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When disruptive behavior meets outcome-based education

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Disruptive behavior is a major concern for most educational systems. Schools often respond to disruptive students with exclusionary and punitive approaches that have limited effect or value. Moreover, recent neoliberal trends with increased focus on student learning outcome change the attitudes towards disruptive student behavior and also narrow down and homogenize the range of what is considered as “acceptable student behavior”. In this article we discuss the interrelationship between an outcome-based, neoliberal school approach and notions of disruptive behavior. We claim that the outcome-based and neoliberal approach to education basically promotes an un-educational way of thinking about education that also has a huge influence on perceptions of and tolerance towards all kinds of disruptions in schools – whether they come from students, parents, teachers or researchers.

Keywords: Disruptive behavior, neoliberal school reforms, standardization, educational processes

Where there is dynamic order in place is also its violation—which could be subsumed under the general label of disruption. Something intact is being ruptured—for better, or worse. Processes of development are disruptive in relation to their previous states of affairs. Earthquakes and volcano eruptions disrupt the natural balance in an ecosystem. And introduction of formal schooling disrupts the processes of learning local knowledge through the channels of informal education. Disruption is natural, and in its social valuation it can acquire both negative and positive connotations.

Systems of formal schooling have their own disruptions. In this article we analyze a number of those—starting from disruptive conduct of children in schools, but also looking at the ways in which school demands disrupt the expectations of families of their pupils and their intrinsic motivation. Last—but not least—we look at the socio-political processes of neoliberal economic models reaching the realm of school education and disrupting the flow of

knowledge development in the name of accounting for educational success of the schools. We may observe disruptive processes at all levels: pupils in the classroom, teachers giving exams to pupils and demands on their parents, and the social power holders putting demands on how school teaching and learning is organized. The circle may end at the base—leading to new waves of pupils' unrest (easily labeled “disruption”).

The obvious problem: pupils are disruptive in school

Disruptive behavior and lack of school discipline have consistently been ranked as major issues in most educational systems (Way, 2011). Disruptive classroom behavior has thus for decades been the subject of great attention. This is not surprising since any disruption is an unwanted obstacle on the way towards fulfilling teacher's and school system's educational objectives. Moreover, current and ongoing shifts in educational policies in many countries towards more outcome-based and neoliberal education seem to further focus on negative attitudes toward disruptive student behavior. The possibility that what is “disruptive” in the school context may constitute the starting point of emerging creativity in the pupils is usually not acknowledged. Norwegian scholar Edvin Bru (2009) for example analyzes why Norwegian students perform badly on PISA-tests, and he concludes that:

“Classroom disruption is a major concern for schools. It can threaten the well-being of pupils and reduce learning outcomes *because pupils have difficulties concentrating* on the learning tasks or simply *because of the loss of learning time* (...). The PISA-results for Norway are in accordance with the assumption that disruptive behavior in schools has negative effects on learning outcomes (Bru, 2009: 462, added emphases)

This attribution is interesting as it (a) assumes that pupils appropriate the goals of the school system (i.e. they **try** to concentrate *but have difficulties* because of disruptions—they are victims to themselves, as they disrupt the classroom activities **and** try to concentrate!) and (b) learning time is presented as a commodity. Poor PISA-results are suggested to be explained with reference to a lack of school discipline and an abundance of disruptive behavior—by pupils, it is assumed. In other words, disruptive behavior has become an increasing concern for schools and policy makers because it is suspected of markedly reducing student learning outcome and because it has negative impact on PISA-results. The first of the concerns is traditional—every next generation is worried about their offspring that does not seem to get the good education the parents got. The second concern is a purely administrative artefact of political insertion into the educational programs in Europe. A new political and educational context for disruptive behavior is thus emerging— one that actively points the finger at the unruly children in schools, disallowing the consideration that the new reforms

of the schools themselves may be an act of social disruption of the teaching/learning processes.

In this article, we want to emphasize that this context also changes the attitudes towards disruptions and also narrows down and homogenizes the range of what is considered as “acceptable student behavior”. The borders of that range define what is perceived as “disruptive behavior” by pupils. We would like to point to potential dangers of such homogenization of student conduct – the “win” in potential outcomes (PISA scores) may hide a serious loss in the preparation of the young generation for becoming active producers of innovation in their societies. The PISA scores are important for social administrators of education, while actual processes of learning *beyond* the levels prescribed by curricula would specify the future generation of technological and social innovators.

Disruptive behavior: what does it really mean?

At a first glance, disruptive behavior seems to be a clear concept. Even those who are not familiar with pedagogical discourses can immediately grasp its meaning: there is something wrong with the student’s way to act at school. But what does it really mean? Is a disruptive behavior always an action (against something or someone)? Or can it also be a non-action (something that does not follow a prescribed pattern)? Is it a contingent and punctual act (one time-like) or it is more a sequel of acts repeated over time (pattern-like)? And most importantly, what is this behavior (which is commonly assumed as a *mis*-behavior rather than some strategic *social action* in the classroom) exactly disrupting: the work of the teacher, the learning process, the classroom atmosphere, the school’s rules or all these together? The implicit focus of the discursive lament seems to point to the answer—“all of the above”. Complaining about growing disruptions of the changing school practices by the pupils becomes a socio-political camouflage for by far more complex issues that education faces today.

Even if we assume a naïve idea of disruptive behavior as something wrong about the student at school, why do we not consider both terms (the student *and* the school) as equally involved into the process of generating a disruptive action? There is something questionable in the use of the term *behavior*, which implicitly evokes an individual focus and responsibility in performing the actions while the contextual factors are totally dismissed. Children at school do not *behave*—they *act within a socially organized setting* in which the learning goals are given to them by the school, in accordance with the political agendas of wider societies. The inventors of PISA may be considered to be equal partners with pupils in triggering increases in disruptive events at school.

The existing discursive coverage of school disruptions is blind to the latter possibility. Thus, a closer look at the notion of disruptive behavior raises some intricate epistemological and methodological questions with great implications for educational practices. According to Maddeh, Bennour, and Souissi (2015), disruptive behaviors refer to any behavior that disrupts school activities and disturbs teachers and/or students in class. These behaviors harm the teacher/

students relationship and student learning outcome. The authors report a vast range of disruptive behaviors which include everything, ranging from “To be distracted”, to “Lashing out at material”, from “Criticizing”, to “Resisting instructions”, from “Deforming the rules intentionally” to “Making noise”, from “Giving up practice” to “Fooling around” etc.

In addition, these disruptive behaviors can be studied from different angles, where some researches study it from the student’s perspective (Stork & Saunders, 2002), while others look into it from the teacher’s perspective (Kulinna, 2007–2008). These research outcomes are mainly taxonomies of disruptive behaviors that include several categories for the sake of differentiating things that co-exist in the same place, namely the classroom (Rosen, 2005). Those categories refer mainly to: a) specific critical disciplinary incidents (verbal and physical violence, bullying, squabbling, etc.); b) difficulties in the learning processes (lack of attention, refusal of the normal school setting regarding rules, entrance routines, homework etc.); c) general problems of the developmental trajectories that frequently appear in preadolescence and adolescence (losing temper, arguing with adults, refusing to comply with adults’ requests or rules, etc). All the above mentioned categories of behaviors are basically conceptualized as *individual* problems that affect the “climate in class”. At the same time, the events that take place in the classroom are collective in their nature—aside from the main actors (i.e. the “disruptive” pupil(s) and the “disciplining” educator) there is always an audience of other pupils, the impact of the “disruption” in the given class to the whole macro-atmosphere of the whole school. An act of “disruption” in a classroom by a particular pupil is thus a social event for all—and its various meanings that can be of opposite value for various participants (e.g., what is “disruption” for the teacher may be “heroism of resistance to teacher” for fellow pupils)

The focus on outcomes: an outcome of the historical move to consumer society

Before we go further into details with changed attitudes toward disruptive behavior, we will shortly describe the current and global shift toward an increasingly outcome-based and neoliberal school system. Education is nowadays a global matter. But it is not only global in the sense that students travel more easily across borders and that nations lose their educational sovereignty. Globalization of education also implies increased competition and standardization between national educational systems. And although globalization has created many new opportunities, it also has some counterproductive and undesirable implications.

In 2001 the OECD published the first results of the *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA). Prior to the publication of the first PISA-results, there had been movements and actions in the 1980s and 1990s in many countries that preceded the PISA-project (Uljens, 2007). However, the PISA-project – put to practice by political decisions rather than educational considerations – instantly led to a massive impact on the participating countries’ educational policies and spirited a global educational reform thinking marked by the values of *accountability*, *competition*, *standardization* and focus on student learning and outcome.

The new educational reform agenda is now an integrated part of most – at least Western educational systems. A Finnish professor of education, Pasi Sahlberg (2011), even describes this as a “Global Educational Reform Movement” (GERM). According to Sahlberg, GERM has emerged since the 1980s and has increasingly been adopted as an educational orthodoxy marked by:

- 1) **Competition.** GERM represents a shift toward increased competition between schools in order to boost school choice. Parents are viewed as if they were *consumers* who have the *right to choose* the school best suited for their children. In this process parents need central data (league tables, grade point average, drop-out rates etc.) about schools in order to make the “right” decisions. Note that all these parameters are of secondary quality in contrast to the substance to be learned and its societal value to be co-created by the graduating pupils, their teachers, and parents. The delegation (to parents) of the appealing notion “right to choose” is a vehicle to get parents to cooperate in placing the pupils into prescribed social roles in the “open society” of consumers *where choices are externally given*, rather than *created as innovations* by the young educated person oneself.
- 2) **Standardization.** Secondly, teaching and learning get standardized with very detailed prescriptions about how teachers are expected to teach and what students are expected to learn (presented to the public as goals-oriented teaching and learning). This also makes comparisons about school and student performance easier. While that is obviously true, the question arises—easier for whom? Is the child in a classroom trying to master a complex mathematics problem benefitting in his or her learning efforts from the publicly available knowledge that this school has better mathematics scores than that other school in town, in the PISA testing? Standardization puts the “cart in front of the horse” (or, maybe in modern times—the engine of a Volkswagen being dragged by its exhausts pipe)—learning has to be accomplished before any transfer of it is possible. And transfer of the established learning results to standardized evaluation devices is only one possible domain where the knowledge can be tested. Societies need young people who can creatively be ahead of the standards of existing knowledge to create new understanding. The business interests of innovative companies need young people who are able to solve problems beyond the knowledge spaces covered by the PISA system.
- 3) **Standardized testing.** GERM also implies an increase in the use of standardized tests (like for example PISA). These tests are used to hold *teachers* accountable for student achievement. Teachers’ profession is captured in a double bind—on the one hand, they try their best to educate their pupils, but what that means becomes put into the straightjacket of the standard evaluation methods. This is a major disruption into teachers’ profession, changing the motivation of your people to enter the traditionally highly valued profession. Instead of being creative educators, teachers become little bureaucrats administering tests, giving school report cards to parents, and legitimizing their educational efforts in increasing flow of paperwork.

- 4) **Devaluation of teacher professionalism.** With GERM teachers are increasingly looked at as mechanic facilitators of student learning and less as professional and competent teachers. Teachers' methodological and pedagogical freedom is restricted and they are expected to teach in uniform ways. Hence, professional teacher judgment has been replaced by protocols and manuals based and so-called evidence-based research and scientific knowledge about 'what works' (see also Biesta, 2007).
- 5) **Privatization of public schools.** Many public schools are being privatized in order to boost what is claimed to be "free choice" and competition. Education is about to become a profit-oriented business, leaving behind the humanistic goals of bringing all human beings to the best of their abilities.

According to Sahlberg, GERM is built on wrong premises and it represents a strong neoliberalization of education that now has turned into a global pandemic. And although not as influential as the US, the neoliberal discourse has also gained very strong influence in Europe and also in Scandinavian countries, which have otherwise traditionally been rooted in a strong social and democratic welfare tradition (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006; Szulevicz & Tanggaard, 2014). Despite the criticism of the pandemic, the social processes that carry it into educational practices continue to be in vogue. There are parallels in other arenas of human societal activities—the notion of "evidence based medicine" becomes interpreted as evidence based on outcomes of past medical treatments—while each new medical problem is unique and requires the medical personnel to solve problems rather than follow standard instructions. This mismatch has been recognized in that side of the medical system that is most directly involved in patient care—nursing (Baumann, 2010). It is passed by in the economy-driven medical insurance practices which calculate cost/benefit contrasts of different medical procedures for the (still) living patients⁹.

Measuring to standardize? The case of the school evaluation report card

Each outlined "problem" in the flow of human activity is a problem in itself. The aim of this article is not to neglect nor deny that schools experience massive problems related to disruptive classroom behavior, and we acknowledge that disruptive behavior truly is a huge problem in most educational systems for both students and teachers. Furthermore, disruptive behavior is both a huge

9 The success of Evidence Based Medicine (and by proxy—Evidence Based Education) cannot proceed unbounded. It will necessarily collapse if the generally accepted (based on samples of cases) treatment procedures begin to produce single but recurrent cases of surviving anomalies. The Thalidomide example from the 1960s is an example of dramatic mis-formations that horrified the public. A similar situation is on the horizon for the move into "gene repair" therapies which are likely to produce unpredictable singular-but-dramatic "side effects". Such effects are likely to horrify the consuming public and lead to collapse of the glory of "evidence" of the misplaced kind.

challenge in outcome-based educational systems as it also was a challenge prior to GERM.

However, as already described, our claim is that attitudes toward disruptive behavior change within an outcome-based school approach. Moreover, disruptive behavior also becomes problematic because policy makers use the disruptions to legitimize new (neoliberal) school reforms (Szulevicz, 2016). We enter into a cycle: new ways of schooling → teachers stressed and overworked → pupils resisting and strategically avoiding learning by “disruptive” conduct and school avoidance → policy makers using this evidence for more regulations... and the cycle repeats.

Measuring is a key process in outcome-based educational systems because it promotes standardized notions of student performance. In order to make good measures, a great effort is made in order to define detailed prescriptions about what students must learn in a specific period of school life. In this section of the article we will present an empirical example from an Italian educational context. The example is taken from the so-called *report cards* that are a way for schools to communicate student achievement to parents and to the large public (policy makers and other concerned people—interestingly labelled “stakeholders”).

Beyond the school: inserting neoliberal ideas into families

Despite this effort in the direction of a transparent accountability of the teaching-learning process, there are many aspects that still remain opaque and local. Research carried out in different Italian schools reveals the ambiguity of the measurement system used by the school in the evaluation report card (Marsico & Iannaccone, 2012). Several “meetings” between families and the teacher appointed by the class board to deliver the school report card at the end of the first semester have been observed, where-after the families have been interviewed about their opinion on the school evaluation of their own children.

The following excerpt shows how the student’s evaluation is “situated” in the specific school life of that particular classroom, taking into account things that are not strictly related to the performance, like the good will and the overall classroom situation.

Excerpt 1 the meeting involving the teacher, an 11year female pupil and her parents. During the encounter, the teacher spent quite a long time in explaining the criteria of the new report card as required by the new reform in the Italian educational system.

English translation:

1. TEACHER: you already know that this year there's the new school report [card]
2. MOTHER: [yes]
[...]
5. TEACHER: you know each school>has its own card<(.) I mean if you go to another school the card will be different (.) because (.) the minister gave (.) the task to every teaching staff (.) to create a card>for that single [school]<
6. MOTHER [I understood.. each school has:.]
7. TEACHER: each school has its own card (.) for instance our card has eight pages (.) another school will have two pages (.) another school will have ten pages (.) so each teaching staff has elaborated its own card (.) according to some [criteria]
8. MOTHER: [definitely]
9. TEACHER: we think that for each subject (.) must be more entries (.) for instance in Italian there are four entries (.) in English three entries (.) maths four entries (.) (well) each subject presents several indicators (.) Italian has, for instance, listening (.) exposition: (.) reading (.) etcetera=etcetera
[...]
21. TEACHER: and obviously there's (.) the evaluation that is no longer called the first four-monthly evaluation (.) but: they changed terminology (.) now is called intermediate evaluation (.) all in all the: card of the girl is: positive enough (.) it goes good (.) full good (.) there are some distinguished for instance [in]
22. DAUGHTER: [music] [music]
23. TEACHER: [music]
24. DAUGHTER: [and theatre]
25. TEACHER: then in other optional activities (.) theatre (.) let's say distinguished in theatre (.) let's say the average is about good (.) actually she's been above all rewarded for her good will
26. MOTHER: yes
27. TEACHER: ehm (.) we took into account a slightly particular situation in this classroom (.) it was a classroom with certain problems (.) brought from the past and at beginning it created us problems (.) not her in particular but well the classroom gave us some troubles (.) that's why in the evaluation we analysed not only the academic achievement (.) we haven't been so strict with the academic achievement (.) taking into account that it was a first class that [suffered]
28. MOTHER: [of the passage from Primary school]
29. TEACHER: [of the passage] (.) some went over it earlier (.) some other [later]

Original Italian transcript:

- 1.DOCENTE: voi già sapete che quest'anno c'è la scheda [nuova]
- 2.MADRE: [sì]
[...]
- 5.DOCENTE: sapete che ogni scuola>ha la sua scheda<(.) cioè se andiamo in un'altra scuola non sarà la stessa scheda (.) perché (.) il ministro ha dato (.) l'incarico ad ogni consiglio ad ogni collegio dei docenti (.) di preparare una scheda>per quella [scuola]<
- 6.MADRE: [ho capito.. ogni istituto ha:.]
- 7.DOCENTE: ogni istituto ha una sua scheda (.) per esempio la nostra è di otto pagine (.) un'altra scuola sarà di due pagine (.) un'altra scuola sarà di dieci pagine (.) quindi ogni collegio dei docenti ha organizzato la sua scheda (.) secondo quello che riteneva i [principi]
- 8.MADRE: [certo]
- 9.DOCENTE: noi abbiamo ritenuto che per ogni materia (.) ci fossero più voci (.) per esempio in italiano già ci sono quattro voci (.) in inglese tre voci (.) matematica quattro voci (.) (insomma) ogni disciplina aveva più indicatori (.) in italiano aveva l'ascolto (.) l'esposizione: (.) la lettura (.) eccetera=eccetera
[...]
- 21.DOCENTE: e poi ovviamente c'è (.) la valutazione che non si chiama più valutazione del primo quadrimestre (.) ma: hanno cambiato terminologia (.) valutazione intermedia (.) tutto sommato la: scheda della signorina è: abbastanza positiva (.) va sul buono (.) sul buono pieno (.) c'è qualche distinto per esempio [in]
- 22.ALLIEVA: [musica] [musica]
- 23.DOCENTE:[musica]
- 24.ALLIEVA: [e teatro]
- 25.DOCENTE: e poi in altre attività opzionali (.) teatro (.) diciamo poi ha distinto in teatro (.) diciamo che la media è sul buono (.) in realtà è stata premiata soprattutto la buona volontà
- 26.MADRE: sì
27. DOCENTE: ehm (.) noi abbiamo tenuto presente in questa classe una situazione abbastanza particolare (.) perché dal momento in cui andiamo a tenere presente la situazione della classe (.) una classe con certi problemi (.) che portava dal passato e che ci ha creato qualche problema (.) non lei in particolare però certo ci ha dato qualche problema (.) per cui nella valutazione abbiamo analizzato non solo la parte delle conoscenze (.) quindi non siamo stati estremamente fiscali la situazione delle conoscenze (.) tenendo presente che era una prima che avevano [subito]
- 28.MADRE: [del passaggio dalla scuola elementare]
- 29.DOCENTE: [del passaggio] (.) chi lo aveva assorbito prima (.) chi lo ha assorbito [dopo]

What is the role of the report card in the educational process? The report card is meant to be a tool for registering and communicating the individual school achievement over time. It represents, in fact, a list of marks indicating the supposed current level of student's competences. Yet each mark is definitively the result of a configuration of specific circumstances (the students, the classmate, the teacher, the semester etc.) which—by the time of the delivery of the report card—are already in the past.

As shown in the excerpt above, the student's evaluation at the end of the semester is based on the interplay between her personal commitment and the class' transitional phase between primary and middle school. Let us elaborate on the teacher's message (line 21):

“...the evaluation that is no longer called the first four-monthly evaluation (.) but: they changed terminology (.)now is called intermediate evaluation (.) all in all the: card of the girl is: positive enough” (added emphases)

What is the communicative function for the teacher to inform the parent about the change of the label of an evaluative system? Sure, the “parent has the right to know” (and maybe the “teacher has the obligation to tell”), but it has nothing to do with the pupil's learning. Rather, the teacher establishes a micro-contract of sharing their opposition to the indeterminate “they” (who changed the name of the paperwork) while communicating to the mother that no matter what evaluation system it is, it is “positive enough” for her daughter. And that is where neoliberal policies become counter-acted—at the “grass roots” level—where the shared interest is in what the pupil learns rather than what the card states.

How can a single mark “translate” all the education process laying beyond it? What is lost or added? Is the translation system clear or is it only outwardly evident? And to whom? What does “sufficient” mean for a parent? Is the scale rate fully understandable to them? How he/she would have access to the child's learning process? What does the evaluation account for? Do the parents get clear data by the assessment code for making choices on the school system as in the GERM philosophy? The conformity to a given standard level expected at a specific point in time and the attempt to give uniformity to the educational process among students is, here, another issue of the teacher-parents meeting. The issue here is basic—it is the contrast between two communication models. The social policy makers assume that policies sent to the implementers and their targets will be “translated” into practices as these are formulated on the top. If these are not, there is an “error” in transmission that needs to be corrected. This communication model fits technological systems, but fails in human systems. In the human case any communicative effort is counter-evaluated by the recipients, and can be dealt with in many different ways: ignored, neutralized, re-directed, selectively accepted, or even accepted fully at the façade level but never taken over. Social policy makers have only limited control opportunities over the active resistance strategies that the recipients have at their disposal.

Negotiating the disruptions between home and school

During the school report card meeting two or more adults, both of whom are responsible in different ways for the child's education, are confronted. Their different perspectives on education somehow compete for the privilege of "having their say" about a human being at a critical stage of her life. In such a one-to-one match, the school should represent a public institution and, as such, should be a sort of "official voice" (Marsico, Komatsu, & Iannaccone, 2013). The family, in the least problematic cases, will spontaneously agree with this representation. In the most difficult cases, it will on the contrary defend its own conflicting position: for instance, when the child exhibits disruptive behavior or does not embody the good student prototype and his/her parents accuse the teachers of being the main reason for this. Report card negotiations represent, therefore, examples of "parental disruption" of the school.

In the following excerpt a father complains about the marks received by his 11 year old son. In his view the son has been punished by the teachers with a lower grade (passing mark) because of his impulsivity. In the father's opinion, the son is smarter and more mature than the other classmates who received a better evaluation. The father claims the incapacity of the school system to make a real assessment of the actual students' capability, neither in term of school achievement nor in term of general developmental trajectory.

Excerpt 2 the meeting involving the researcher, the 11-year son, the 13-year daughter (who studied in the same school) and the father and it took place immediately after the report card delivery. The researcher interviewed the family soon after the teacher who presented them with the school evaluations left the meeting room. The father and the children, still inside the school context and holding the card, were asked to provide explanations and to attribute meaning to the child's success or failure in school.

English translation:

19. RESEARCHER: what do you think about your son's results?

20. FATHER: he's been hit on his own character (.) he's over-meticulous (.) I tell him don't care for the others (.) you must care for yourself (.) I see you're studying (.) but his character is impulsive (.) you can't get pass mark for that (.) because these boys are growing (.) he's a mature boy for his age he's smart (.) let's see if he's like that compared with other.>if you got distinguished and you don't know the France's chief town<you are not mature for the third class (.) a guy that finished the second year with all good marks now got pass mark (.) you must help him (.) there's something going on (.) there's the girlfriend the first crush (.) we've been all like this (.) I can see he's more mature even if he got a passing mark (.) than one who got distinguished but is like a child that cannot face real life

Original Italian transcript:

19. RICERCATRICE: cosa pensa dei risultati di suo figlio?

20. PADRE: lui è stato colpito sul carattere (.) lui è pignolo (.) gli dico che agli altri non li devi pensare (.) devi pensare a te stesso (.) Io ti vedo che studi (.) ma il carattere che è impulsivo (.) non si può mettere sufficiente per questo (.) perché questi hanno dei momenti di crescita (.) lui è un ragazzo mature per l'età che ha lui è sveglia (.) vediamo se è così rispetto agli altri>se hai distinto e non sai qual è la capitale della Francia<non sei maturo per la terza media (.) uno che ha finito la seconda con tutti buoni e adesso ha sufficiente (.) lo dovete aiutare (.) c'è qualcosa c'è la ragazza le prime cote (.) siamo stati tutti così (.) io vedo che è più maturo lui che ha sufficiente (.) di uno che ha distinto, ma che è un bambino che non sa muoversi

According to the father, the school fails in its own mission, consisting of both certifying the competence and supporting the developmental task toward a more mature attitude. This is a counter-voice to the conformity as well as a real “disruption” of the supposed alliance between family and school.

Disruptions and disruptive behavior can be described in many ways and likewise, disruptive behavior obviously can express itself in many different ways. In the following section we will describe some of the consequences that potentially follow when disruptive behavior/disruptions ‘meet’ an outcome-based approach to education. In the following section, these consequences are outlined.

First consequence: Education becomes un-educational

The first consequence we will describe is indirect and can be considered a theoretical point about the consequences of the outcome-based approach for education in general. Like Sahlberg, Gert Biesta, an educational philosopher, also contends that managerial accountability, which focuses on efficiency and competition, dominates the current political arena in education. According to Biesta (2014a, 2014b) the main problem in the outcome-based school approach is that it basically promotes “a rather un-educational way of thinking about education” (Biesta, 2014a: 124) and that the very fundamental and normative question about what “makes good education good” is not answered. Instead, this question has been replaced by new social technologies like the report cards described above or by questions about how we more efficiently can enhance student learning to administratively set criteria of today. Yet, the whole role of education is to prepare the learners to undertake new tasks that might emerge tomorrow.

However, institutionally set goals create a framework of easy evaluation. As a consequence, *accountability* has become the principal way of regulating education. Originally, accountability had a democratic potential and implied that schools had a direct relationship with students, parents and society in general. But the notion of accountability has been transformed into an indirect relationship in which schools nowadays are responsible for their ‘quality’ by fulfilling pre-defined quality standards defined by policy makers and OECD (e.g. PISA-scores). This has produced a system of control, inspection and quality insurance in which schools and teachers are made accountable to the public (policy makers and stakeholders) for good performances. Accountability has thus become a matter of controlling school- and student learning outcome like we saw above with the report cards.

Furthermore, Biesta (2014a) laments the idea that education should be or become an evidence-based practice and that teaching should be an evidence-based profession. One of the problems is that educational research too narrowly becomes a matter of providing information about effective strategies for educational action to reach the standardized uniform goals. Moreover, Biesta

argues that educational research should not only investigate the effectiveness of various teaching methods. Education is a fundamentally normative matter and educational research should therefore also ask and investigate normative questions about the desirability of educational ends. Otherwise, we might end up valuing what we measure instead of measuring what we value.

If we return to the notion of disruption, the outcome-based approach considers disruptive behavior a problem because it reduces student effectiveness and performance. Biesta probably would not disagree that disruptive behavior actually is a big problem in schools. However, he warns against simplifying and controlling student learning and he insists on the fact that educators must create occasions for student learning by transforming schools and classrooms into intersubjective 'spaces' characterized by pluralism and difference (Biesta, 2006). This also means that the 'fight' against disruptive behavior should not lead to further control, further homogenization of student behavior, further individualization and further focus on student performance and effectiveness. In a recent book, 'The Beautiful Risk of Education' Biesta (2014a) distinguishes between a so-called *strong* and *weak education*. In Biesta's terms the outcome-based approach to education is a strong one. It is strong in the sense that education becomes more secure, more predictable, more risk-free and generally characterized by more standardized testing and measurement. From this perspective, education is an endeavour that ideally ought to be completely controlled.

As can be seen, the strong notion of education basically misses what education is all about. Education is a dialogical process that is slow, difficult, risky and basically weak. So when everything about education is reduced to control and measurement, education basically becomes un-educational. According to Biesta, teaching fundamentally means to risk something: to teach is to be human, to teach means to accept the fundamental weakness of the purposeful, creative process we call education. Without such risk-taking it is impossible to prepare next generations to cope with new problems.

If we relate Biesta's thoughts to the understanding of disruptive behavior and if disruptive behavior is dealt with by further homogenizing, controlling and measuring behavior, we might end up either aggravating the problems related to disruptive behavior or we might end up missing the values related to different kinds of student behavior. If the homogenization of the conduct in school settings reaches its desired goal of full accountability (i.e. measurement of all possible outcomes) and becomes internalized by the pupils, the result would be intra-psychological obedience to external rules without readiness to test their borders. From the perspective of existing and standardized knowledge, any question asked about its innovation is a disruptive act. The (standardly!) re-told life stories of Giordano Bruno and Galileo Galilei—not to speak of a more recent case (with happy ending) of Barbara McClintock—tell us a story of the value of disruptive ideas in knowledge creation.

Second consequence: Disruptive behavior gets individualized and pathologised

With increased individual student measurement, the outcome-based approach automatically also leads to further individualization of education. In a recent Danish study, Danish teachers emphasize that it is children with disruptive behavior that cause them the most trouble (Kristensen & Mørck, 2016). Moreover, Kristensen & Mørck also point out that teachers generally have become less tolerant towards disruptive behavior. One of the reasons for this intolerance is probably the increased focus on learning outcomes that fosters negative attitudes towards all kinds of student behavior that minimize learning outcome.

Another interesting but also alarming tendency is that many of the students involved in disruptive behavior nowadays are talked about in psychiatric terms. Generally, there has seldom been more focus on psychiatric diagnoses than what we are seeing today. Part of the new awareness is due to a rapid rise within recent decades in the number of children with psychiatric diagnoses, such as for example ADHD and problems on the autism spectrum. There is no consensus on the extent of the increase in diagnoses, nor on its cause. However it is certain that the increase in the number of children being diagnosed is very significant, to the point where we can even talk about a ‘tsunami of diagnoses’. Brinkmann (2014, 2016) feels that it might be said that we are living in a *pathologising age* in which human traits, characteristics and abilities that previously required no diagnostics or treatment are now formulated as conditions requiring treatment. Pathologisation has resulted in diagnosis becoming a social and cultural tendency within our response to human problems. Brinkmann even goes so far as to say “we might call the development a psychiatrisation of pedagogics” (Brinkmann, 2014), and that making a diagnosis has become a ‘neat’ way of reacting to complex, muddy and unclear dilemmas in practice. The problem arises when the challenges associated with a child’s disruptive behavior in school – perhaps related to social, educational economic and cultural issues – is reduced to neat (understood in this case as diagnostic) conditions pertaining to the individual. For example, the diagnosis of ADHD, associated with difficulties concentrating and behavioral difficulties (often resulting in disruptions), covers a fairly diverse range of circumstances in a child’s life. The diagnosis does not in itself explain these circumstances, which may persist even if the child’s direct symptoms disappear or are reduced through treatment with Ritalin, for example.

Hence, alongside the pathologisation of society, there has been a *psychiatrisation*, not simply of pedagogics but also more generally. This means that, to an increasing degree, we use concepts and types of understanding from the psychiatric domain in order to understand ourselves and our fellow human beings. In other words, psychiatry has been accorded increasing significance as a model for explaining general human problems. Nicholas Rose (2006) even says that we are currently in the midst of a paradigm shift in which we are moving from the century of psychology to the century of psychiatry. As an example of

this psychiatrisation, Szulevicz (2016) refers to a large study in which Danish teachers at primary and lower secondary schools say that every fourth pupil has individual difficulties, problems or has received a diagnosis. If we take the teachers' assessment of boys in isolation, 31 per cent of boys are perceived challenging to the point where diagnosis might be appropriate. The interesting point is that the teachers responding to the survey use a type of psychiatric understanding in order to address the child's (often disruptive) behavior and problems, and in this regard there is often a reference to the diagnosis of ADHD. It reached a stage at which there are many more people besides teachers using the diagnosis of ADHD to categorize pupils. We are seeing tendencies for parents, case handlers, advisers and officials to attach importance to the psychiatric aspects of diagnoses and to support the idea of medical treatment. In the Danish reference programme on ADHD, drugs are recommended as the primary form of treatment; in the space of 10 years, the prescription of drugs for ADHD has increased tenfold (Ibid.)

It thus seems that psychiatrisation has become decisive for the way in which pupils' problems and disruptive behavior are understood. Tendencies to diagnose have in other words led to professionals increasingly understanding the disruptive behavior (and other problems) of children and young people from the point of view of diagnosis. This psychiatrisation of the understanding of children's problems is also evident in educational psychology practices, wherein diagnoses are used to develop pedagogical and didactic practice in dealing with children experiencing difficulties. This is partly due to the development within neuroscience, and nowadays diagnoses are connected with a new form of positivity and exclusiveness due to the fact that they can often release resources, but also due to the circumstance that the child receiving a diagnosis and its parents or teachers can to a certain extent be absolved of any responsibility for the problem/disruptive behavior.

Third consequence: A culture of conformity and unification of accepted behavior is promoted

Another major consequence which might appear when disruptive behavior is matched with the dominating neoliberal outcome-based approach to education is the increased focus on the normative discourse of conformity and a cluster of certain accepted behaviors – in contrast with another cluster of the unaccepted. Homogenizing both clusters sets up a contrast in highly evaluative terms that disfavors the unaccepted (otherwise understood as new) events. Specific control mechanisms exist within the school systems which promote conformity. These can lead to overarching discourses of acknowledged behavior both within and outside the schools. The flourishing of this emphasis on normative conformity stems not only from *one* historical event or initiative but from multiple factors. Already the industrial revolution in 19th century European societies set the stage for homogenization of the masses of people, at that time the working class, whose collective performance mattered for economy. This led to homogenization

in education through introduction of test-based selection of some groups of students from others (e.g., the goal of first IQ tests in French education context in early 20th century). By late 20th century we have reached the current consumer revolution and for its formal power structure in many schools and the discourse of experiencing knowledge and science as a product rather than a source for the society to trigger innovations.

As described above, teachers tend to have become less tolerant towards disruptive behavior because of recent years' increasing focus on measurable student learning. Instead they now increasingly opt for a culture of conformity and unified ways of acting among students which for example is described by Alencar (2002) who points out that many teachers – in their attempts on fostering high-end student outcome – develop what could be termed inhibitory practices characterized by:

1. A search for the “right” answers from students
2. Too much focus on reproduction
3. Low expectations regarding student creativity
4. Promotion of student obedience and passivity
5. Devaluation of student imagination and fantasy

Overall society has gone from outer control to the emphasis on internal self-discipline (the self report cards can also be interpreted as an example of a self-disciplinary technology). With self-discipline comes autonomy which creates commitments and hence less freedom because of the responsibility (Tynell, 2002). The policy makers push the educational institutions to *flexploitation* (the exploitation of boundary control and rational control through seeming increase in flexibility) which was conceptualized in the beginning of the 19th century by German physician Ernst Heinrich Weber (1795–1878) as “Tightening the iron Cage” (Barker, 1993). James R. Barker, professor of organizational behavior, argues that this iron cage is steadily tightened and that rescheduling motivation is actually rescheduling control since accountable autonomy is an indirect control form. It is this form of control which students suffer from by concrete negative impact factors which can lead to stress (Praetorius, 2004).

Institutional triggering of stress: the exams

Exams have always served as a control mechanism, however, an instrumental orientation towards learning prevails even further when students undergo exams with the purpose of proving that she is worth the time and money spent on her by repeating rote learning in the end of a school term. In this context, Praetorius states that a mentality of assembly line-knowledge with focus on quantity and grades can lead to drop in quality and a societal level lead to impoverishment of intellectual qualities of education.

As described within the three consequences above, how an educational institution promotes certain behaviors has an enormous impact on who strive

and/or who is left in the category of students with disruptive behaviors. The frames that policy makers set up for the goals of educational institutions also determine what is possible within the frames. The general pattern that emerges from these examples is;

- a) A clearly positive: person (learner) oriented task is specified (both by learners and institutions). Here the task of education is shared.
- b) The educational institution delegates responsibility for these tasks to the learners, thus enhancing the autonomy of the learners and allowing for advancement of intrinsic motivation and personally set goals.
- c) After step *B*, the very same educational institution introduces bureaucratic norms of how, in what places, to what extent, and under which time conditions, the autonomous activity should happen. This is the step of administrative takeover of the autonomy of the learners that negates the shared values of the task (step *A*) and delegation of responsibility (step *B*).
- d) Finally, the educational institution introduces assessment systems for “measuring” the fulfillment of the tasks in step *C*, based on setting up norms for the outcomes. The person-oriented actions of steps *A* and *B* are fully eliminated, and the institutional demands in step *C* become institutionally demanded (conformity based) “targets” for education.

What are the alternatives to an outcome-based notion of education?

So far we have problematized outcome-based and neoliberal notions of education. We have done so by discussing how attitudes towards disruptions and disruptive behavior change within an outcome-based frame of educational of mind. In the latter part of the article, we will draw the contours of two educational alternatives to the outcome-based notion of education. The first alternative insists on the need for asking educational questions to education and the last alternative points to the need for a contextual and culturally sensitive notion of education.

Bring education back to education

Disruptions can be dealt with in many ways and obviously teachers play a central role in ‘disruption management’. However, it is our hypothesis that teacher judgment and teacher autonomy have been dismissed in recent educational policies which is also a central point in Sahlberg’s analysis and descriptions of the GERM-processes. And this is actually a paradox since educational research quite unequivocally points out the teacher as the most important ‘factor’ in educational processes. So, on one side teaching has been bureaucratized, manualized, instrumentalized and de-professionalized, while we on the other side we know what important role the teacher plays in student learning. As for disruptive behavior, we have argued that teachers’ attitudes towards disruptions and students showing disruptive behavior have changed, and

that teachers nowadays generally are less tolerant towards disruptive behavior. So our recommendation is: *bring back autonomy and educational judgment to the teachers themselves*. Start asking educational questions to education instead of bureaucratic ones.

Teacher judgment and teacher autonomy are essential in education (see also Biesta, 2015). Disruptive behavior is not only an obstacle that reduces classroom learning outcomes. Instead, disruptive behavior is a complex educational, social, cultural and psychological phenomenon that calls for situational analysis and judgment.

Actually, disruptive behavior is communication to teachers about social and educational processes in a classroom. In a recent Danish empirical project on disruptive behavior in schools an 11-old boy for example explained during an interview:

“One year ago my parents divorced, and I just felt that my life was one big mess. I think I was very disruptive in that period. I was scolded for being disruptive, but luckily I had a talk with my math teacher and from that day, everything got better.”

With GERM education has become a technical matter about creating the most effective educational systems. But with this article, we want to argue for the need of refocussing the discussion about education on the normative questions of what Biesta (2015) terms good education. Good education is not only about producing high PISA-scores. Creating good education calls for normative and multi-dimensional questions. With GERM, education is being reduced to a matter of producing the best possible learning outcomes. And this is a problem, which Biesta also points out in a recent article:

There is, however, something special about education – which, if I see it correctly, distinguishes it from many other human practices. This is the fact that in education the question of purpose is a multidimensional question because education tends to function in relation to a number of domains.” (Biesta, 2015: 77)

We have to be open to the multidimensionality of educational processes. And this openness calls for autonomous and professional teachers that are allowed to make educational and not bureaucratic judgements all the time.

A perspective from cultural psychology

Cultural psychology contributes to education by offering a semiotic view on all the processes that are involved in school. In the discourses about disruptive behavior, there seems to be a prevalence of individual factors (as a sort of dispositional elements) in order to explain the disruption at school, while the contextual dimensions are de-valued. For example the difficulty of

the tasks assigned to the students, the number of students in each class, the teaching methodology adopted, the physical school setting etc. are not taken into consideration. By adopting a more contextual understanding of the disruption phenomena, we could even suppose that the school system promotes the student's disruptive behavior or, at least, creates a set of multiple conditions that make the disruptive behavior possible. This would be the case of some aggressive behaviors in an overcrowded class of 40 preadolescents, as in an ordinary Brazilian public school, or of the lack of attention which leads to "make noise", to be "distracted" or to "ridiculing" the teacher in a two hours' lecture-based lesson, as in the Italian educational system. In addition, the student attitudes vary situationally, depending on the more or less salience of the rules on which teachers rely. One can consider the special case of the physical education and sport activities at school (Flavier, Bertone, Méard, & Durand, 2002). The negotiation between teachers and students regarding the rules "of life" and "learning" in class has an operative function. Some rules are crucial in order to achieve a social order by means of students' educability, whilst others enable the development of learning.

All this calls for an "ecological" balance in class, where disruptive behavior takes place on the border between what it should be, would be or can be and what should /would/can-not-be (Valsiner, 2007). We can also advocate for the positive function of the disruptive behavior for the work of schooling. By adopting a more contextual vision, the disruption at school should be viewed as a situated action in the specific educational setting and, thus, as a sign of the complex dynamic between, on one side, the value-laden school guidance and, on the other side, the resistance, circumnavigation and innovation strategies. The disruptive behavior is thus a sign of friction between the individual and the system (Tateo, 2015). It is a border of clashing and possible meeting, of rigidity and innovation (Marsico, 2016). Thus, the *individual-in-context* is the issue at stake here becoming the real (and the only possible one) unit of analysis in cultural psychology perspective (Marsico, 2011). As Vygotsky (1999) pointed out:

"Psychology, as it desires to study complex wholes.... needs to change the methods of analysis into elements by analytic method that reveals the parts of the unit [literally: break the whole into linked units-metod...analiza,...razcheleniyushego na edinitsy]. It has to find the further undividable, surviving feature that are characteristic at the given whole as a unity-units within which mutually opposing ways these features are represented [Russian: edinitsy, v kotorykh v protivoplozhnom vide predstavleny eti svoistva]" (p.13).

In cultural psychology, the level of complexity of the unity of analysis depends on the research question. However, as Valsiner clarified, the minimal unit should have this systemic nature: "Whole Unit= {parts **A**, **B**, and relation **A-R-B**}" (2004, p. 16). What is missing in the laments about "disruptive

behavior” in schools is the “B” in between—the school as an administrative labyrinth (rather than a temple for knowledge), the bureaucratic power holders in ministries of education who “send down” guidelines for “implementation”. Their disruption of the teaching-learning processes is resisted by the “disruptive behavior” of pupils in schools and their parents “disruptive thinking” about their children’s report cards.

Hence, the nature of the relations needs to be investigated. It could be not always harmonious, as in the case of disruptive behavior in the classroom, but instead the locus of tension creating, from psychological point of view, an intriguing dynamic of opposition/contradiction between subparts of the units (Marsico, 2015).

According to Bruner (1996):

“To take a cultural view of education does not really require constant cultural comparison. Rather, it requires that one consider education and school learning in their situated, cultural context”(p. X).

However, in the contemporary debate, an individualistic and decontextualized perspective still persists: individual behaviors of deviance, passivity, inconsistency etc. are assumed to be the real causes of the troubling in class management. This leads to a double negative outcome: the denial of the disruptive behavior at school as a way to rethink and reflect upon the current educational practices and the medical drift of the student’s disturbing actions, who becomes easily pathologized and enters the healthcare system. The medicalization of problems in the schooling process is an emergent trend not only in North America and Europe, but also in some of the so-called developing countries like in Brazil, where the increasing demand of mental health assistance for children in the school age has generated research aimed at understanding the phenomenon and intervening in response to it (Dazzani, Cunha, Luttigards, Zucoloto, & Santos, 2014; Zucoloto & Chaves, 2015). These studies emphasized (among other factors) a) the teachers’ lack of training and support to pedagogically address differences in the class; and b) the importance of rethinking pedagogical practices to embrace diversity in the ordinary school activities.

Furthermore, all the discourses around the disruptive behavior present a paradoxical contradiction: they always refer to general notions like “class atmosphere” and “social climate” (Martel, Brunelle, & Spallanzani, 1991) (i.e. the disruptive behaviors affect the class climate) whereas they are reduced to one of their components (the individual). In such a way, the part prevails over the whole violating the parts-whole asymmetry. A more appropriate theoretical model for understanding the disruptive phenomena in the school would consist of the analysis of both the entire parts-whole relationship dynamics (namely the class climate) and of the changes in its configurations over the time, in the light of the novelty (the unexpected and undesired act) introduced by its single parts (namely the student’s disruptive behavior).

Final Conclusion: Disrupting the homogeneous stigmatization of “disruptive behavior”

We have demonstrated how contemporary education’s focus on accountability, competition and standardization constitutes an inherently ambiguous social-political program that is transforming education for living to training to consume. In this educational context, the labeling of different behaviors as “disruptive” can be considered as an effort to re-direct the focus from the systemic tension that accompanies the neoliberal agenda to blaming the “misbehaving” pupils for creating “disruption”.

Among other things, we have argued that the neoliberalization of education in general terms changes our (teachers’, parents’ peers’, politicians’ researchers’) attitudes towards disruptive behavior. Moreover, policy makers also use disruptive behavior use to legitimize new neoliberal and control-based school reforms. It would be highly relevant to investigate these trends further – theoretically and empirically: What is understood by disruptive behavior on different ecological levels? What are the long-term psychological consequences for children growing up in increasingly neoliberal educational regimes? How do we challenge increasingly individualized notions of disruptive behavior? How do we maintain educational systems that are still open for disturbances and disruptions? As disruptive behavior is often identified as one of the most significant challenges to (productive) education, theoretical and empirical educational research on the different ecological levels and interconnections related to disruptive behavior and disruptions is highly needed.

Nevertheless, we have also pointed to some alternatives to neoliberal educational trends. We pointed to the resistance and neutralization of educational reforms at the “grass roots” level—the indeterminacy of the communication processes across a chain of hierarchically linked institutions buffers the direct impacts from the “top”. In some sense – in the domain of literature about contemporary education – the present article could be equally well labelled “disruptive” as we refuse to accept the neoliberal invasion into the educational system in terms in which it presented to us all. However, if our pointing to the increasingly un-educative features of schools-as-factories is considered to be “disruptive” it would be a direct proof of our analysis of the current transformations in education.

It could be really interesting to investigate disruptive behavior in and between all these ecological “levels” and interconnections! I would really like to encourage you to do such empirical study. But at present I do not see the paper as adding any novel aspects to the field of education.

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