
COLLOQUIA

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The curious case of ‘trendy theory’, ‘training’ and targets in the reform of university-based teacher education in England

Streszczenie

CIEKAWY PRZYPADK „MODY NA TEORIĘ”, „TRENINGU” I CELÓW NAUCZANIA JAKO PODSTAW REFORMY KSZTAŁCENIA NAUCZYCIELI NA ANGIELSKICH UNIWERSYTETACH

Uniwersyteckie kształcenie nauczycieli w Anglii przechodzi obecnie radykalne przemiany wprowadzane przez ministrów, którzy z przyczyn ideologicznych sprzeciwiają się krytycznym perspektywom w programie nauczania. Obecny minister szkolnictwa Michael Gove obdarzył takie perspektywy etykietką „mody na teorię” i często powtarza, że taka moda jest bez znaczenia albo wręcz szkodliwa. W reformie angielskiego szkolnictwa zapanowała ortodoksja „zdrowego rozsądku” i praktycyzmu, oparta na tezie, że nauczanie jest „rzemiosłem”, którego można się nauczyć wyłącznie przez obserwację i kopiowanie zachowania wykwalifikowanych nauczycieli. Kursy początkowe dla nauczycieli, przed przemianami bazujące na połączeniu praktyki w szkole z wykładami na uniwersytecie, są więc przenoszone do szkół, gdzie propagowany przez ministerstwo szkolnictwa model nauczania polega na wyznaczaniu uczniom indywidualnych celów i ciągłym pomiarze nauki przy użyciu testów i egzaminów. Artykuł jest próbą oceny tych przemian i zubożałych doświadczeń edukacyjnych dla nauczycieli-stażystów i ich uczniów, jakie z obecnej reformy mogą wyniknąć. Niechęć polityków do teorii jest jednym z objawów „anty-intelektualizmu” charakteryzującego obecne czasy. Prymat praktycyzmu odciąga uwagę od głębszych przemyśleń o znaczeniu edukacji dla jednostki i społeczeństwa. Pomimo ataków na „modę na teorię”, kształcenie musi opierać się na bogatej tradycji myśli teoretycznej, aby zachować holistyczną i prawdziwie edukacyjną orientację.

Słowa kluczowe: kształcenie nauczycieli, uniwersytet, trening, cele nauczania, dobre nauczanie.

Introduction

University-based teacher education in England is now being systematically dismantled, as evidenced by significant reductions in government funding (University and College Union (UCU) 2014). Within the broader context of higher education in the UK, the humanities and social sciences have been repeatedly denigrated in government rhetoric as not 'useful' for the economy (Leitch 2006; Department for Business Innovation and Skills (DBIS) 2011), with research grants explicitly favouring 'high impact' projects (Pain et al. 2011). The tradition of scholarship appears to be increasingly replaced with 'expertise', narrowly conceived as bite-size courses, designed for the educational marketplace, whilst strategic decisions about the future of university education are increasingly made by politicians, rather than academics (Harris 2012). It is against this background that recent measures to banish 'trendy theory' from teacher education can be understood. For example, the current Conservative Education Secretary, Michael Gove asserts that: 'teaching is a craft and it is best learnt as an apprentice observing a master craftsman or woman. Watching others... is the best route to acquiring mastery in the classroom' (Gove 2010). This assertion is indicative of the assumptions driving the radical reform of teacher education. As 'training' is relocated to schools from the university and 'trainees' learn the craft of teaching by observing qualified practitioners at work (Teaching Agency 2013), the role of university-based teacher education in England is becoming redundant. In parallel with the narrow conceptualisation of teacher education as 'training', the theoretical complexity of pedagogy is being increasingly reduced to a target-based model of teaching and learning (Alexander 2004; Bates 2013a). As Seddon (2008) explains, targets originate in industrial management, where they are set by managers in order to increase the output of the workforce and improve efficiency. Transferred to educational settings, a focus on attainment targets turns teachers' attention away from children's learning to the management of pupil-learning outcomes. Without sufficient theoretical foundation, teacher trainees may, in turn, uncritically accept and mimic the enactment of the target-driven conceptualisation of 'good' practice which they observed in the classroom. What this approach to teaching then conveys to pupils is that what matters in their education is getting better at meeting targets and passing exams.

If we are to understand the scale and pervasiveness of these changes, then locating them in the current era of 'anti-intellectualism' (Braidotti 2013) may be illuminating. Writing from the postmodern perspective, Rosi Braidotti (*ibid.*: 4)

links anti-intellectualism to the rise of the free market ideology, which has not only introduced the 'tyranny' of economic profit and self-interest, but also pays "undue allegiance to 'common sense'". Whilst the concept of 'common sense' has provided a stimulus for some important philosophical investigations (Cottingham 2008), appeals to common sense in the current political idiom are based on 'sound' judgement in practical matters, leading to 'entirely practical' solutions. For example, much of the Conservative discourse on education reform emphasises the Party's 'entirely practical mission,' juxtaposing its commonsense principles with the failed 'ideology' of the political Left (e.g. Shorthouse and Stagg 2013: 21). However, the conflation of commonsensical explanations with a belief in free markets has resulted in the domination of instrumental reasoning, aimed at seeking the most effective ways to maximise profit and other gains. For example, commonsense justifications for university education in England are framed around its effectiveness in preparing a highly-skilled workforce, capable of successfully competing in the global marketplace (Leitch 2006). The logic of effectiveness may have made sense on the factory floor in the industrial era, based on the premise that the sole purpose in this case was the mass production of popular, affordable consumer goods. Applied to university education in the 21st century, however, this logic becomes 'grotesque and absurd' (Bauman and Donskis 2013: 136). This is because 'truly great scholarship,' which profoundly changes the ways in which we understand the world, cannot be developed quickly, for fast consumption, 'unlike applications of technology or popular theory' (ibid.: 136). The corrosive effect of economic imperatives on intellectual integrity is indicative of 'moral blindness' (ibid.: 2013). It may also adversely affect teacher education, as we shall see next.

Trends and 'theories' in education reform discourse

Education reform in England manifested itself over the last twenty years as a proliferation of often incoherent education policies, referred to by their critics as the 'policy epidemic' (Levin 1998; Ball 2003). A recurring characteristic of the rhetoric around the 'policy epidemic' is the expression of 'urgent need' in relation to educational reform (Department for Education (DfE) 2010: 4–5). This need is justified on the basis of two commonsensical claims. Firstly, that teachers and schools are deficient in addressing the needs of *all* students (ibid.). Secondly, on the basis of international comparisons such as the Programme for International

Student Assessment (PISA), which is conflated with the relative competitiveness of Britain in the global economy (DfE 2010). The alarm associated with the image of Britain 'standing still,' whilst other countries 'race past' (ibid.: 3) is reinforced by the metaphor of a widening 'gap' between high and low achieving pupils. Reform has aimed above all at 'reducing the attainment gap' and new performance indicators to benefit the "underperforming educational 'tail'" (Paterson 2013: 11). The 'educational tail' refers here to pupils who are not performing as well as their peers in standardised national tests.

Designing, disseminating and monitoring reform involves complex (and costly) government machinery. For example, it includes government-funded agencies such as the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) and Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), as well as a network of private companies and consultants, think-tanks and academics, who stake their interest in government agendas (Ball 2009). Generating reform generates jobs, income and profit for individuals and companies whose claims to authority in educational matters are based on claims to 'expertise'. The label 'expert' frequently appears in government documentation and promotional literature. For example, as stated in the invitation to a Westminster Briefing, a regular event hosted by the public policy event provider, Government Knowledge (GOVKNOW).

As schools return from the summer holidays, reform of the Education system shows no sign of slowing. Westminster Briefing will be running a series of events over the coming months... These highly interactive, expert-led events will interpret and explain DfE initiatives, leaving you prepared to manage change and improve outcomes in your setting. (GOVKNOW 2013)

'Educational experts' come from many walks of life, often unrelated to education. For example, an 'expert' presenter at a recent Westminster Briefing on: *Reforming School Accountability: Improving Outcomes by Measuring Attainment and Progress*, was Chris Paterson, a researcher from the think-tank *CentreForum*, who...

specialises in social policy and education, with a particular focus on social mobility. He was a contributor to the recent publication 'The Tail – How England's schools fail one child in five'. He was previously a solicitor at city law firm... (Paterson 2013: 2)

The reference to 'specialism' in policy and education reveals the arbitrariness of claims to expertise by individuals such as Paterson. 'Specialism' in education policy may be acquired at one-day courses delivered at Government Knowledge (GOVKNOW 2013), or through a book contribution. In an era which legitimates common sense, a fast track to expertise is open to anyone who shows an interest

in education, even if it is unrelated to the actual lived experience of being a teacher. The inherent lack of criticality in commonsense thinking allows such experts to establish their authority through appeal to 'assured' meanings (Bauman 2005: 1094), meanings which are taken for granted and, therefore, beyond contestation. An example of an 'assured' meaning is the government interpretation of the PISA results as an indicator of the position of Britain in the global economic competition. As pointed out by Zygmunt Bauman, apart from privileging experts over non-experts, the phenomenon of 'expertocracy' also limits what is possible to think, constraining individuals within 'assured' meanings rather than enabling them to create their own meanings.

That politicians mean 'business' in matters of education reform is clear from the continuing privatisation agenda. Under the guise of promoting diversity, the current government refers to the education system as the 'school market' and invites private providers and sponsors to take over underperforming state schools (Bates 2013b). Whilst the introduction of the first 'free schools' in England in 2011 was substantiated by the alleged effectiveness of the Swedish free schools (Wiborg 2010), in a recent statement, Michael Gove openly expressed his approval of schools making a profit (Grice 2013). English education system may thus be on the verge of another radical change, the privatisation of state education.

Ironically, a 'theory' appears to be emerging from the discourse and reforms sketched above, despite Gove's distaste for theory signalled in the introduction to this paper. Framed in commonsense terms and still to be verified (if it is verifiable), the 'theory' presents a number of propositions. Firstly, that teachers and schools in England continue to fail the 'underperforming tail' and this calls for an unrelenting education reform. Secondly, that the main (if not sole) cause of pupil 'underperformance' is poor teacher performance. Thirdly, that an introduction of more accurate measures of pupil attainment and progress and new 'floor' targets (GOVKNOW 2013) will lead to improved outcomes. Lastly, that the private sector is more effective and this is the basis for the privatisation of education. Underlying these propositions is an ideological belief in the regulatory powers of free market competition. Silenced in this discourse is teacher autonomy, socio-economic and other complex factors affecting pupil learning (and outcomes), the importance of 'interhuman relationships' (Bauman and Donskis 2013) and the contribution of a theoretically-rich education to helping student teachers make sense of all this complexity. Absent here are also deeper considerations of the aims of education in the 21st century, beyond scoring highly in PISA tests or developing skills to compete in the global economy. The reform

spawned by Gove's 'theory' makes university-based teacher education less viable in the future because of the shift of funding from universities to schools (TA 2013). The resulting closure of university programmes may not only adversely affect future research, but also disconnect new teachers from the rich theoretical tradition which developed on the British Isles and provoked fruitful, albeit sometimes controversial, international educational debates (Godoń 2012).

Re-forming or de-forming education?

In arguing that politicians more often deform rather than reform education, Zygmunt Bauman and Leonidas Donskis (2013) observe that the lack of respect for academic freedom and intellectual integrity at the re/de-formed university creates a new cadre of 'corporate professors'. By complying or even collaborating with managerial regimes, this cadre in effect deprive students of an 'opportunity to experience what a non-vulgar, non-pragmatic, non-instrumentalised University is like' (ibid.: 139). They also contribute to the fragmentation of the academic community and the breakdown of relations characterised by mutuality and sensitivity to the Other. As an academic community, the university has traditionally played the role of a guardian of intellectual and moral principles. However, as a fragmented, fluid network of individuals often working in silos, it becomes 'adiaphoric', exempt from moral evaluation (ibid.: 149–50). Under the conditions of this exemption, the marketplace pattern of consumer-commodity relations is transferred to interhuman relations within the university, bringing with it insensitivity to the Other and indifference to what is happening around; in short 'moral blindness'. As the authors point out (ibid.: 150), whilst 'a consumerist attitude may lubricate the wheels of the *economy*, it sprinkles sand into the bearings of *morality*'.

A similar 'adiaphorisation' arises in the factory-floor relations established in schools through the introduction of pupil performance targets. Targets are numerical measures of the expected grades in tests and levels of academic attainment. For example, one of the curriculum objectives for reading taught to eleven-year-olds is to: 'discuss and evaluate how authors use language, including figurative language, considering the impact on the reader' (DfE 2013: 44). Based on this objective, the teacher will give the children a set of targets to aim at, one at a time, in their reading lessons. Targets related to this objective could be for example: 'I can use the way in which a text is organised to help me understand';

'I can compare, contrast and evaluate different non-fiction texts'; 'I can identify figurative language, e.g. similes and metaphors'. Once a child has demonstrated reaching a particular target, she will be given another one to work on. Whereas teaching and learning through targets may be a means to a particular end, it is an approach which Bauman (2012) and Barnett (1997) would evaluate as propagating the 'closure', rather than 'openness' of mind. Teaching reading by setting targets fragments the complex and inherently personal experience of making sense of the text into bite-size stages, moulding possible responses of the reader within predetermined, 'assured' meanings. The production line in the reading factory provides training in producing the 'right' standardised answers, rather than encouraging divergent, individual responses to books. This approach ignores both the past debates about curriculum design and problems linked to a highly prescribed, behaviourist aims-and-objectives curriculum. It also ignores the need of education to prepare children for a future which cannot be predicted, cannot even be imagined today. Writing over 30 years ago, Denis Lawton bemoaned...

the folly of attempting to list the behavioural changes in pupils which could be predicted as a result of their studying a Shakespearean play. Since every individual's response to a work of art is unique, then how could a teacher predict a correct response to a speech by Hamlet? [...] the behavioural objectives model... encourages trivialisation – that if teachers have to prespecify and then test everything in their teaching programme, they will tend to emphasise all the most easily tested, but the least significant, aspects of any subject or topic. (Lawton 1983: 20)

Even young children, starting primary education at the age of five, are expected to 'own' their targets, in accordance with the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) assertion that target setting is the most effective means to achieving educational 'excellence':

We want every primary school to review its performance and to set targets... which are... [o]wned: understood by the school, including governors and pupils, and having a visible life and meaning in the classroom... (DfES 2003: 19)

Targets are an example of what Hogan (2011: 28) refers to as the 'recasting of issues of quality in educational experience as issues of indexed quantity (of grades, test scores, etc.)'. This recasting has in effect pushed 'the heart of educational quality itself to the margins, or even out of the picture' (ibid.). Targets are also at the core of the vicious circle of schools' accountability for pupils' performance outcomes. Schools are held to account for the overall outcomes of education reform, despite their lack of choice in matters of reform. Accountability

for being a 'good' school is, in turn, determined by political power networks external to the school:

At the heart of any system of secondary school accountability lies a decision about what a 'good school' is and does. This is because the real goal of such a system is to judge schools against – and therefore encourage school behaviour towards – this chosen ideal... In accountability terms... the prevailing definition [of a 'good school'] is heavily shaped by the government of the day. (Paterson 2013: 8)

This explanation may make sense at the level of commonsensical reasoning; since school accountability is determined by the government of the day, it follows that the definition of 'good' education must also be provided by the same government. This argument, however, is based on the premise that accountability conceived in terms of performance measures is the best lever for reform. Different lines of reasoning and alternative theoretical perspectives could open up different debates. For example, the very notion of accountability could be re-examined from a premise that curriculum and pedagogy could best be reformed 'from within' (Hogan 2009: 97).

Such commonsensical discourses mask what Bauman and Donskis (2013: 156) reveal as the political class's 'inability to exist otherwise than through changing or reforming others, rather than oneself'. In the context of Academia, the incessant change becomes a form of social control; 'stripping scholars and academics of a sense of safety and security, [it] has become an inescapable part of the power discourse' (ibid.). The change discourse mobilises instability, in order to create and legitimate a 'precarious public sphere' (Berlant 2011: 3), where not just the lives of academics but of all workforce are 'being made and unmade according to the dictates and whims of the market'. A new global class is thus being created to replace the proletariat of the early capitalist state, termed the 'precarariat' (ibid.: 192).

The governance by fear (Braidotti 2013) is also embedded in the target-driven schools, where it operates on several levels. Because of accountability, schools are obliged to meet externally set performance targets, their security is therefore tied up with political 'whims' to reform education in particular ways. Since the craft of 'good' teaching relies on efficient target setting, on reaching her target the pupil is immediately given a new one, in an incessant target-setting-assessment-target-setting cycle. The curriculum has thus become a 'collection of targets' (Pring 2013: 65) and pedagogy confined to their delivery. The traditional ideal of education as being about the journey rather than the destination

(Peters 1967) has been reversed, with the journey fragmented into hundreds of mini-destinations which have to be reached, one by one. In the process, children learn to be 'good' at reaching targets in the most effective or fastest way. The purpose of such education could be encapsulated as preparation for work on the production line, in alignment with the government's economic imperative for training efficient workforce.

According to Bauman and Donskis (2013) instrumental reasoning is presented in the guise of commonsensical practical solutions for reforming education. When a politician's ambition is transferred onto schools, teachers and pupils become seen as instrumentally useful/not useful for delivering reform. The conception of 'good' as useful underpins the insensitivity to the Other which, as argued by Bauman and Donskis (*ibid.*), dominates human relations in liquid modernity. In the context of education reform presented in this article, it is about asserting one's 'educational expertise' by constructing the idea of an "underperforming educational 'tail'" (Paterson 2013) and blaming teachers for creating this 'tail'. It is about making the Other accountable for change rather than changing oneself. In Bauman and Donskis' (2013: 217) words, it is about 'fabricating one's success and building one's legend at other people's expense, using them as situations, fragments and individual components of one's own project'.

In summary, what the political class expect a 'good' teacher trainee to learn 'on the job' is compliance with the 'government of the day', unquestioning enactment of reform and increasing efficiency in teaching-as-target-setting. Teacher trainees are thus trained to train their pupils. Discouraging 'trendy theory' leads to an impoverished learning experience for both teacher trainees and pupils. Conversely, bringing theory into practice, may not only halt the spread of 'moral blindness', but also restore the spirit of intellectual enquiry in the English classroom and lecture theatre alike.

Restoring theoretically-rich 'good' practice

Is there then a way of being and living sensitively in today's world, of working without manipulating others, of regaining the lost moral in/sight? Bauman and Donskis (2013: 203) link 'moral blindness' to 'adiaphorisation', or the normalisation of instrumental reasoning. They see 'adiaphorisation' as rooted in liquid modernity, in its consumerism and individualism, which impair our powers of association. Fragmented communities and atomised individuals are

simultaneously created by and contribute to the spread of liquid relations; they at the same time suffer from and close a blind eye on the 'decline of the West' (ibid.: 168). Regaining sensitivity, becoming human may be achieved through connecting to love, friendship and loyalty and remembering that old age, loneliness and being forgotten unite all of us, no matter how atomised, powerful, or successful we are.

Whilst for Bauman and Donskis the inevitability of the end of one's life is a call for sensitivity and moral insight, remembering this end at the prime of one's life, in the midst of ordinary everyday work with young children may seem of little relevance or appeal. A more immediately applicable scheme is offered by Pádraig Hogan (2009). It is a conceptualisation of 'good' practice which seeks to reclaim the *integrity of learning*, in the sense of the 'wholeness of education as a practice in its own right' (2009: 95). On Hogan's analysis, this integrity has for hundreds of years been eroded by power elites, such as the Christian church in the Middle Ages or the nation state in the 19th century. In the past two decades, external interference in education has been accelerated under the 'credo of a globalised age' (ibid.: 99). The current subjugation of 'good' practice to numerous commandments of the global economy obscures education's 'own inherent purposes and ethical commitments' (Hogan 2011: 30). In seeking to develop a coherent case for educational practice which would be reformed 'from within', Hogan (2009: 97) turns to the philosophical insights of such theorists as Hans-Georg Gadamer. Gadamer's reminder of the 'the dialogue that we are' is of vital importance as the basis for all understanding and learning (Gadamer 1989, as quoted by Hogan 2009: 109). It is through dialogue with others that we come to understand ourselves and the world. The kind of dialogue which deliberately seeks out the challenge of otherness instead of sameness is particularly valuable, because understanding differently is at the heart of all new learning. By being open to otherness, this kind of dialogue also gains a moral orientation, since it encourages a 'reciprocal recognition, an attempted reversibility of perspectives, between oneself and others' (ibid.: 110).

Whilst watching experienced teachers at work, the 'trainee' teacher remains a detached spectator, interpreting classroom events, learning *about* others. By engaging in dialogue with the teacher and children, the 'trainee' is able to learn *with* and *from* others. S/he listens to others, articulates his/her understandings and comes to know others' perspectives. The process of learning to be a 'good' teacher becomes enriched through the sensitivity to the Other, which develops in both the 'trainee', the child and the teacher. By having further conversations in

the lecture theatre about the very process of coming to know, 'trainees' are able to deepen their understandings and take their insights back into the classroom. This is an opportunity for reversing the roles of the teacher as the 'master craftsman or woman' and the 'trainee' as the 'apprentice' (Gove 2010). Bringing back to the classroom some of the 'trendy theories' discussed in the lecture theatre may stimulate further dialogue about whether the curriculum has indeed become a 'collection of targets' (Pring 2013: 65) and why, after decades of 'policy epidemic' educators suggest that there is '[s]till no pedagogy' in primary schools (Alexander 2004: 7).

Conclusion

What could then be learned from the case of 'trendy theory', training and targets outlined in this article? What lessons can be learned from the ways in which globalised politics seeks to determine exactly how teacher trainees are supposed to teach eleven-year-olds to read? What do we need to remember if we wish to engage in teacher education which goes beyond the classroom 'craft' (Gove 2010)? Bauman and Donskis (2013) remind us that the changes which engulf universities and schools today are not simply decided and enforced by those in power. Rather, we all participate, '[w]e are all accomplices' (ibid.: 140). Being implicated means not only responsibility but also choice. At stake in the post-intellectual era is our ability to choose between complying with the whims of powers that be or seeking alternatives. An alternative conceptualisation of teaching and learning developed by Hogan (2009; 2011) may be helpful in restoring the wholeness of the now fragmented 'good' practice. The wholeness of practice, however, has no alternative but to be understood holistically, in the sense that the 'good' practice enacted in the classroom or the lecture theatre is always already embedded in theoretically-rich foundations. It is such foundations that form the logical-dialogical bases for countering the commonsensical creeds of the globalised age and articulating defensible arguments for renewing 'good' practice 'from within'.

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