# Dorthe Staunæs, Katja Brøgger, and John Benedicto Krejsler (Eds.), Performative Approaches to Education Reforms: Exploring Intended and Unintended Effects of Reforms Morphing as they Move, Routledge: 2019; 114 pp.: ISBN: 13:978-0-367-24645-7

Reviewed by Nika Šušterič[1]

In recent decades, the institutions of the welfare state, including education, have been the target of continuous criticism related to their many functions and practices. Despite efforts at education reform, criticism remains vociferous, coming from parents, teachers, politicians, or business leaders – education has failed to reduce inequalities, achieve higher results at national or international evaluations, higher 'employability' or children's happiness, and similar. The constant flow of criticism in education creates a sense of perpetual crisis that begs for more reform, leading to new evaluations and a new round of criticism. Although education reforms are, as a rule, well-intentioned, we are found surprised or even shocked each time they seem to fail to deliver on their promises, which raises a very simple question – why don't they work?

At first glance, the reviewed book aims to offer an insight into this very question and its answers. However, due to its specific approach to the matter at hand, the book actually 'brings attention to the "how" – and not "why" – reforms are enacted the ways that they are' (p. 2). The introduction and especially the first paper in the collection thus explicate the reasons and ways in which this question can be posed and answered within a performative approach to education reforms. While performativity is typically associated with Judith

---
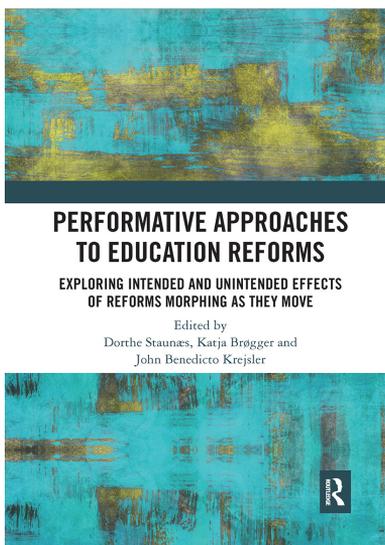
1   Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia; nika.susteric@pef.uni-lj.si.

Butler and their[2] work on gender, the authors of the collection mostly complement their approach with works of contemporary authors associated with new materialism (e.g., Karen Barad) and affect theory (e.g., Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant). The collected articles thus (mostly) share some crucial premises that can be traced back to current theoretical shifts in social theory more broadly, namely, and most importantly, as the authors of the introduction emphasise, the discursive, affective, and material turn. At the centre of performative approaches to education reforms, building on the above-mentioned theoretical shifts, is an effort to 'nuance the idea of causality and linearity in the implementation of education reforms' (p. 1). This necessitates shifting the analysis away from questions of congruity between representations and reality towards questions of the various interactions, or in the words of new materialism, *intra-actions* that call reality into being. This can then provide us with different insights into the mismatch between the good intentions of reforms that usually represent a hallmark of all policy papers and the actual results or realities that take form as they are implemented. In a sense, then, performativity approaches attempt to 'do away with the king's head', to paraphrase Foucault: since power relations are not linear relations of force that can demand a reality into being, they should also not be analysed as such. What we should focus on are the many ways in which relations between both human and non-human agencies produce the reality that science aims to know and understand.

The conceptual framework determines both the phenomena analysed and the methodology and analytical emphases, which is clearly evident in the collection. Many articles in the collection thus focus on what could be otherwise considered minute elements of reforms and their movements. Katja Brøgger opens the collection with their paper on data visualisations as an instrument of government. In this case, data visualisations related to the Bologna Process's monitoring mechanisms are not something outside of reforms, a neutral visual representation of a pre-existing reality, which the reform demands to be evaluated, but are rather a constitutive element in the constitution of this reality. Data visualisations create a reality of ranking and classifying the education system that is not alien to the reform but is its integral element. When we thus speak of reform, we must not only take account of its text. We must examine and approach it as a whole mechanism, encompassing the text and the tools, instruments and practices implemented at various moments in the life of its implementation. However, data visualisations are not reserved for presenting big, national data but also play an increasingly important role in classroom practices. Dorthe Staunæs analyses their uses in motivating students to learn. As they explain in

2   To avoid presupposing gender, we will use the same 'they/them' pronouns for all authors.

the paper, students visualise their learning (e.g., by adding stickers that form a graph over time), making their own learning visible both to themselves and to others, which fundamentally makes them governable and incites them into governing themselves in particular ways. As Staunæs explains, '[v]isuals staged as data walls and scorecards make exposure and transparency possible. They simultaneously constitute a space for sharing knowledge and norms and also a space for comparing results, for ordering and ranking' (p. 72). There is however a common mechanism to data visualisations, whether about big data or data at an individual level, that both Brøgger and Staunæs emphasise: affect, understood both as the ability or potential of impacting and being impacted and as the *emotional* dimension of these processes. Affect in this double sense, then, is a crucial mechanism in the workings of data visualisations in as much as they (in the case of nation state) generate emotions such as fear and shame that can compel them to reform their education systems. In the case of individuals, visualisations also induce and create affects through the same basic principle of comparison: pupils view their scorecards and can feel proud, happy, ashamed, angry, or envious, which in turn carries the potential to either motivate or discourage them in their work. While Staunæs especially recognises the transformative potential of affects, specifically envy, in its ability to pose a critique of the current systems of education, the affects and the actions taken in response to them usually call for further monitoring that can again be visualised, compared, and measured, ready to become a new evidence-base which can be drawn upon to achieve change, creating a somewhat ceaseless loop of evaluation.

However, there are also other ways in which education reforms in the context of modern forms of governance generate or harness affects. Sellar and Lingard, as well as Krejsler, focus on how affects, in their cases fear and/or anxiety, play into reforming education. Sellar and Lingard focus primarily on the affective consequences of large-scale international assessments, particularly PISA. They show how research and data can create affects that provoke or demand change and reform while simultaneously questioning the functions that data play in our contemporary societies. Torn between the increasingly prevalent trend in education towards evidence-based education on one side and the post-truth society we otherwise inhabit on the other, data become not so much the evidence behind our practices, but catalysts. As 'data culture meets populist politics that rides on waves of affect and desire in a post-truth context' (p. 25), the discussion around PISA, and the frequent shocks nation-states go through as their pupils' performance in PISA drops, is thus, as the authors demonstrate, not so much a discussion about the results, as it is a discussion that aims 'to create public moods that can be used by politicians and other actors to

legitimise reform agendas' (p. 34). The primary instruments of these legitimisations are affective: from inducing shock with regards to the dropping results to anxiety over our future (the children' future, the future of society), the affective economy culminates in a fear of falling behind. It is precisely this fear of falling behind that is the central focus of Krejsler's paper. In their study of education reforms in Texas and California, Krejsler delineates a genealogy of the 'fear of falling behind' phenomena in the USA. The fear of falling behind was related not to particular states, but to the fact that the entire federation and education was seen as the crucial mechanism for maintaining the USA's position as the leading global power. While it motivated a comprehensive educational agenda at the federal level, it has had varying performative effects in different states. Krejsler thus emphasises the morphing of reforms as they move from the federal to the state level. This raises important doubts with regard to various contemporary governmental techniques, especially techniques such as 'best-practices', which frequently presuppose that a single practice can easily and successfully be implemented across varying contexts, disregarding their specificities.

The remaining papers focus less on the affective side of education reforms while still staying within the basic framework of performativity. Steiner-Khamsi critically explores the premises of the Education Market Model and shows how the systems of public and private provision of education interact in a way that changes and shapes not only public education, which is the usual focus of research on the impact of educational privatisation. Steiner-Khamsi thus shows that private provision also changes in the same process to remain comparable to public provision in terms of the qualifications provided and their recognition, which further standardises education. They thus conclude that the public and private provision of education 'as a result of their interaction, converge to a hybrid model that reflects similar business strategies [...] as well as a similar public talk on the quality of education, the common good, and on education as a human right' (p. 46). Vaaben discusses the ways in which the new teachers' working hours legislation in Denmark has affected significant, unintended, and undesired consequences such as drastically redefining teachers' work, professional identities, and self-perceptions. The different working hour count radically changed the internal micromanagement of schools: while it strived for greater flexibility in managing teachers' hours – which can at least partly be understood as doing more work in less time – it actually achieved the opposite with many teachers refusing the new count or refusing the new rules by following them so literally that they became absurd.

The final paper in the collection turns its gaze towards research production on reforms, particularly on the ways in which different research approaches

construct different objects and phenomena, even if the signifier remains the same. The paper by Juelskjær, Falkenberg and Larsen thus focuses on the ways in which the student voice is constructed in research and how these various constructions provide us with different knowledge, different aspects of what both the voice and its message are.

The collection of contributions covers various topics that share a common set of parameters, dictated by the adopted framework of performative approaches to education reforms. The papers shed new light and offer new insights into many topics that have become a standard part of discussions in the field of education (e.g., marketisation of education, large scale international assessments, student motivation etc.) and thus surely achieve the main goal of nuancing education reform research and knowledge production. The specificity of the approach and its introduction in the book – specifically, its distancing from other approaches and the recent contemporary shifts that support it – can also open up a further discussion, one of the theoretical approach itself and theoretical approaches more generally. The study of education has been approached in various ways since the beginnings of formal, comprehensive education and its study: statistics, psychology, sociology, philosophy, anthropology, and many other disciplines and approaches have all focused on and contributed to research on education. The fragmentation of disciplines that has been at work for the past few decades has only increased the number of disciplines and approaches that have a strong interest in education. This can be seen as an absolute advantage from a perspective that prioritises the *problem* and not the approach, but it can become an issue in the current context of 'epistemological botany' in the academy, as Bernstein (2000, p. 92) called the tendencies to persistently classify and distinguish various approaches.

To put it differently, the ever-new approaches that emerge in theory might do well to place their emphasis on communicating with other approaches about their common problems while focusing less on the ways in which they are radically different from other or older approaches and on their newness. The burden of scientific innovation, which characterises academia today, can make us forget that some problems have characterised education since its beginnings, while it also risks over-simplifying the works of other authors. To give just one example – the concern with discourses producing material consequences is not only a concern of 'recent thinkers' as Brøgger (p. 11) points out but can be found, for example, in the works of Foucault and his analysis of power. We could also go further back in history and find traces of the same concern in Durkheim and his work on religion in society, where he quite explicitly states the importance of the material *and* the representational. Our efforts to

delineate our approaches as much as possible from others risk rendering a great amount of knowledge obscure as we – the good botanists – classify it as functionalist, structuralist, post-structuralist, performative and a great many things. By extension, they also risk obscuring many important insights about education itself, contributing to the obfuscation of the field we are ultimately trying to understand and clarify.

References

Bernstein, B. (2000). *Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity: Theory, research, critique* (Revised edition). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Staunæs, D., Brøgger, K., & Benedicto Krejsler, J. (Eds.) (2019). *Performative approaches to education reform: Exploring intended and unintended effects of reforms morphing as they move.* Routledge.