

Educational Experience, Standardisation and Instrumentalism: A Century of Limited Change

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Abstract

Drawing on the social commentary of Charles Dickens (1812-1870) and Padraig Pearse (1879-1916) and juxtaposed against current educational circumstance, this paper provides an empirical critique of the role and function of contemporary education. Based on the perspectives of 200 post-primary pupils in Ireland, this paper highlights a notable trend of standardisation and pupil passivity within the classroom and calls for classroom teachers and teacher educators act as agents of change.

1. Introduction

...Mr. Gradgrind...stepped forth into the light and said, 'Louisa, never wonder!' Herein lay the spring of the mechanical art and mystery of educating the reason without stooping to the cultivation of the sentiments and affections. Never wonder. By means of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division, settle everything somehow, and never wonder.

- Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*

Praised for its 'generous anger' and satirical overtones, Dickens' depiction of utilitarianism, education and the bourgeois preoccupation with 'fact' over 'fancy' during the Industrial Revolution of the 1850's acts as a useful insight into the social conscience of the time. The damaging consequences of the propagation of information at the expense of feeling and imagination are exposed in *Hard Times* [1] and suggested as the catalyst for the systematic failure of imagination and the consequential social and economic struggles within the situated society [2]. Focusing on the harmful consequences of the discourses, standards and beliefs associated with laissez-faire capitalist endeavour, the novel acts as an allegorical caveat to educationalists and policy makers alike. Within the post-Fordian milieu however, indictment of standardised practice, mass consumption and static knowledge is present, not alone, in social commentary but has also found place and status within the discourse and literature of educational research and policy. The advancement of an 'era of post-standardization' is argued to align with the promotion of students' educational experiences and also to respond to the increasing demands for a more flexible and innovative

workforce in the fortification of technologically advanced, global, knowledge economies [3]. Yet, Nassbaum [4] suggests that despite such popular rhetoric, Dickens' critique of society, education and economics remains topical and acts as a pressing appraisal of modern practice. He argues that "Gradgrind economics has an even greater hold over the politics and intellectual life of [our] society than it did over the society known to Dickens's characters, or to the narrative voice in his novel". Therein, the uncomfortable utilitarian, dehumanising and 'fact, fact, fact'[5] based approach to schooling chronicled in *Hard Times* forms an antithetical condition to that espoused in current educational literature and policy. However, the liminality of experience between advocacy and assessment within current educational systems poses cause for concern. Within this space, which is characterised by a notable performance agenda and reflective of Gradgrind's caution to Louisa to "never wonder" [5], the value of outcome is frequently prioritised over that of process, the value of efficiency is frequently prioritised over that of the creativity and the value of explanation and response is frequently prioritised over that of inquiry and wonder [19, 20,25].

2. Educational Prioritisation

The potential of education to dehumanise through the subordination of pupil experience is not a new theme; indeed the literature of the past century depicts some challenging perspectives of education. These perspectives, while more extreme in terms of social deprivation, depict schooling not as an empowering and great social leveller but rather as a function of industrial socialisation. Students are depicted as cogs in the education machine in *Hard Times* when Dickens conjures an image of a classroom in which the sole function of education is to produce workers for local industry. The manner by which this is achieved is through the eradication of imagination and freedom of thought in order to socialise docile factory workers. For the modern world, Dickens' Coketown classroom may appear an extreme representation of schooling as utilitarian. Looking beyond educational rhetoric however, it is questionable as to how much modern schooling has really changed. Walford [6] for example argues that the dominance of the examination has resulted in making modern schools "an even more effective sorting machine" for denoting future career trajectory or lack thereof. Similarly, Pearse in a

damning condemnation of the Irish education system in 1912 also referred to the system of education as a ‘murder machine.’ [7]. Pearse juxtapositions this condemnation with an expression of his ideal of education in which ‘the main object in education is to help the child to be his [sic] own true and best self.’ Pearse further identifies the teacher as one who does not transmit knowledge for uncritical reproduction but rather as one who inspires and fosters enthusiasm and a quest for further knowledge;

I dwell on the importance of the personal element in education. I would have every child not merely a unit in a school attendance, but in some intimate personal way the pupil of a teacher....What the teacher should bring to his pupil is not a set of readymade opinions, or a stock of cut-and-dry information, but an inspiration and an example; and his main qualification should be, not such an overmastering will as shall impose itself at all hazards upon all weaker wills that come under its influence, but rather so infectious an enthusiasm as shall kindle new enthusiasm [7].

However, his depiction of the reality of schooling and educational discourse in 1912 conflicts with his outlined vision;

As an intermediate teacher said to me, ‘Culture is all very well in its way, but if you don’t stick to your programme your boys won’t pass.’ ‘Stick to your programme’ is the strange device on the banner of the Irish intermediate system; and the programme bulks so large that there is no room for education [7].

3. Divergence in Education: Value and Practice

Despite calls for more meaningful, relevant and student-centred educational experiences, the subordination of student voice appears to remain a constant feature in the journey of the student through the schooling system. For example, McIntyre, Pedder and Rudduck [8] suggest that while teachers generally react very positively to their pupils’ comments on pedagogical change, they are selective in relation the responses they actively respond to, and tend to favour ideas from students that are already in the teachers’ own repertoires. Cook-Sather’s [9] offers a similar perspective suggesting that authorizing student perspectives runs counter to many reform efforts, which hitherto have focused on adults’ conceptualization and practice of education. Given that student voice is important in illuminating the culture and values that are dominant in schools

[10], the myriad of recent research reports published on the marginalization of student voice serve to challenge any bourgeois myths of neutrality [11] and point towards inherent cultures of silence [12] built on the cornerstones of power and autocracy in schooling. The marginalization of student voice points to hierarchical educational paradigms dominated by teachers where the potential for meaningful pupil engagement is reduced and replaced with hegemonic endeavor predicated on an ‘ill-defined’ and ‘one-dimensional’ conception of ‘excellence’ [13]. Teaching and learning in an environment where the centrality of meaning making and student engagement is relegated in the name of effectiveness, proficiency and efficiency [13] poses significant challenge to teachers who seek to teach democratically, and in particular for those teachers of poetry who endeavour to advance their students’ educational experiences with energising, purposeful and imaginative learning experiences [14]. The difficulties posed by the dominance of standardised performance, especially in the arts, is explored by the former Poet Laureate of the United States, Billy Collins;

Introduction to Poetry

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a colour slide
or press an ear against its hive.
I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,
or walk inside the poem’s room
and feel the walls for a light switch.
I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author’s name on the shore.
But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.
They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means. [15]

In this poem, Collins identifies some of the inherent challenges permeating the contemporary poetry classroom and highlights the ever-present tenacity of a utilitarian approach to education, akin to that described by Dickens in the mid-1800s.

4. Methodology

This research is predicated on the conviction that meaningful engagement with poetry holds the potential to advance both critical and creative thinking skills [16]. The authors also contend that listening to student voice is essential in order to understand the lived experience of poetry pedagogy in Ireland. Therefore set against the backdrop of ever

pervasive technicist approaches to poetry teaching in schools, the research reported here sought to explore pupils' experiences of studying poetry in an environment driven by a "preoccupation with book and verbal knowledge accompanied by instructional modes of teaching and regurgitative practices" [17].

This study explores the perspectives of 200 pupils studying higher level poetry at Leaving Certificate level in Ireland. Pupils' perspectives on their learning experiences were examined through the use of a questionnaire based on that of O' Neill [18]. This research builds on that of O' Neill, which explored the experience of teaching and learning poetry at Junior Certificate level in Ireland. The adapted questionnaire comprised a 66 point instrument including open, closed and Likert scale questions. For test-retest reliability the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC = 0.86) achieved over a two week interval indicated a good level of agreement ($p < 0.001$). A pilot survey was implemented with one class cohort of Leaving Certificate pupils ($n=24$) prior to the dissemination of the full survey. Descriptive statistical analysis was primarily employed on the data set, supported by the use of PASW (Predictive Analytics Software) Statistics v.17. Ethical approval for the study was sought from and granted by the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EHSREC) in the University of Limerick.

5. Findings

Two hundred pupils (77 male and 123 female) from eight post-primary schools in Ireland took part in this study. Of this cohort 111 were 5th year pupils and 89 were 6th year pupils. Each school has been designated with an alphabetical pseudonym (A, B, C etc) to preserve the institution's identity. Pupil responses are codified with association to their school (e.g. pupil one from school A will hereafter be listed as A1).

The data suggests lack of attention to the development of pupil creativity through differentiated response, such as poetry composition or illustration. Ninety-four percent of pupils reported 'never' or 'rarely' being asked to develop their aesthetic writing skills through poetry composition. A similar trend emerged in the practice of creative imitation, where 95% of pupils indicated 'never' or 'rarely' using creative imitation as a poetry composition tool. In addition, 93% of pupils surveyed indicated 'never' or 'rarely' being asked to represent their understanding of a poem through illustration. 76% of pupils indicated 'never' having encountered any form of drama-in-education as part of their poetry studies. Concerning pupils' involvement in meaning making during poetry analysis, 53.5% of pupils indicated 'never' being requested to engage in the subjective analysis of a

poem. A particularly limited use of response journals was also evident. Eighty percent of respondents indicated they had never experienced this reflective medium in the poetry classroom. Rote learning of pre-scripted notes emerged as the primary approach to study for the Leaving Certificate examination, with 77.5% of all respondents indicating their intention to adopt this study practice. Less frequently cited approaches to study for the Leaving Certificate exam included: writing sample answers to questions (48%), rote learning of essays on specific poems (41%) and reading over poetry studied in class (27%). Individual critical and subjective analysis of new or unseen poems was the least frequently cited pupil approach to pre-exam study (1.5%). However, high levels of self-confidence amongst pupils relating to the study of poetry at Leaving Certificate level were identified in this research. This self-confidence was found to be predicated on the strength of teacher notes. Fifty-eight percent of respondents reported high levels of self-efficacy, with slightly more male pupils (68.8%) than female pupils (51%) asserting themselves as confident regarding their study of poetry. Ownership of 'good notes' for rote learning purposes emerged as the most frequently cited factor amongst respondents for high levels of confidence in poetry.

6. Discussion

The data highlight a worrying trend of pupil passivity and standardisation in the Irish Leaving Certificate poetry classroom. The authors argue this trend to be inextricably linked with the pressures placed upon the teacher to acquiesce to exam performativity therein negating the time given to the development of creativity and pupil voice. Lack of attention to differentiated response and poetry writing were noted by the majority of pupils in this research. In addition, the provision for critical analysis and meaning making in the poetry classroom was also particularly limited. Over half of the respondents indicated never being asked to engage in the subjective analysis of a poem during their course of study. Furthermore, a trend of conformity was noted, with rote learning of materials emerging as a frequently prescribed practice. This is not to suggest that rote learning holds no value in schools, but of concern is its dominance in modern schools.

The results of this research focus attention on questions pertaining to the purpose and function of education, or as Claxton colloquially questions, "What is the point of school?" [19]. Attempting to respond to this questions Claxton argues;

Education is meant to supplement the upbringing provided by families and communities with a more systematic

preparation for the future. That preparation involves cultivating the knowledge, skills, values and beliefs that we think young people are going to need if they are to thrive in the world that we foresee them living in. [19]

The modern world does not require the docile factory worker depicted in *Hard Times*. On the contrary it requires self motivated and independent thinkers who are creative, inquisitive and critically engaged. Didacticism and rote memorisation clearly falls short of the development of such competencies and yet they continue to dominate the practices of schools. Educational practice requires significant reform in order to challenge the hegemony of this practice. Yet, the production line metaphor of education is enduring, coming again to the fore in recent critiques of education. Robinson [20] in his challenge of current educational paradigms uses it to challenge the 'one size fits all' approach to education that dominates modern schooling, describing it as detrimental to student creativity and as encouraging conformity. He argues that 'Like an assembly line, students progress from room to room to be taught by different teachers specialising in different disciplines.' Robinson's call for divergent and lateral thinking is important, however, just how well education policy makers will listen and act upon such calls remains to be seen. Claxton [19] also employs the production line metaphor in a damning critique of education where he compares schools to an 'efficient old fashioned factory' where everything can be 'specified, standardised and cut and dried'. Perhaps the most illuminating critique on the pervasive infiltration of the language of industry into schools is the writing of Marshall [21] who questions how the metaphor of work has shaped the classroom practices of teachers. She argues that 'In fact the workplace metaphor so pervades our thinking about classrooms that we hardly notice this root metaphor when teachers talk about homework...or tell their students to get back to work.' Thus she advocates for learning oriented classrooms rather than those that are work oriented in nature.

The apt metaphor of the production line, the dominant discourse of 'work' in schools, and the continued dominance of exam performativity and didacticism, over one hundred years since its critique by notable social critics is cause for concern for those committed to educational advancement. These practices are clearly antithetical to the espoused policies that advocate for creativity and for the education of the whole person. They also present significant challenges for teacher education. However, Giroux [22] cautions that many teacher education programmes are currently lacking in practices and vision which promote critical democracy. The proposals of Wang, Odell, Klecka, Spalding, and Lin [23] therefore appear pertinent.

They argue that if teacher education is central to teaching reform and to the quality of teaching and student learning, greater investment in the conceptual, empirical, systematic, and sustained inquiry about teacher education reform is required. Slee [24] highlights the importance of critical inquiry into the nature of the curriculum, asserting that at a time when teachers are increasingly estranged from curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, teacher education needs to enter the debate about curriculum rather than merely training teachers to implement it.

Moving from educational patterns of technicism, commercialisation and inequality requires ideological redress at all levels. Attention to the manner in which educators view the purpose of public schooling is important according to Giroux [22]. He argues that the conceptualisation of schooling needs to move towards a more democratic vision, where schools themselves are regarded as democratic public spheres. Such a vision for schooling according to Giroux would work contrary to the current view that education which conceptualises schools as extensions of the workplace or "institutions in the corporate battle for international markets", rather he asserts, schools within this vision are viewed as democratic public spheres which place emphasis on critical inquiry and meaningful dialogue. Similarly Bartolomé [25] calls for a shift in focus from "a narrow and mechanistic view of instruction to one that is broader in scope and takes into consideration the sociohistorical and political dimensions of education".

7. Conclusion

The data generated in this study raise considerable questions about how educators understand the role of education, and in particular, the role of the poetry teacher. If educational priorities and practice serve to reflect societal priorities then the current practice of standardization and knowledge reproduction appears adversative the espoused values of creativity and innovation often enshrined in syllabuses. Education has not moved far in terms of the relevance of the critique offered by Dickens and Pearse at the turn of the previous century. Hargreaves [26] argues that we are at a major crossroads in education where teachers may "spend their time teaching to the test, maintaining order, and rigidly adhering to standardised curriculum scripts". The evidence suggests that we have been at this crossroads for a long time. Yet, education has the potential to "reach far beyond the technical tasks of producing acceptable test results, to pursuing teaching as a life-shaping, world-changing social mission" [26]. The latter vision affords space, both rhetorical and practical, for the development of the attributes which were notably undervalued in school in which this research was

conducted. The development of pupil voice, wonder, enthusiasm and critical engagement requires attention and advancement in the poetry classroom. Never before has the need been so great for classroom teachers to become agents of change [27]. Teacher education at initial and continuing education levels is well placed to take the initiative here. The importance of understanding how pupils learn best should act as the cornerstone of any teacher preparation course [28], but also important is the nurturing of agency and the empowerment of poetry teachers in a manner that equips them with the skills necessary to sustain a commitment to educational advancement and therein, the pupil, for the years to come.

8. References

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