
Improvement *versus* transformation

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Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/educationdidactique/2718>

DOI : 10.4000/educationdidactique.2718

ISSN : 2111-4838

Éditeur

Presses universitaires de Rennes

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 6 décembre 2017

Pagination : 31-34

ISBN : 978-2-7535-7318-5

ISSN : 1956-3485

Référence électronique

Yrjö Engeström, « Improvement *versus* transformation », *Éducation et didactique* [En ligne], 11-2 | 2017, mis en ligne le 06 décembre 2017, consulté le 15 septembre 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/educationdidactique/2718>

IMPROVEMENT VERSUS TRANSFORMATION

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INTRODUCTION

Anthony S. Bryk's (2015) article is a call for systematic and accelerated improvement of schools by means of networked improvement communities. "This approach respects the complexities involved in educating well while also affirming that important aspects of the work of schooling should follow standard protocols." (Bryk, 2015, p. 474) While the general thrust of such an initiative is easy to embrace, it is imbued with some less obvious but foundational faults that I will address here.

My main concern is that Bryk seems to take *improvement* as the self-evident way to develop education in the present circumstances. Dictionaries define improvement as "the act or process of making something better." The tacit assumption is that schools are basically doing the right things and moving in the right direction – they just need to do it better. Bryk says nothing about what the contents, substantive goals and directional visions of improvement should be. These are taken for granted, as if we all would be in agreement about them.

I find this approach dangerous. It disregards the possibility that educational systems may in fact be coming to crossroads where qualitative transformations in their foundational assumptions and directional visions are necessary. By ignoring and suppressing this possibility, Bryk creates a situation in which improvement and transformation are seen as mutually exclusive alternative diagnoses and strategies.

In what follows, I will argue that educational systems are facing increasingly aggravated contradictions that cannot be resolved by improvement alone. They demand qualitative transformations. The notion of contradiction has been used in various ways in educational literature (e.g., Bowles & Gintis, 2011; McNeil, 2002; 2013). I will use contradictions in the dialectical and Marxist sense (Engeström & Sannino, 2011). This means that contradiction is a foundational philosophical concept that should not be equated with paradox, tension, inconsistency, conflict or dilemma. Many of the terms misused as equivalents of contradiction may better be understood as manifestations of contradictions. Contradictions are historical and must be traced in their real historical development. The primary contradiction of capitalism resides in every commodity, between its use value and exchange value. The primary contradic-

tion generates secondary contradictions specific to the particular conditions of the given activity or institution. Developmentally significant contradictions cannot be effectively dealt with merely by combining and balancing competing priorities. Seeing contradiction as an inconsistency or competition between separate forces or priorities corresponds to the general mechanistic tendency to replace inner systemic contradiction with outer, external oppositions. Inner contradictions need to be creatively and often painfully resolved by working out a new "thirdness," something qualitatively different from a mere combination or compromise between two competing forces.

In the present educational landscape, key struggles largely focus on the detrimental effects of high-stakes testing on the one hand, and the threat of privatization and marketization of public education on the other hand (Au, 2011; Macpherson, Robertson & Walford, 2014; Ravitch, 2014). These struggles are related to two inner contradictions that may be of decisive importance for the future of education. These are (1) the contradiction between knowledge as common good and knowledge as commodity, and (2) the contradiction between student engagement as seeking personal gain and student engagement as involvement in collective initiatives for equity and sustainability.

COMMODITIZATION VS. COMMON GOOD

Turning knowledge into a commodity, privately owned and sold for profit, is a powerful tendency in education and in the society at large (Boyle, 2008; Lessig, 2004). Commoditization, or the closure of knowledge commons (Hess & Ostrom, 2007), happens by means of extending corporate intellectual property rights in ways that prevent free access to knowledge. It also happens more insidiously, by extending corporate control and ownership over information exchanged and circulated in the internet. In education the basic form of commoditization has for a long time been the standardization and modularization of instructional contents into packages whose value is measured in numbers of credits. Literature on "open education" is mainly focused on success stories of widening the educational markets; it remains largely silent about the advance and impact of commoditization (Iiyoshi & Kumar, 2008).

Commoditization clashes with the increasingly universal availability of knowledge brought about by digital networks, including the increasingly pervasive potential of practically anybody to produce and effectively disseminate knowledge free of charge in a global scale. Promoting free and open knowledge today means to ask: What will be the shape of knowledge understood as common good in the age of social media? Schools and educational systems have a huge responsibility in tackling this question. Bringing tablets and Twitter into classrooms is not the answer. The first step toward a viable answer is to acknowledge that knowledge needs to be seen as a rigorous collective inquiry that brings the learners into the world beyond the classroom walls.

If researchers of educational change ignore these contradictory dynamics, they are hiding their heads in a bush. The challenge is that like any dialectical contradiction, this cannot be eliminated simply by choosing a side.

PERSONAL GAIN VS. COLLECTIVE ENGAGEMENT

Student engagement has become a central concern for educational practitioners, administrators and researchers (Christenson, Reschly & Wylie, 2012). Schools have lost their monopoly over the students and they are not necessarily doing very well in competition with social media and entertainment.

“Engaged students do more than attend or perform academically; they also put forth effort, persist, self-regulate their behavior toward goals, challenge themselves to exceed, and enjoy challenges and learning. [...] Student engagement, irrespective of the specificity of its definition, is generally associated positively with desired academic, social, and emotional learning outcomes.” (Christenson, Reschly & Wylie, 2012, p. v)

This characterization depicts an engaged student as an individual who is keen to work hard in order to reach desirable learning outcomes. These desirable outcomes are typically expressed in good grades that serve as credentials for further studies and jobs. In other words, an engaged student is primarily an individual who is effective in the pursuit of personal gain, as defined by the established measures of success imposed by the educational system and the

wider society. Self-critical awareness of the limitations of this stance has been practically absent in the literature; it boils down to the observation that engagement is not wholly an experience of “flourishing” as some students experience elevated levels of both engagement and burnout (Salmela-Aro *et al.*, 2016).

At the same time, scholars such as Scott Atran are ringing alarm bells on the basis of studies of radicalized youth joining organizations such as the ISIS.

“Why do values of liberal and open democracy increasingly appear to be losing ground to those of narrow ethnonationalisms and radical Islam in a tacit alliance that is tearing apart the European middle class (the mainstay of European democracy) in ways similar to the undermining of republican values by fascists and communists in the 1920s and 1930s? [...] what can be done to mobilize yearning youth to a countervailing cause? What dreams may come from current government policies that offer little beyond promises of comfort and security? People who are willing to sacrifice everything, including their lives – the totality of their self-interests – will not be lured away just by material incentives or disincentives. The science suggests that sacred values are best opposed with other sacred values that inspire devotion, or by sundering the fused social networks that embed those values.” (Atran, 2016, S201)

The drive for young people to join radical jihadists, for example, is rooted in thorough disappointment in the options of engagement offered by standard practices of western education. What might be a constructive alternative set of values and practices that would inspire devotion? Obviously schools need to seek avenues of collective engagement in matters crucial for the survival of our planet. In other words, social movements and communities engaged in actions for equity and sustainability are the natural allies of schools if we are to develop engagement beyond individual self-interest (Sannino, Engeström & Lemos, 2016).

CONCLUSION

I have sketched a perspective that builds on transformation, not on improvement, as remedy for educational systems and schools. The transformation must be based on careful analysis of inner contradictions of educational practice. In other words, transformation is not a process of achieving preset goals; it is a

process of resolving contradictions by constructing and traversing a collective zone of proximal development (Engeström, 2015).

I identified two contradictions that may be of decisive importance for the future of education, namely the contradiction between commoditization of knowledge and the development of knowledge as common good, and the contradiction between student engagement as pursuit of personal gain and student engagement as involvement in collective efforts toward equity and sustainability of life on our planet. Generating, implementing, comparing and generalizing expansive local resolutions to transcend these contradictions is an alternative to improvement as outlined by Bryk (2015).

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