

THE STANDARDS CHALLENGE: A COMMENT ON KARSTEN *ET AL.*

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INTRODUCTION

On 10 June 2008, the New Labour government announced a National Challenge for schools in England. A total of 638 schools have been identified as underperforming because less than 30 per cent of pupils achieve five GCSE's at grades A*–C. Out of a total of 150 local authorities, 134 have been told to produce a rescue plan for each 'failing' school within 50 days. A £400 million package of additional financial support has been announced, but if the schools do not get over the 30 per cent barrier by 2011 then they will be closed or turned into an academy where private interests (for example, businesses or religious groups) can take over a school and receive a taxpayer investment (BBC 2008). Ed Balls, Secretary of State for Education (now the Department for Children, Schools and Families), seems to have brought forward the date set by Prime Minister Brown of 2012–13 for this target to be reached for all schools (BBC 2007). This announcement has revealed numerous anomalies, not least how OfSTED inspection reports show that 26 per cent of the schools are considered to be among the best in the country and about one-third are in the top 40 per cent. A further 50 per cent are considered to be satisfactory and meeting pupils' needs (Lipsett 2008). Additionally, 26 of the identified schools are already academies and so the proposed solution to underperformance is not itself performing (Greenshields 2008).

This intervention prompts me to ask whether the proposed technical improvement in the design of 'standards for the publication of school performance indicators' developed and reported on by Karsten *et al.* in their article would make a difference. Clearly a response could be in the affirmative because if the UK government responded productively to their Standards for Public School Performance Indicators then the situation described above might have been handled better. A good starting point could be to examine the rationale for the threshold of 30 per cent and the recent inclusion of Maths and English. Furthermore, it seems that there are problems with 'accuracy', 'utilization', and 'due care', where schools continue to have particular types of data organized and communicated in ways that name and shame schools, teachers and students. In addition, the academies programme is being accelerated through this process in spite of concerns about the dominance of private interests, opposition by parents and communities, and little evidence that an academy improves standards significantly more than the school or schools it replaced (Gunter *et al.* 2008). For me this generates two issues: first, standards are not neutral indicators of educational performance but are a political construction designed to deliver a marketized public sector; and second, that functional school improvement is problematic work for academics in higher education.

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THE POLITICS OF STANDARDS

Karsten *et al.* in their article recognize concerns which they group as technical-analytical, utilization, political-ethical, and social. These concerns are not fully engaged with because they are identified as 'problems associated with' and not integral to the politics of standards. Association allows recognition of the problematics but enables them to be bypassed because to do otherwise would prevent the authors from going on to present their framework for making the system work better. While the framework goes some way towards handling technical and utility issues, it cannot deal adequately with the political-ethical and social matters. This is because standards are a political construction used to make interventions in public education in such a way as to enable neo-liberal ideas, cultures and practices to be accepted as normal. The New Right under the Thatcherite governments (1979–1997) promoted higher standards through the introduction of a quasi-market, whereas New Labour (1997 onwards) sought to regulate the market through performance management. The lexicon of New Labour is replete with references to 'standards' where: 'each school will have its own challenging targets to raise standards, and will be held responsible for achieving them' (DfEE 1997, p. 6). School life in all its aspects is externally controlled through the design of the curriculum, lessons, and methods of assessment. Children's lives are fully standardized with specifications about what is to be learned, when, and with what required outcomes. The official rationale is that education matters and that reform must take place with neither debate nor interpretation or, in the words of Michael Barber in his 2007 book, *Instruction to Deliver*, 'deliverology' scenario building: what is in the mind of the minister must be delivered to the child. The narratives this produces are around teachers having to face the challenge of change (DfEE 1998) by taking on received professionalism as trained and performance-managed deliverers. However, underlying all of this, and clearly missing from Karsten *et al.*'s analysis, are the workings of neo-liberalism, and how the standardization of people and their lives is central to how the economy works (Smyth and Gunter 2009).

Neo-liberalism requires 'market exchange' as the only 'ethical belief' for human interaction (Harvey 2007, p. 3), and so children need to be productive employees with standardized skills, behaviours and knowledge. This allows the education market in a globalized economy to expand, with ever ready, ever trainable, and ever deployable workers. Neo-liberal knowledge workers have strategies to enable capital accumulation to thrive: first, to attack professional standards, not least those of teachers as a self-interested and seditious group who have sought to expand their work, cost the taxpayer money, and fail to be accountable for it; and, second, to promote neo-liberal practices, language, and solutions for major social ills (Gunter 2008). Hence while ongoing reform was needed, this was taken out of the hands of teachers and given to those who embraced private sector managerialism (Gunter and Forrester 2008). Children and parents were recultured as consumers, where, to paraphrase Hirschman (1970), loyalty to the public good was ridiculed, and self-interested decisions could be made on choice or exit. New Labour sought to prevent exit by the middle classes by making choice within the system more appealing, not least through generating data about standards that could speak to parental concerns.

The political response to neo-liberal ideas has therefore been to use the language of the 'modern' to undertake some highly 'conservative' steps regarding the direct linking of the main purposes of education with economic productivity. The financializing of everyday life ('What do I cost?' 'Am I efficient?' 'Is my work effective?' 'What am I worth?' 'How can

I prove I am worthy?’ and, ‘Will I win?’) means that there needs to be the production of evidence. Hence standards are about data production that is disconnected from learning, and instead serve those who wish to be seen to win from education as marketized provision. The school as a firm needs to demonstrate to its ‘stakeholders’ that there is profit and so standards and targets are normalized.

No one seems to care too much about the impact that this has on teachers until large numbers started leaving the profession and so the response has been to ‘remodel’ by substituting teachers and the expertise of teaching with ICT and assistants (Gunter and Butt 2007). No one seems to care too much about the children and how there is a need to hold a major debate about the levels of childhood stress and unhappiness, and what it means to grow up in England. So perhaps we need a different scorecard to the percentage of 5 A*–C at GCSE, and here is the beginning of one:

- Number of children living in poverty in the UK: 3.9 million;
- Number of 11–16 year olds who have been bullied online, by email or by text message: 25 per cent;
- Number of exams and tests the average school child takes in England up to the age of 16: 70;
- Number of 11–15 year olds in 2006 reported to be drinking regularly: 21 per cent (Moore 2008, p. 27).

In addition to the above, on 10 July 2008 there were six stabbings, four in London, one in West Bromwich in the West Midlands, and one in Tarleton in Lancashire. While these are dramatic statistics which require our attention, what we don’t know enough about is the invisible damage that neo-liberal education is doing to children who do not make the headlines, who conform, who revise for and pass tests, as well as the schools they attend that are labelled as excellent. While data is vital for educational development and for research into educational change, it can say very little about how we as a country want to live together or how we want childhood to be experienced. There needs to be another form of knowledge and knowing, and this enables me to turn to the next issue: what is the proper role for researchers in higher education?

KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND STANDARDS

Standards are important in enabling the basics of our modern world to work. As Knight (2008) found out on his visit to the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) in Geneva, having voluntary agreements to the way things are done makes sense:

victories for standardisation have included the credit card, the qwerty keyboard and the GSM system that supports mobile phones. . . . Having an international standard enables companies and countries unfamiliar with each other to join new markets and trade with confidence. In 2005, the department of trade and industry found that standards are worth £2.5bn a year to the British economy. In global terms they are priceless. (pp. 56–7)

Following Raffo and Gunter (2008), I would argue that the transference of methods for the standardization of inert objects to the governance of people means that Karsten *et al.* provide a rationale and engage in narratives that are about technical improvements to a measurement system but have little to say about social justice. Functionality assumes that

the right behaviours and skills will bring about improvement. However, the framework does not have a rationale about poverty, class, and racism; it is a world where narratives about the impact of unemployment on children and schools do not feature. Alternatively, socially critical work (see, for example, Hollins *et al.* 2006) is concerned to reveal the way that advantage and disadvantage operate, not least through the standards agenda, and to work for a better society. What does this mean for researchers? It means that we do not accept that our research is determined and shaped by government priorities. It means that we do not accept the neo-liberal account of the so-called 'crisis' in public education that demanded league tables. It means that we do not accept neo-liberal definitions of accountability but examine a range of ways in which children, parents, teachers and politicians answer to the taxpayer. It does not mean that the existence of standards determined that our job is 'to improve the technical quality and use of SPIs as much as possible'. After all, NCLB tells us about good and bad testing, not necessarily about learning. It does mean that we should look at countries, such as Wales, where such regimes have been dismantled and see what they are doing and why.

Young (2008) has argued there are two debates in educational matters: political and theoretical. It seems to me that Karsten *et al.* are immersed in the political debates and that is fine, but what they do not seem to be able to recognize is that as knowledge producers in higher education our responsibility is to engage in theoretical debates as well. This requires us to have a sense of scholarship where we know about, use and critique all the arguments around an issue, as our responsibilities are not to be automatically policy relevant. Indeed, we need to give recognition to how we do research in an unjust world, and this may mean that we have to challenge what is seemingly normal and settled. As Young (2008) states, we do need to be clear about whether we are doing political or theoretical work, and not to blur this. Not only will this enable us to locate our work intellectually, but also to value such work, not least because when we do cross the boundary into political work we will have resources that can offer various different strategies to policy-makers.

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