

# **Precluding Critical Pedagogy: Ethical Democracy and the Tyranny of Functional Metrics, Visible Learning, and Data Surveillance**

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## **Abstract**

*Through a Foucauldian theoretical framework, this article contests the efficacy of the modern assessable and visible learning curriculum, and analyses how the current education episteme disempowers the ethical subjectification of the individual, dislocating the development of aesthetic agency. It articulates a tension between education for the development and enrichment of specific skills and economic growth, which is data-driven, and a more humane, values-driven education. As the vociferous application of, and focus on, standardised tests dominates pedagogical practice and only certain types of empirical knowledge become the accepted norm, then aesthetic agency is subverted. Such data-gazing practices, it is argued, neglect the Foucauldian psychagogical ‘care of the self’ of students through the cultivation of a life practice; instead, as data surveillance pervasively dominates recent pedagogical rationales, students are further alienated from ethical practices of self that lead to an ethically democratic society. Focusing on the Foucauldian concepts of discipline, biopolitics, and biopower, and the way these concepts shape educational practice, some of the studied blindness and lacunae dissimulated in the excitement of measuring the “effectiveness” of education is analysed.*

**Keywords:** *Data-gaze, aesthetic agency, critical education, visible learning ethical democracy*

## **Introduction**

Whereas the National Curriculum in England merely provides ‘an outline of core knowledge [to] ensure that all children are taught the essential knowledge in the key subject disciplines’ (Department for Education, 2013c)<sup>1</sup>, the purpose of education, according to the Australian Curriculum has more ambitious aims. This curriculum attempts to shape the lives of young Australians, enabling them to contribute to a democratic, equitable and just society (ACARA, 2015b) and ‘to help all young Australians to become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens’ (ACARA, n.d.-c). However, these laudable, though indeterminate, proposals are undermined by the reliance on student surveillance through constant testing and mechanistic pedagogy, articulating the very essence of a kind of visible learning (see Hattie, 2009; Hattie et al., 2016). This trend in pedagogy has emerged as the premium measure of success and heralds a change of priority from a humanitarian and libertarian locus in education to an approach that is far more sanitising and reductionist. It also precludes any attempt to nurture students’ critical and (self) reflexive abilities.

Schools and governments tend to rely on assessment data and metrics to define their educational values and policy formation. While this is not necessarily an unsound base, the reliance on easily assessable data in preference to the formative aspects of the hidden curriculum is immanently perturbing.

Individuals and groups are placed on hierarchical tables of classification, often referred to as achievement standards (e.g., see ACARA; Victoria Government), where the structure and criteria purportedly ensure that all learning is both transparent and observable. In Victoria, the VCE<sup>2</sup> serves as the conspectus of achievement, and international test scores (PISA and NAPLAN<sup>3</sup>) have become the focus of educational policies<sup>4</sup>, both federal and state. The sovereign power of government is exercised through the imposition of restrictive national

curricula and testing forums. This biopolitical governmentality shapes the normality experienced by students and teachers. Subsequently, this sovereign power prohibits certain behaviours and mandates others through a discursive practice which increasingly precludes the voices of the educators and students. Instead, this power embroils them in those ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 49).

The discrimination inherent in these policy platforms tends to be glossed over, and where large groups of students are interlocked as in a unified whole, any individuality receding into an almost invisible void. This reflects Foucault’s admonition that ‘the first action of discipline is in fact to circumscribe a space in which its power and the mechanisms of its power will function fully and without limit’ (Foucault et al., 2009, pp. 44-45). Seemingly being treated as independent individuals, students are, in fact, immersed in a collective and standardised extrapolation of mass data. This collection of data is a complementary and indispensable part of marketisation and serves to subsume students within a pragmatic kind of market orientation. They are subjected to a fetishization of functional filters and algorithms that register an accretion of mechanistic outcomes and purported pedagogical progress. Simultaneously, students are atomised, becoming targets for correction. The purveyors of the standardised testing regime establish a culture of structural narcissism, a homogenised technocratic regime that circumscribes both the space and the mechanism of disciplinary power. In large part, they define what needs to be achieved and what requires correction, using only that which is visible in their metrics. The pre-packaged assembly-line of mass learning disempowers English teachers while re/forming the system of endless assessment and the maintenance of ‘accurate records of learner performance at each assessment ... [which enables the] analysis of learning gains and [identifies] learning needs’ (Victoria Government).

The basis of the duality of atomisation and market-oriented homogenisation is found in a politically-calibrated market accountability. Hereby, students emerge as a source of data upon which prescriptive designations about national productivity can be realised. Harnessing school inventories and outcomes to support selective national priorities is precisely what Foucault refers to as a bio-political agenda. In Australian politics the focus is to train students for employment. Foucault reminds us that ‘the chief function of disciplinary power is to “train”’ (Foucault, 1979a, p. 170), and market discipline, among other disciplinary mechanisms, can be assigned to account for specifically trained personnel and the commensurate value-added national productivity and disciplinary governmentality. Students are objectified through this limited conception of education as units to be utilised in employment solely for the furtherance of the state. As Foucault suggests,

instead of bending all its subjects into a single uniform mass, [market discipline] separates, analyses, differentiates, [and] carries its procedures of decomposition to the point of necessary and sufficient single units ... it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise’ (Foucault, 1979a, p. 170).

This is the aesthetic self-stylisation that visible learning strategy uses; it is a methodical evaluation having ‘a crushing effect, transforming education into an individualistic, technological, and quantitatively based system of indicators and structures [for] monitoring [that] which the principal, the teacher, and “the learner” must all commit themselves to’ (Rømer, 2019, p. 590).

In Australia, both main political parties view the purpose of education to provide ‘skills and training’ (ALP, 2022) and ‘to get young Australians into skilled, secure, and well-paid jobs’ (LNP, 2022)<sup>5</sup>, a form of national economic security. For the main political parties then, the “truth” being promoted is that

education has become a kind of biopower representing training for employment as a panacea for securing the economy, where students are controlled through the disciplinary measures of a curriculum colonised by increasingly prescriptive syllabuses through non-negotiated assessment targets<sup>6</sup>. The dominance of a data-driven education for the development and enrichment of economic growth creates a data-glazed system where data and assessment take priority over a more humane, values-driven education that is lost in a plethora of statistics

Foucault claimed that:

Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth. That is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (Foucault, in Harsin, 2015, p. 2).

There is now a new regime of truth based on assessments and the hard scientific “evidence” they produce. However, this datafied approach subsumes creative, aesthetic, and critical education into various non-specific and second-order parts of the curriculum, with little class-time given to a nuanced study of Literature. Increasingly, the English curriculum imposes learning targets that are more easily assessable, such as the fissiparous tendency to prioritise aspects like a limited conception of literacy.

Additionally, when governments provide schools with a structured range of choices concerning curricula guidelines, these educational centres, in turn, shape learning outcomes concordant with the prescribed national agenda and aim at building industrious skills and learning aligned with employability. Hereby, they normalise the curriculum’s inherent restrictions and the exigencies

of scientific and instrumental governmentality. By offering limited choices, governments can imply that they are not offering neglect or wilful distortion but, rather, the freedom to achieve measurable indices that count towards meaningful learning outcomes through a biopolitical agenda. Here, ‘choice’ remains interpellated and distorted, and the quintessential attributes of ‘free choice’, as it is configured in the liberal imagination, which presumes it can only be realised in the form of a kind of market polarisation where antinomy appears to both accede to, but also, exclude and divide the creative and enriched cultural aesthetic from the school curriculum. The aesthetic narrative needs the form of literacy but does not thrive if it is overwhelmed by linguistic strictures. Then, it degenerates into a kind of tautological reiteration that repeats the mechanistic performance outcomes.

Curricula are the means through which the Australian government develops a control over students and teachers through a focus on productivity, the economy, and biopower. Using selected data, the policy makers focus on specific outcomes, redefining education through a capitalist lens which has the effect of subduing and subjugating the role of aesthetic agency<sup>7</sup> through a more humanistic education. The dwindling opportunities for exploring the relationships between self and others, then, creates a vacuity rather than heterotopias for students to transform and effectuate an ethical self.

### **Datafying students, teachers, and the curriculum – an overview of the issues**

Underlying the contemporary veneer of evidential pedagogy is the premise that data, including programmed tests that are readily assessable, easily acquired, and readily identified, can be used as evidence as the most effective method in achieving improved educational outcomes and enhanced human potential. The

generalised nature of this approach denies the rich contexts through and against which national policy is usually enacted. It tends to ignore a range of intergenerational, intercommunal and intersectional inequalities and differences, which are of particular interest in an Australian context.

Critically, this datafied approach is the mechanism seeking to regulate the aggregate phenomena of performance and social and ability factors into a marketable product (Triantafillou, 2022, p. 5). Nevertheless, this “evidence” is contestable, appearing to be focused on specific assessment criteria in education and deployed in a manner akin to market signals that define success or failure. In turn, social and cultural criteria are largely omitted and expelled. Here the interaction between sovereign and disciplinary power that controls the educational environment is clearly exposed. The divisive practices of hierarchical assessment carefully categorise students, labelling them to introject and enfold disciplinary procedures of adjustment and correction, amounting to ‘a process of normation’ (Triantafillou, 2022, p. 5). Hereby, students are ‘trained’ to meet a particular standardised formulation that has been authorised by socially accredited experts.

In the contemporary pedagogical setting, the vision for an “effective” education attaches itself to, and is encircled by, the term “Visible Learning” (Hattie, 2009). The central tenet of recent pedagogical practice appears to be a mimesis of Hattie’s pedagogical proposition, which posits that for all learning ‘it is critical that the teaching and the learning are visible’ (Hattie, 2009, p. 25). This vision for an ‘effective’ education - visible learning - is designed to train students to ‘learn’ by themselves, where, despite the rhetoric, certain types of knowledge become little more than a market proxy for education. Similarly, in practice, education is problematised, becoming enveloped in a discourse that is more about discrimination through the divisive practices of progression points

than individual development. It positions the teacher's learned perspective as naturally corresponding to the formation of learning through the student's lens, and correlatively, students find themselves adopting the posture of being their own teacher.

This exclusionary approach provides for an immanent and somewhat limited conception of education and relies on a much-criticised pedagogical foundation which is, essentially, purely 'evidence' based (Eacott, 2017; McKnight, 2019; McKnight & Whitburn, 2018; Rømer, 2019; Snook et al., 2009). The basis of Hattie's meta-analysis was related to research covering diverse theoretical approaches including behaviourism, cognitivism, and constructivism. It also rejects qualitative research 'because their findings can't be quantified in a manner to be used in a meta-analysis' (Hattie, 2018). The effect of selectively enjoining quantitative research extirpates the different and nuanced effects of the theoretical approaches being applied. This, by definition, singularly focuses on those analyses containing data, conflating them in a meta-data analysis.

Subsequently, the quest for "best practice"<sup>8</sup>, is prioritised, and consequently disregarded are the imputed concepts underlying each of these methodological approaches. In turn, this approach masks the effect and the social consequences of using assessments based on these specious methodologies. Moreover, it obscures the negative impact on shaping subjectivation<sup>9</sup>, and the disfiguring traces it has on the imaginative arts. Students are left bereft of some of those tools they require to develop a more humanistic approach to life. Similarly, imaginative literature is reduced to disconnected paragraphs ripe for autopsy through constantly assessed analysis.

Visible learning tends to focus on the disciplinary and panoptic aspects of learning, providing a regulatory regime that makes students and teachers accountable for their own learning and results. The government's 'calculated



management of life' (Foucault, 1976/1990, p. 140) incorporates the schemes and interventions that seek to direct the minds and bodies of individuals with a view to enhancing and achieving improved learning goals. These anticipated goals are inherent in the achievement standards prescribed by the sovereign state. As Hattie explains, goals 'lead to a clearer notion of success and direct the student's attention to relevant behaviours or outcomes' (Hattie, 2009, p. 164). Nevertheless, these 'notion[s] of success', defined by narrow parameters, are identified externally from the student, regulating them, and structuring and delimiting their conceptions of success to a set of notional performance indicators.

The overarching methods used in this panoptic and regulatory educational regime traverse the entire learning curve and anticipate the student as an object to be discovered in a nomenclature. This is a clear and discursive surface that enumerates a science of order. Linked to measurement and calculation, the density, the overwhelming pervasiveness, of this configuration fails to guide or supplement the aesthetic education on offer. The deep and critical education, that 'ethical work' that Foucault suggests that 'one performs on oneself ... to attempt to transform oneself into the ethical subject of one's behaviour' (Foucault, 1984/1990a, p. 27), and that is crucial to the development of subjectivation, and the development of an ethical self – a self that becomes an ethically democratic citizen, is not present. Instead, students are shaped heteronomously by the external stimuli provided through government-approved continual standardised testing which regulates them into a way of thinking and education emerges as a competition rather than a form of cooperation.

When Hideaki Koizumi contends that 'from the viewpoint of biology, learning and education can be defined as the processes of forming neuronal connections in response to external environmental stimuli, and of controlling or adding

appropriate stimuli, respectively' (Koizumi, 2004, p. 434), he is suggesting that students are subjectified by acting and thinking within their environment. The almost continual daily input from the datafied curriculum, computer games, social media, and the internet changes the perceptions and methods of knowledge creation in the learning generated by students. Without the means to critique the effect these have on their subjectivation, students are divested of the ability to critically cultivate ethical life practices.

This has serious implications for the evolving student: with diminished higher-order functionality, decisions and subjectivation or identity formation will be formed in an iteration of *halbbildung*, in which they will be 'constrained by not only what is difficult to imagine, but what [will remain] radically unthinkable' (Butler, 1993/2011, p. 59). As Marian Wolf explains:

When words are not heard, concepts are not learned. When syntactic forms are never encountered, there is less knowledge about the relationship of events in a story. When story forms are never known, there is less ability to infer and to predict. When cultural traditions and the feelings of others are never experienced, there is less understanding of what other people feel (Wolf, 2008, p. 102).

Similarly, when students concentrate purely on the mechanics of narratives, the humanistic involvement which is crucial to an empathetic understanding of character and of effectuating self is diminished.

Returning, then, to panoptic and regulated education, quantified and evidence-based education has become a technological imperative, measuring key performance indicators that satisfy governments and private education resource providers. Within the order of datafied representation, the Australian Curriculum provides performance targets which underpin an apparently

efficacious curriculum. The curriculum then emerges as an extension of market rationality and aligns itself with the vociferous use of test results and key performance indicators which are commensurate with a mode of market enterprise, entrepreneurial and industrious activities, and a systematised form of pedagogy to produce competitive and self-serving subjects. These mechanisms of market evaluation are given precedence over an education which also includes those intangible, untestable pedagogical elements: aesthetics, emotions, enculturation, imagination, critical thinking, and the critiquing of ideas and concepts<sup>10</sup>.

The Australian Curriculum is a mimesis of marketised thought directed through the sovereign power of the state. This has a twofold influence on education. The state is imbued with sovereign power that is territorialised, and through which security ‘is exercised over a whole population’ of students (Foucault et al., 2009, p. 11). As Thomas Lemke suggests, ‘the economy and population are increasingly seen as natural phenomena, the optimum functioning of which requires limited and indirect forms of political intervention’ (Lemke, cited in Triantafillou, 2022, p. 5). The educational security of the state is at risk when international metrics (e.g., PISA) signify falling performance ratios. At this point, the state intervenes by attempting to visibly shore up its response, and this, in turn, culminates in ‘the emergence of technologies of security within mechanisms that are ... mechanisms of social control’ (Foucault et al., 2009, p. 10).

Visible learning and panoptic assessment offer the state easily identifiable issues, rather than inherent problematics, through the power of irrefutable scientific judgement. Deficit teaching outcomes are commonly identified as issues of teacher inadequacy and a need for ‘back to basics’ teaching. This emerges as a vector of agonistic tension that resides in a determinate

government understanding that there has been a failure in following the “proven” techniques of effective teaching. The educational experts subsequently become not the teachers on the ground but privatised companies abseiling in to rescue students from teachers’ lack of expertise, and students are re/formed as warriors fighting for their educational rights and position on an international leaderboard. This is problematic in that it focuses student attention on competition rather than cooperation and serves as a means of external control whereupon others have set the parameters of success and failure.

The diachronic effects of performativity and standardised testing on students and teachers have been well documented (Allard & Doecke, 2014; Au, 2011; Ball, 1982, 2000, 2003; Biesta, 2009a, 2010, 2013, 2015a; Keddie, 2016; McKnight & Whitburn, 2018; Ragusa & Bousfield, 2017). The current education agenda effectively moulds perceptions about values using a plethora of data-based neoliberal business terms such as key performance indicators, value-added assessment, effectiveness, stakeholders and clients. Stephen Ball (2003) warned of the detrimental impact this regime of performativity would have on education, and, in turn, Amanda Keddie, referencing research examining the negative effect such policies have on children, concluded that

Students in today’s classrooms are *children of the market*, that is to say, they are crafting their identities and making sense of their educational and employment experiences and choices within the context of neoliberal imperatives (Keddie, 2016, pp. 109, italics added).

The new pedagogical epistemology of enterprise in school praxis produces a new kind of subjectivity. Contemporary students experience an aporia closely aligned with the human subject becoming effectively reified and transformed

into human capital. Rizvi and Lingard (2010) acknowledged this, arguing that in ‘education policy discourses, this has involved a reorientation of values from a focus on democracy and equality to the values of efficiency and accountability, with a greater emphasis on human capital formation’ (p. 72).

### **The acquiescent data-gaze**

Standardised testing dominates current educational discourse, creating regimes of truth which render alternative pedagogical approaches and concepts peripheral and almost indeterminate. Au suggested that the use of standardised testing has increased in dominance in education such that ‘within modern day systems of educational accountability, high-stakes, standardized testing is now the central tool used for educational reform’ (Au, 2011, p. 29). In turn, Sahlberg, outlined how the result of this standardisation has ‘characterised a homogenization of education policies worldwide, promising standardized solutions at increasingly lower cost for those desiring to improve school quality and effectiveness’ (Sahlberg, 2012a). Subsequently, alternative pedagogical practices have been submerged under the behemoth of data collection, statistical evidence, and surveillance learning. A necessary question, often hidden under the swathe of tests, is *What is the purpose of education?* This critical question has been subsumed and subverted by the ‘effective’ learning and teaching paradigm emerging as a performative inquiry, namely, *What is effective education?* Statistical measurement problematises the definition of ‘effectiveness’ - a highly contested concept (Biesta, 2009a; Rømer, 2019).

The use of disciplinary techniques to enhance objective understanding about the general student body privileges ‘data-gaze’ - knowledge gained from meta-analyses to create a distinctly surveillant educational discourse. This becomes a form of normalising closure that expels alternative pedagogical approaches which challenge empirical measurement and calculation. As the empirical

values and algorithms achieve the commanding heights of authority and assert their scientific validity, this privileged power/knowledge web and order of visibility increasingly envelops and entraps the pedagogue in a domain of compliance. This subreptive discourse, while disingenuously averring to know everything about the student, conceals the fact that the data is connected to a ‘system of policy goals that are not related to pedagogy and learning theory’ (Rømer, 2014, p. 111). For example, the first priority in the Gonski Report 2.0<sup>11</sup> is to ‘[d]eliver at least one year’s growth in learning for every student every year’ (Gonski, 2018, p. x), a priority which reflects Hattie’s mantra that young people should gain ‘a year of learning growth from a year of schooling’ (Earp, 2018). As Geoff Masters affirms, this fails to take account of the variation in a student’s learning curve or ability (see Earp, 2018). It assumes that educational growth can be measured, and assessable growth is commensurate with education.<sup>12</sup> The Victorian Department of Education and Training indicates a similar proposition, suggesting that

[t]here is scope for new, consistent, high quality and easily deliverable formative assessment tools to help drive improvement in the outcomes of students in classrooms across Australia by providing teachers with access to real-time achievement data to inform their teaching ... (in Gonski, 2018, p. 63).

This is not to decry the concept of progression or growth in various skills. The main issue here is that data analysis appears to be the only acceptable methodology used to teach students and acknowledge their growth, marginalising the soft, and less definitive, humanistic elements.

It is significant that the data used to justify this predominance of assessment has itself been robustly demonstrated to be inaccurate (e.g., Bergeron & Rivard,

2017; Rømer, 2019). Equally significantly, despite a protracted Hattiesque focus on data and visible learning, Australian reading and numeracy results for school students have deteriorated since 2018, according to the Productivity Commission (Sakkal, 2003) and the ‘mean performance in reading has been steadily declining, from initially high levels, since the country first participated in PISA in 2000’ (OECD, 2021b).

Nevertheless, because the gravitational centre of neoliberal testing and performance indicators has been so pervasive, the security offered by visible learning and continual testing has dominated and colonised educational discourse, providing a placebo for the state that something is being done. The outcome of the data analysis confirms and validates elements that the producer of the data sought to privilege. The exclusions, the glosses and the omissions create a subtle picture of inevitability and justification, muting opposition, and challenging dissent. Indeed, such data, and the pedagogical culture that accompanies them, ‘not only teach[es] the staff new skills, but also reorientate[s] their outlooks as dictated by the needs of the database’ (Deen, in Beer, 2019, p. 99). Teachers develop an acquiescent ‘data-gaze’ as the continual application of such datamining normalises the procedure, obscuring its negative effects even further. The teacher becomes *data-glazed*, seeing data acquisition as the only way to progress students and to demonstrate effective teaching practice. As Foucault discerned, ‘the reason that was supposed to liberate us has itself become the primary instrument of our domination’ (Gutting, 2005, p. 76). Correspondingly, data surveillance has pervasively dominated recent pedagogical rationales, and the obsession with data tends to obscure, with a superficial glaze, the purpose of education.

By focusing on educational outcomes which are ‘ensconced in a dehumanizing ethos of free market supremacy, social surveillance, and community shattering

individualism, the cracks are not always easy to decipher' (Darder, A., in Bottrell & Manathunga, 2019, p. v). However, by focusing on the purpose of education, some of the studied blindness and lacunae that have been dissimulated in the excitement of measuring the "effectiveness" of education are exposed.

### **Aesthetic agency – missing in action**

Symbolic violence is incorporated into the mis/use of data to control the student through this kind of panoptic surveillance. The panoptic inscription on the body and the invasive educational ideology insidiously undermines the educational goal of, for example, the Melbourne Declaration<sup>13</sup>. This states that: 'as well as knowledge and skills, a school's legacy to young people should include national values of democracy, equity and justice, and personal values and attributes such as honesty, resilience, and respect for others' (MCEETYA, 2008a, p. 5). Instead of reaching this goal, a hybrid, Frankenstein student emerges. This student is both teacher and learner, unearthing immanent knowledge and forced to instruct themselves due to the presence of a compromised professional pedagogue. This teacher, in turn, is invariably undermined and straightjacketed by the fixed terms and mechanical application of institutionalised pedagogy. This can justifiably be labelled a form of structural violence.

Students, through the imperatives of learning outcomes, are compelled 'to constitute and recognise themselves as autochthonous individuals in need of self-actualisation' (Krisjansen & Lapins, 2001b, p. 57), shaping their subjectivation through an impoverished conception of education. The student as teacher dictum, and the insistence on self-reflection on personal performance, undermines and radically deprives the student of the very possibility of expressing individual autonomy as aesthetic self-creation and so achieving aesthetic agency. As Judith Butler explains, 'to be a subject at all requires first



finding one's way with certain norms that govern recognition, norms [they] never chose, and that found their way to [them] and enveloped [them] with their structuring and animating power' (Butler, 2015, p. 40).

Enmeshed in the behemoth of neoliberal ideology, language, and pervasive instrumental assessment, students are left bereft of an education which encourages a flourishing of aesthetic agency. Instead, students recede in the grip of an individualism which 'shifts all responsibility for success or failure to a mythical, atomised, isolated individual, doomed to a life of perpetual competition and disconnected from relationships, community and society' (Zuboff, 2019, p. 33). In turn, many (including Paulo Friere) have argued that self-regulation and institutional objectives are usually aligned. Choudhury and Wannyn (2022) contend that 'learning to self-regulate ... [is about] subjectifying oneself in complying to institutional constraints, to adapt oneself to a pre-ordered reality rather than to learn how to resist oppressive social arrangements', and, thereby, become agential in self-development and enabled, to create an ethical democracy (p. 47).

(e.g., Bergeron & Rivard, 2017; Rømer, 2019)(Sakkal, 2003)(OECD, 2021b)

If education is to encourage and effectuate the development of ethical agents, then it needs to focus on the subjectification of the student, rather than an objectification resulting from being enshrouded in a cocoon of political dogma. The (mis)use of data encourages students 'to develop their self-image through an external objectification, ... reinforced by educators, that promises to overcome adversity. Here, science and education come together to emphasize the "objective self"' (Choudhury & Wannyn, 2022, p. 44). When aesthetical education becomes enmeshed in algorithms of achievement standards, the predominant pedagogical discourse is to annul the discussion in a praxis dominated by effectiveness and efficiency, where the telos of high grades

sublimates the journey of reflexive understanding of self and others. This disconnect perpetuates the dominant neoliberal ideology which ultimately becomes normalised in educational praxis, thus perpetuating the divisiveness of selfish gain over social mindfulness in a spiralling cycle. ‘Teachers [need to] recognise embedded norms within the structure of schooling and disrupt the oppressions—in themselves and in the students’ (Jaime-Diaz & Méndez-Negrete, 2021). The cycle can be broken through the illocutionary discourse of pervading praxis, ‘Examining this possibility in light of the notion of perlocutionary effect, instead of re-defining illocutionary force, allows us to better grasp its precarious and fragile nature, and to show more clearly that some of the most relevant consequences of our words are, at the time that we utter them, essentially indeterminate’ (Lorenzini, 2023b) such that the socially established conventions and norms are not merely reproduced. The application of just one approach to education, be it neuroscience, psychological, or datafied learning models, can delimit and devalue students’ experiences, thus curtailing the quality of their subjectification and employment of aesthetic agency to become ethically democratic. Education then runs the risk of becoming a mere mimesis of political and marketplace ideology.

### **The hegemony of standardisation, and counter narratives**

The educational milieu is not a set of binaries. Rather, it is an interconnection of multiplicities including aesthetics, data, and critical thinking, among others, each of which are combined in the matrices of sovereignty, security, and discipline. An educational policy cathexis on ‘back to the basics’ (Alan Tudge, Education minister, in Baker, 2019), assessment data, best practice, and so forth, is an education policy which is bereft of an understanding of cultural education and the supporting educational theories. Given the specific ideological lens through which it is viewed, this kind of neoliberal agenda negates aesthetic values; the foundation of education has shifted from one of

cultural, ethical and societal values to one focused on economic investment - albeit within a cloud of justifying rhetoric, in which token reference is given to democratic values, ‘intercultural understanding’ and ‘ethical understanding’ (ACARA, n.d.-f). These are paths of resistance to the hegemony of ‘unbridled consumerism [which] has increased individualism [...] and the narrowing of education to economic instrumentalism. It [unbridled consumerism] serves the needs of capitalism, rather than encouraging citizens to learn, recognize and cope with actual and impending ecological, democratic and cultural catastrophe’ (Bainbridge et al., 2021, p. 10). It also curtails the effectualisation of ethically democratic students.

Educational practice, its dissemination and delivery, is being strained in multiple directions to find a coherent general policy of order and a nostrum for perceived problems. When the attention is focused on PISA results, the emphasis becomes one of improved standards. The exigencies of order in the mode of educational outcomes accentuates a standardising curriculum for all, which negates the equity that is required in education to begin the process of achieving those ubiquitous but meretricious standards. The standards argument, used as a disciplinary measure to castigate teachers and negate their expertise, has the complementary effect of promoting the contention that external agencies, and especially the visible points of a value-added biopolitical curriculum, serve as a solution. Similarly, an education based on a form of panoptic surveillance alongside tried and tested, and thus reified, methodologies is currently viewed as the most efficacious way forward (see, for example, (ACARA, n.d.-f; Hattie, 2009, 2018; HITS, 2017). It is a damaging and coercive surveillant technique which works subreptively on individuals. This kind of approach suggests that learning must be seen to be relegated into the slow lane when it comes to applied imagination and deep critical thinking, and alternative and newer approaches to learning are rejected. The main focus of

education is, then, no longer on deep learning, critical thinking and self-reflection, curtailing the potential to become ethically democratic. Instead, students emerge in a statistical distribution and order - in a hierarchy of data points that links identity to measurement and calculation. This is at the heart of data-surveillance in schools (see, for example, the NAPLAN results (ACARA, n.d.-a) or the PISA results (ACER, n.d.).

### **Concentration spans**

There is an obvious issue in using ‘tried and tested’ teaching practices found in the meta-analyses which propose what teaching methods work. The basis for this ‘back to basics’ type of meta-data analysis takes as its source students who were not as immersed in technology as those in the contemporary period, a point which has serious ramifications on the way that these students think and see the world, as explicated previously. ‘According to Levonius, how learners are raised and educated affects their perception of formal learning, and this helps create distinct learning styles for that generation’ (Poláková & Klímová, 2019, p. 2), a salient point when considering the best way to teach modern students. Children are no longer just ‘children of the market’ (Keddie, 2016); they are also a digitalised generation or, in Prensky’s terms – ‘Digital Natives’ (2001a), a formulation that fundamentally impacts their education. One aspect of this, highlighted by Poláková and Klímová, is that ‘compared to previous generations, the attention span of Gen Z is limited, which is caused by continuous interaction with a multimedia environment, predisposing the brain to shortened attention span’ (Poláková & Klímová, 2019, p. 4). The implications of this trend, noted, for example, by Healy (1990), Wolf (2008) and Prensky (2001b), could be far-reaching, especially in fostering the ability to think deeply and critically. Further research should take place in this area. However, Poláková and Klímová suggest that while the ‘current generation is better than any previous generation when it comes to task switching, ... one side effect of

this is the inability to focus on and analyse complex information’ (Poláková & Klímová, 2019, p. 2). This suggests that the ability to think critically is being undermined due to the lack of ability to concentrate for long periods. Following the digital trends of playing computer games for many hours does not enhance critical thinking. Indeed, Semler also highlighted this issue, asking: ‘at what point does the decline of capacity to read deeply in complex and extended literary texts become a genuine problem, bearing in mind the irresistible cultural shift towards digital and visual literacies?’ (Semler, 2017b, p. 6).

### **Democratic deficits and resistance**

Adorno considered critiquing society as fundamental to a democratic society. He argued, ‘It is the act of critique, it is the act of negative argumentation, it is the act of dealing negatively with what is asserted to be absolute. The unquestioned must become the questioned, what is unidentified must become identified’ (Flight, 2017). Yet, as education becomes repressed by technology, data, and accelerated curricula, ideological positions tend to become reified, remaining unquestioned and without resistance. Instead of an active, participatory citizenship, there appears to be a marked shift towards a post-truth<sup>14</sup> world in which abbreviated messages dominate a knee-jerk response to perceived problematics based on misinformation. John Ambrosio argues that this is a result of

the ubiquity of high-stakes standardized tests that compel students to choose the one *right* answer. These kinds of tests, and the dispositions toward knowledge and learning they foster, discourage and punish imaginative, creative, and innovative thinking, making it less likely that students will question or even be cognizant of competing perspectives and truth claim’ (Ambrosio, 2022, p. 9).

Adorno recognised the danger of scientific encroachment on the civilising process, arguing that:

Enlightenment ... the progressive technical domination of nature, becomes mass deception and is turned into a means for fettering consciousness. It impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves. These, however, would be the precondition for a democratic society which needs adults who have come of age in order to sustain itself and develop (Adorno in Pickford, 2020).

The language of the updated Australian Curriculum instead ‘leans towards viewing young people as passive recipients of knowledge more than active learners’ (Brett, 2022), a dangerous approach which denies students the critical skills required to critique the messaging they receive online, denying them the ability to cogently critique mis/disinformation. This approach has been underlined by Scott Morrison, as Australian Prime Minister, arguing that, ‘We do not support our schools being turned into parliaments... What we want is more learning in schools and less activism in schools’ (AAP, 2018). This narrowing of curriculum potential, as Peter Brett argues, makes it

a whole lot harder for teachers to nurture a fuller achievement of democratic citizenship and human rights nationally and globally and more difficult not to promote a conservative political interpretation of civics and citizenship education in what is already a ‘Cinderella’ learning area lacking presence and status in many schools (Brett, 2022).

Nevertheless, transgressing the boundaries of the neoliberal imagination are kinds of dissolution, complex rivalries, and alternative aspirations that Kay Fuller (2019) explores in her study of some of the many forms of resistance confronting the unconditional homogeneity imposed by neoliberal policies in

education. She reveals a spectacle of transgression, outlining how head teachers operate either covertly or overtly to resist the kinds of so called didactic, standardised reforms that enforce and demand compliance. Resistance challenges interdicting authority that circumscribes and delimits critical pedagogy, the kinds of training that promote hope, agency, independent capacity, critical acumen, and enablement. Resistance evokes an image of frustrated potential and seeks emancipation from prescriptive life. Dissent comes in many forms, such as counternarratives, disengagement and critique. The rejection of socially sedimented pedagogical practice and notions appears in media headlines such as ‘Queensland teachers told to withdraw own children from NAPLAN tests as union pushes for reform’ (The Guardian, 2021); ‘National teacher survey gives thumbs down to NAPLAN’ (AEU); and ‘Teachers and principals give NAPLAN a fail in education union survey’ (Carey, 2020). The cultural imperative to uphold normalising standards in terms of standardised tests in Australia, is being resisted. The Australian Education Union (AEU) reported that:

[Eighty-five per cent] of teachers feel that NAPLAN is ineffective as a method for teachers to use as a way of assessing students. 76% of teachers say publication of NAPLAN data has led to an increase in the pressure on teachers to improve NAPLAN results ... 58% of teachers feel they spend too much time preparing for standardised tests (AEU, n.d.).

As a case in point, the discipline of English is increasingly constituted and identified discursively in terms of the tenets of literacy - and it is shaped by the discourses of the regnant government (discourses that then become doxic) - researchers have disrupted and critiqued the implementation of policies, as well as examined their effects on teachers and teaching English (Alexander, 2007; Ball, 1982, 2003, 2015a; Brass, 2018; Goodwyn, 2003; Green, 2017; Misson &

Morgan, 2007). Such resistance, overt or covert, positions subjects as discursive formations, and ‘social agents thus are identified and/or identify themselves within a discursive structure’ (De Vos, 2003, p. 166). In this sense, they can resist the normalising effects of those formations.

The continual dialogue between dominant policy and the resistance to it makes education a fraught battleground. Indeed, as a constant topic of discussion in government and the media, the education of children has been considered an essential area in the development and enculturation of modern Western society. It is, as Adorno would argue, crucial in creating an ethical society that ‘know[s] how to be critical of itself [and] the culture in which it exists’ (Flight, 2017). What can be currently observed is a dislocation of student, learner and education, as students are redefined from being empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge to dutiful and lifelong learners working for society and the economy. Through various sovereign and disciplinarian power relationships (e.g., pedagogical, parental and societal), the conception of the student has been deconstructed, reshaped and reconstituted into an autochthonic being that draws out knowledge from within for life. Perceived as a drain on the economy, students are expected to work performatively in school before working equally as performatively for the economy. Education, as a critical practice, develops self-reflexive thinking and understanding, which subsequently creates a disconnect from uncritical schooling and narrow and pervasive heteronomy. In its humanistic forms, it is a liberating praxis that enables autonomous [and, for Foucault, agential] action (Adorno, 1966; Flight, 2017). For teachers and students, education provides a *technology of self* – using effective agency to develop their identity through subjectivation.

Significantly, despite a protracted Hattiesque focus on data and visible learning, Australian reading and numeracy results for school students have deteriorated



since 2018, according to the Productivity Commission (Sakkal, 2003) and the ‘mean performance in reading has been steadily declining, from initially high levels, since the country first participated in PISA in 2000’ (OECD, 2021b) suggesting that students’ ability to effectively critique is also in decline.

Subsequently, the current abbreviated approach to critical thinking, the inanition and etiolation of the curriculum, and the acceleration of literacy skills instead of a more meaningful approach to encouraging a love for reading and the ability to read critically, is expediting the transition to a world swamped in artificial and conspiracy knowledge gleaned from the extremes of social media. A lack of critical ability, and therefore the means to ethically self-reflect, leads, as Adorno would argue, to Auschwitz. In this context, Auschwitz is a metaphor. It exemplifies:

the justification of systematic violence; it means the oppression of freedom through the criminalization of dissent; it means the proliferation of destructive propaganda; it means dehumanization through the apparatus of ideology; it means the negation of ourselves as a species; it signifies the end of resolution by intelligence and the beginning of resolution by violence (Flight, 2017).

A lack of critical thinking ability associated with the drop in attention span may lead to a fertile environment for ‘manufacturing consent’, and for extreme groups to spread their influence through the immediacy of social media: short tweets, terse memes, aphoristic texts, and Facebook comments suggests that social media has a fecundity for the banal. Disturbingly, many of the posts, due to their brevity, are meaningless but, synchronously, jingoistic, appealing to those searching for a cause or an enraged and extreme view to propagate. Together with this, little critical thinking is applied to these missives – they become easily accepted as incontestable. Therein lies the dilemma – a populace swayed by the cognitive dissonance of jingoism and misinformation is one that

accepts without question the post-truth politics, and extremism, that appears to resonate with their views without critically reviewing the implications of the headline message.

Post-truth politics is a development of an increasingly privatised and fragmented public news that began with the ‘sound bite’ and ‘photo opportunity’ to bypass public discussion in the regime of the 24-h news cycle, where news channels take on the mantle of party ideologies often deliberately distorting the truth (Peters, 2017, p. 564).

Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Marine le Pen, Boris Johnson, Viktor Orbán, Jair Bolsonaro, Narendra Modi, Giorgia Meloni and, recently, Ferdinand Marcos Jr, are just a few leaders who have spread dis/misinformation to achieve their political ends, with some extolling the virtues of threatening minorities, demonstrating xenophobic and nationalistic traits, and tending to promote authoritarianism and aggressive leadership, and who have utilised ideologically-friendly media outlets to propagate and enhance their distorted truths.

## **Conclusion**

The continuing search for an efficacious education system which does not undermine the purpose of education needs to include the multiplicities of theories rather than delimiting practice to just one. A reductive policy, limited in its scope, adamant in its hubris, can alienate students and limit the possibilities of creating ethical democracies. Instead of providing opportunities for self-realisation and critical thinking through an aesthetic and critical education, the advent of visible learning tends to manipulate the expectations around students and their performance, ignoring the fact that these are young people, not dispassionate objects to be hierarchised individually and used as visible points

in a taxonomic regime promoting an extraneous bio-political agenda. Instead, ‘it is the fact of being seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection’ (Foucault, 1979a, p. 187).

As the intangible, untestable and rich aesthetic tapestry inherent in meaningful education becomes an ancillary form of edification, so opportunities for self-realisation and critical thinking are ignored in egregious attempts to negate the importance of deep reading in preference to facile, exiguous comprehension passages. Experimentation governs the entire arrangement, and there are, then, ethical issues regarding the effect these classification practices have on the development of young people, and their capacity to appropriate and resist the educational discourse.

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The DfE goes further: ‘The National Curriculum is just one element in the education of every child. There is time and space in the school day and in each week, term and year to range beyond the National Curriculum specifications.’ The subjects of the National Curriculum 2014 are, legally speaking, known as ‘core foundation’ and ‘other foundation subjects’. In other words, they provide the foundation of the school’s own curriculum, ‘an outline of core knowledge’ Department for Education. (2013c). *Reform of the National Curriculum in England: Government response to the consultation, conducted February – April 2013*. London: Department for Education.

<sup>2</sup> VCE – the Victorian Certificate of Education

<sup>3</sup> The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy

<sup>4</sup> David Gonski, for example, uses NAPLAN results from some schools to suggest that if ‘double the amount of learning growth ... can be achieved by some schools, it should be possible for others’ (Gonski, 2018, p. 11). See also, for example, Ball, S. J. (2007). *Education plc: Understanding private sector participation in public sector education*. Routledge. , Hogan, A. (2016). NAPLAN and the role of edu-business: New governance, new privatisations and new partnerships in Australian education policy. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 43(1), 93-110. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-014-0162-z> , Rizvi, F., & Lingard, B. (2010). *Globalising educational policy*. Routledge. .

<sup>5</sup> ALP – Australian Labor Party; LNP – Liberal National Party (Australia)

<sup>6</sup> This colonisation appears to be a reflection of the Australian history where there is a segregation in terms of socio-economic status and which exacerbates the divide between First Nations peoples and the rest of the society. (See, for example, the Closing the Gap Implementation Plan <https://www.niaa.gov.au/2023-commonwealth-closing-gap-implementation-plan/introduction>).

<sup>7</sup> Aesthetic agency - how the creative use of a medium can help redefine the borders of imagined communities by commanding the attention of individual subjects and hence providing conditions for a cognitive and affective opening to effectuating the self.

<sup>8</sup> A meaningless term in education where individual students and classes vary in their approach and response to teaching methods and teachers.

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<sup>9</sup> Subjectivation, in this article, is the process through which a student/subject effectuates a conception and ethics of self

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, D'Olimpio, L. (2022). Aesthetica and eudaimonia: Education for flourishing must include the arts. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 56(2), 238-250. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12661> ; Shevtsova, O., Stratan-Artyshkova, T., Tiutiunnyk, M., Komar, O., & Syroiezhko, O. (2023). Aesthetic education of personality development in the field of education. *Amazonia Investiga*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.34069/AI/2023.64.04.14>

<sup>11</sup> The Gonski Report was initiated by the Gillard government in 2012 to review educational achievement and school funding, aiming to put Australia in the world's top five education systems by 2025, with its students among the leaders in reading, science and maths. 'The review was established to develop a funding system for Australian schooling which is transparent, fair, financially sustainable and effective in promoting excellent outcomes for all Australian students' (Executive Summary, Gonski (2018)).

<sup>12</sup> It also assumes that all students are fundamentally created equal, and have an equality in terms of access to learning tools (ICT, books, equipment, etc).

<sup>13</sup> Melbourne Declaration - Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians.

<sup>14</sup> For a Foucauldian discussion of post-truth, see John Ambrosio, 2022. For a discussion of the effects of fragmentation on social media, see Bright, J. (2018). Explaining the Emergence of Political Fragmentation on Social Media: The Role of Ideology and Extremism. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 23(1), 17-33. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmx002> . For a discussion on how social media contributed to the increasing polarization among Indonesians, see Lim, M. (2017). Freedom to hate: social media, algorithmic enclaves, and the rise of tribal nationalism in Indonesia. *Critical Asian Studies*, 49(3), 411-427. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2017.1341188> .

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### **Acknowledgment**

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr Ivan Krisjansen for the suggestions and helpful recommendations which have proved invaluable in the writing of this article.

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