

Education and Emotions: From One Emotional Logic to Another

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Abstract

An expanding field of research in educational sciences are analyses of the relationship between feelings and education. According to an important strand within this field, the new discourses regarding emotions that have emerged in educational policies more recently are concomitant with new societal – in particular economic – demands; it is argued that the emotionally loaded discourses are manifestations of new techniques of governmentality – a form of emotional management. In reaction to these tendencies, variously described as “postmodern relativism” and/or a “neoliberalisation” of education, some researchers, e.g. Frank Furedi, have advocated a “return” to a more formal, strictly knowledge-oriented, approach in education: a return to a rationally grounded education serving to transmit knowledge. In contrast to these narratives, I will argue that in order to better understand the new forms of articulating emotional dimensions in educational policies in late modernity, it is more fruitful to conceive of it as a shift from one form of emotional logic – a more public-oriented logic – to a more private-oriented emotional logic. In order to illustrate my point, I will mobilise Richard Sennett’s reflections in ‘The Fall of Public Man’.

Keywords: Education, Emotional Logic, Public Sphere, Private Sphere, Authority;

A tendency in late modern societies that has attracted interest among educational researchers is the increased focus in educational policies on the emotional life of pupils in the Western World since the 1990s, by some referred to as a therapeutic turn [1] [2] [3]. In Sweden, this is noticeable in e.g. the introduction of Life Competence Education (*Livskunskap*) in the 1990s, as well as in an increasing interest in different forms of emotional management [4] [5]. The discerned shift ties in neatly with what Gert Biesta has argued is typical for “the new language of learning”, where education has been replaced by learning as a structuring concept from the 1990s [6]; this shift, Biesta continues, is concomitant with an increased focus on the individual in learning situations, as in contrast to the ideal of exposing “students and learners to otherness and difference and to challenge them to respond” [6]. The tendencies are often related to the conspicuous labour-market rhetoric noticeable in educational policy documents since the 1990s. As the educational researcher David Hartley puts it:

Indeed, how to think about one’s emotions [...] – how to ‘manage’ them – become central attributes of the sophisticated consumer and citizen [7].

Following this line of argumentation, there is an intimate affinity between the therapeutic tendencies and the promotion of an efficient and rational behaviour. As the intellectual historian Thomas Karlsruhn points out, some critics have reacted to this by promoting:

[...] an educational system in which personal feelings are given second place to knowledge acquisition and rational argumentation. Often arguments have referred to what is perceived as classic enlightenment and humanism. Opponents are portrayed as typical exponents for of postmodern relativism [8].

In contrast to this way of envisioning the problem, the purpose of the present paper is to highlight how the delineated change could be understood as a shift from one emotional logic to another; that is, neither as the outcome of some form of sentimentalist drift, with a purported Rationalism as the implicit solution to the problem, nor as the result of a neoliberalisation of educational politics. I maintain that a more fruitful way to comprehend the therapeutic turn is to envisage it as a shift from a logic where the emotional centre of gravity is the world outside the individual pupil, mediated via the subjects taught, to an educational logic which increasingly gravitates towards the individual pupil [9] [10] [11] [12] [13]. Thus, rather than assuming that we are confronted with a dichotomy between emotions and Rationality, I maintain that emotions and education are inseparable, but that the ways in which they have been articulated, i.e. how education has been expected to canalise emotions, has undergone

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important changes throughout the post-war period. A second aspect that I will stress, is how my findings motivate us to reconsider the narrative of a neoliberal system shift in Sweden in the 1990s by uncovering hitherto unnoticed strands of continuity.

In the sequel, I will elaborate on how this shift has been comprehended in earlier research. Drawing on previous research, I will subsequently flesh out what I mean by a shift from one emotional logic to another, and how I maintain that this shift interlocks with other pertinent educational policy shifts, as well as how this ties in with a wider structural shift in modernity highlighted by Richard Sennett.

At least two strands of critique are discernible in the analyses of the therapeutic turn in educational policies. Among some of the detractors, the emphasis on emotions and well-being in the classroom is conceived of as the continuation of a wider anti-rationalist tendency, rooted in the progressivist emphasis on child-centeredness. In Sweden, this was a critique levelled against educational politicians by the so called “Knowledge movement” [*Kunskapsrörelsen*] in the 1980s (on the lines of similar critique promoting “back to basics”). From a longer historical perspective, this critique can be traced back to the tension between secondary grammar school teachers and elementary school teachers that emerged in the wake of the comprehensive school system in 1962, i.e. when all parallel educational paths were reduced to (almost) one single path for all [14]. Looking outside Sweden, similar forms of critique have been articulated at an earlier stage against progressivist education throughout the Western world, all the way back to the 1930s [15] [16].

The other strand of critique is composed of the ever-increasing number of studies drawing on Foucault’s writings on *gouvernementalité*, often mediated via Anglo-Saxon sociological interpreters such as e.g. Nikolas Rose [17]. Attention is here drawn to how the aforementioned tendencies, the therapeutic as well as the manifest labour-market approach – exemplified in particular by the importance ascribed to “entrepreneurial learning” – are assumed to converge in the focus on the self [18] [19]; accordingly, the turn towards the inner life is interpreted as a new form of governance, where the aim is to attune individual psyches with the ideal of man as “an entrepreneur of her/himself” [20].

Now, while both narratives highlight pertinent aspects of the educational reforms since the 1990s, they both neglect an essential aspect. My argument is that the proclaimed “therapeutic turn” should *also* be understood as the outcome of a shift with origins further back in time; a shift from an emotional orientation tending to orient – via the content of subjects taught – the emotional attachment towards society and the world, to an ideal where the emotional centre of gravity is the individual pupils herself.

When focusing on this aspect, the acclaimed system shift around 1990 appear in a somewhat different light. In contrast to earlier studies, my findings highlight important strands of continuity in the reforms; hence, with regard to the relationship between individual and society and the outside world, the introduction of a voucher system in the early 1990s, framed as the citizens right to have a bigger saying, should also be understood as a furthering of the attempts to let the pupils have a bigger saying – to let the pupils practice democracy rather than *preparing* for a future life as citizens [10] [11]. In relevant respects, the reforms should therefore also be considered a prolongation of the democratic impulse to emancipate the individual (by limiting the influence of traditional authorities) that the reformers already in the 1940s had initiated. Under the aegis of emancipation, with admonitions to learn how to learn rather than arousing an emotional attachment to the content taught, the emotional attachment was successively reoriented from a public emotional logic to one where the individual increasingly was centred.

In a suite of studies, Sennett has argued that the private sphere and the logic of intimacy that characterises this sphere, increasingly came to influence the public sphere from the 19th century and onwards. Comparing public life with playacting, Sennett argues that “manners, conventions, and ritual gestures is the very stuff out of which public relations are formed, and from which public relations derive their emotional meaning” [21]. Examining public life in Western metropolis during the 18th and 19th century, he argues that the private has eroded the public sphere to the extent that it is motivated to speak of a tyranny of intimacy:

Intimacy is a tyranny in ordinary life of this last sort. It is not the forcing, but the arousing of a belief in one standard of truth to measure the complexities of social reality. It is the measurement of society in psychological terms [...] It is the localising of human experience, so that what is close to the immediate circumstances of life is paramount [21].

I argue that we can conceive of the delineated shift as an expansion of this process, engendering a transmutation from one emotional logic to another, rather than a decay of an assumed Rationally ordered system to an increasingly sentimentalist form of education. Undergirded by what appears to

be an implicit ideal of emancipation as individual independence, the role of school as an institution has been transformed into a medium for assisting the individual pupil to make use of the possibilities offered to her. This is how the new relationship between pupil and school closely coincides with what Sennett refers to as “the measurement of society in psychological terms”: a societal shift from a public oriented emotional logic to a private oriented emotional logic.

Thus, as much as I agree with Biesta’s claim that education should aim at confronting “students [...] to otherness and difference”, I maintain that in order to properly grasp the transmutations since the 1990s, we need to pay due attention to the more structural undercurrents from which the turn to towards the inner life nourishes [6]. What he – as well as so many others writing on the manifest neoliberalisation of educational politics since the 1990s – fails to satisfyingly address, is how it also, i.e. besides the conventionally highlighted triggering causes, should be envisaged as the ideological outcome of the endeavour to emancipate the individual. The democratisation of the “inner life” in school furthered from the 1970s thus sapped the very ideal – democracy as public freedom – it was supposed to further.

In light of these experiences, I maintain that in order to set the educational system at the service of democracy (understood as a political project), and counter the further expansion of the logics of governmentality, a more politically coherent form of envisioning education is called for; an idea of education conceived of as a “[...] dialectic process by which strictest constraint is reversed into the free language of emotion, by which freedom is born out of constraint [...]”, stretching beyond the confines of rights and utility functions of the individual pupil and her classmates [22].

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