

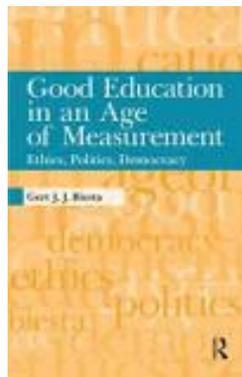
# PARENT POWER, STUDENT POWER, TEACHER POWER? RECLAIMING EDUCATION AS A PUBLIC CONCERN GERT BIESTA

Brunel University London, UK – University of Humanistic Studies, The Netherlands –  
Education Council of the Netherlands

many thanks for the invitation

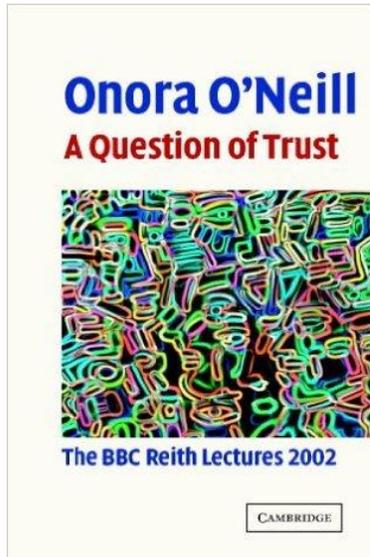


I speak from my experience as a teacher and teacher educator  
in higher education in England, Scotland, the Netherlands, and Norway  
plus advisor to the Dutch government and parliament  
and a keen observer of trends & fashions in policy, research and practice  
(though Ireland is fairly ‘new terrain’)



the context: the age of measurement  
the response: reclaiming education  
the question: Who ‘owns’ education?

# THE CONTEXT: THE 'AGE OF MEASUREMENT' FROM BUREAUCRATIC TO TECHNOCRATIC CONTROL OF EDUCATION



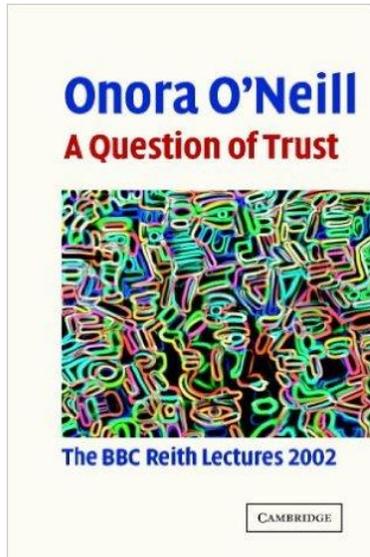
2002

## PARTICULARLY DUE THE RISE OF THE 'AUDIT CULTURE' (1)

**In theory** the new culture of accountability and audit makes professionals and institutions **more accountable to the public**. This is supposedly done by publishing targets and levels of attainment in league tables, and by establishing complaint procedures by which members of the public can seek redress for any professional or institutional failures.

But underlying this ostensible aim of accountability to the public **the real requirements are for accountability to regulators, to departments of government, to funders, to legal standards**. The new forms of accountability impose forms of central control – quite often indeed a range of different and mutually inconsistent forms of central control.

# THE CONTEXT: THE 'AGE OF MEASUREMENT' FROM BUREAUCRATIC TO TECHNOCRATIC CONTROL OF EDUCATION



2002

## PARTICULARLY DUE THE RISE OF THE 'AUDIT CULTURE' (2)

**In theory** again the new culture of accountability and audit makes professionals and institutions **more accountable for good performance**. This is manifest in the rhetoric of improvement and raising standards, of efficiency gains and best practice, of respect for patients and pupils and employees.

But beneath this admirable rhetoric **the real focus** is on **performance indicators chosen for ease of measurement** and control rather than because they measure accurately what the quality of performance is.

# WHERE DID IT START? AND WHERE DID IT GO WRONG?

## the social justice argument

every child and young person, irrespective of who they are, where they are or where they are from, should have access to good education

## the slippery slope

How do we make sure that education is everywhere of the same quality?

How do we assess the quality of education?

How do we measure the quality of education?

How do we measure the quality of educational outcomes?

Which outcomes should be measured?

Which outcomes can be measured?



“measuring what we value, or valuing what is being measured”

‘supported’ by the Global Education Measurement Industry  
and its seductive ‘social psychology’: the fear of being left behind

## THE RESULT

a **narrow definition** of what counts **in** education

‘achievement in a small number of curricular areas’

instrumentalisation of other areas (e.g., art)

a **narrow conception** of what counts **as** education

a shift from provision to outcomes

an input-output logic – education as the production of things

a **degrading** of the teacher

as a factor in the production of outcomes

not a thinking, judging and acting professional

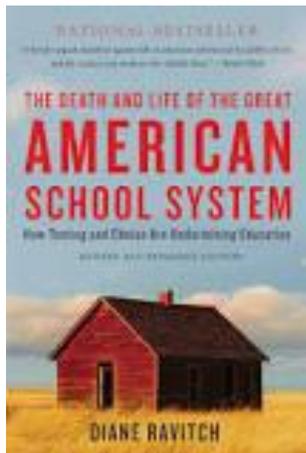
the rise of **performativity**

where indicators of quality become definitions of quality

(e.g., league table positions, including OECD’s PISA)



the emergence of a **cynical education** system



**FROM WHERE MIGHT EDUCATION BE RECLAIMED?**

## **OPTION 1: PARENT POWER?**

**a long & a complicated discussion**  
**e.g. in relation to religion and worldviews**  
[see the particular settlement in The Netherlands]  
**parents' rights – children's rights – parental duties**

**more recently: the rise of parents as customers on the education market**  
**partly the result of the rise of education markets themselves: choice!**



**markets may be fairly good at servicing the wants of customers**  
**but are not good at needs-definition**

“Do you really need a new TV?” “What’s wrong with the old one?”

“Shouldn’t you go out more?” “Have you tried reading?”

**markets mainly want us to desire more**  
**rather than helping us interrogating our wants and desires**

## OPTION 1: PARENT POWER?

**the difference between markets and democracy**

**“We want democracy, Mr Blair, not choice!”**

**democracy is not the power of the majority (quantitative)  
but figuring out which private wants can be ‘carried’ collectively (qualitative)**



**in a democracy, therefore, “you can’t always get what you want”**

**democratic deliberation ‘regulated’ by the principles of liberty and equality**

**two limits to parent power**

- [1] a diversity of private wants needs to be mediated**
- [2] with reference to the principles of liberty and equality**



**which are public principles**

## OPTION 2: STUDENT POWER?

should students be 'driving' education?



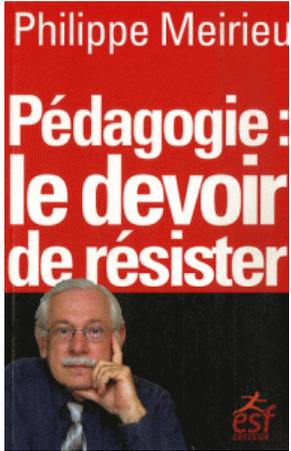
old and new forms of child-centred or student-centred education  
as a response to (extreme forms of) curriculum-centred education  
as a response to authoritarian forms of education  
e.g. Paulo Freire

a neo-liberal version: "student satisfaction"  
giving students what they want



yet education has a duty to take students 'beyond the present and the particular'  
not just giving them what they want  
but pointing them in different directions  
giving them what they could not have imagined they would want

## OPTION 2: STUDENT POWER?



and education has a 'duty to resist' (Philippe Meirieu)



particularly 'infantile' or ego-logical desires

not in order to suppress desires

not to tell students what they should desire (moralising education)

but by introducing a question

whether what students desire (or encounter as desire)

is what they should be desiring

to live their life well, with others, on a planet with limited capacity

education as the 'non-coercive rearrangement of desires' (Spivak)

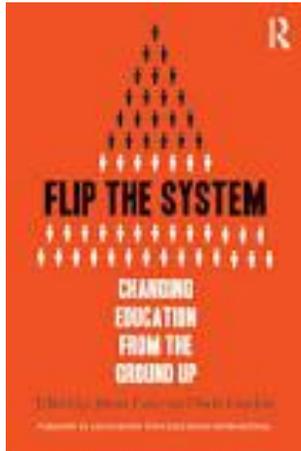
not child- or student-centred but world-centred

focused on existing together with who and what is other: public existence

## OPTION 3: TEACHER POWER?

Does this amount to an argument for teacher power?  
Are teachers the true 'owners' of education?

Should 'the system' thus be 'flipped' towards them?



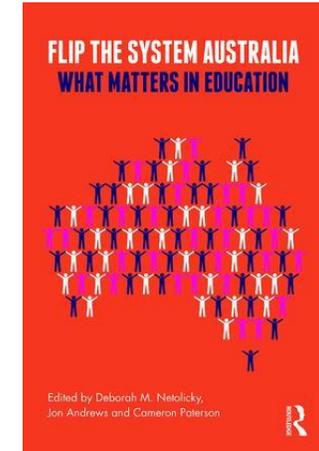
'teachers' are not a homogeneous group



some favour control, some favour emancipation  
and many have been 'schooled' in the  
age of measurement and the language of learning

and thus may have lost connection with altogether different ways  
of 'thinking' and 'doing' education  
or work under conditions that do not allow them to (re-)connect

plus the lure of 'evidence' as a way to regain teacher agency  
yet turning teaching into an 'effective intervention' = control



## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

IN AN 'AGE OF MEASUREMENT' THERE IS AN URGENT NEED TO RECLAIM  
EDUCATION FROM THE TECHNOCRATS



PARTICULARLY THOSE WHO CONTRIBUTE TO A SITUATION WHERE PEOPLE  
VALUE WHAT'S BEING MEASURED, RATHER THAN FOCUS ON WHAT'S VALUED  
[the question of Good Education]  
AND DO SO OUTSIDE OF ANY DEMOCRATIC CONTROL  
[such as particularly the OECD]

parents – students – teachers?  
all have a legitimate interest in education  
but their interest becomes problematic when it becomes entirely private



hence any attempt at reclaiming education  
needs to maintain a public orientation

**THANK YOU**

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