

The vulnerable child as a pedagogical subject

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to examine the ways in which the idea of the child as high vulnerable to risk is constituting new pedagogical subjects, ie, the teacher/caregiver as a professional risk-manager, and the child as a risk-management 'case'. It does so by indicating how an expanded notion of the duty of care has reconstituted the child as a work-in-progress case rather than "the concrete subject of [educational] intervention" (Castel, 1991: 288). It examines how the new teacher as a risk-conscious professional caregiver both needs and comes to acquire a new intimacy with the child not as a fleshly body but as a case of risk minimisation.

The provision of educational and social welfare to children has been for some time now an area fraught with anxiety. What early childhood scholars point to is a climate of suspicion in which the risks of providing care are fast becoming untenable, particularly for men (Farquhar, 1997; Johnson, 2000; Victor, 1998). This climate of suspicion, characterised in part by sensational media revelations of priestly and teacherly impropriety, is very much focused on the potential of a care-giving adult to abuse children sexually and psychologically (Jones, 2001; McWilliam, 2001). An effect of this "child panic", as Joanne Wallace (1997) terms it, has been that teachers and other caregivers have become the targets of 'safety' policies, and this has meant a burgeoning number of rules and regulations for minimising risk to children in educational settings (Beck, 1992; Scott, Jackson, & Backett-Milburn, 2001). As a result of all this, according to Jennifer Nias (1999), we have seen an expansion of the parameters of a properly enacted ethic of pedagogical care, so that it now includes an unprecedented array of issues for which teachers can and do hold themselves responsible.

The work of this paper is to track the ways in which risk consciousness is changing the nature of the work that is done by the teacher as a self-regulating professional expert, and how this, in turn is re-creating the child as a pedagogical subject. The

paper does this tracking work in two parts: the first is by providing a way of conceptualising the relationship between risk and the schooling; the second is by elaborating the precise ways in which the work of identity (re)formation of children is being done by teachers as risk-conscious professionals.

Schools as risk organisations

All contemporary organisations, including schools, are risk organisations. This is because all organisations must, of necessity, focus on guarding themselves against the possibility of failure. In her anthropological studies of social and cultural life, Mary Douglas argues that risk is no longer about the probability of losses and gains - risk simply means *danger*. She states:

The modern risk concept, parsed now as danger, is invoked to protect individuals against encroachments of others. It is part of the system of thought that upholds the type of individualist culture which sustains an expanding industrial system. (Douglas, 1990: p.7)

Following Douglas, ‘risk-as-danger’, is generally understood by cultural theorists to serve the “forensic needs” (Douglas, 1990) of a new and expanding global culture in “politicizing and moralizing the links between dangers and approved behaviours” (Pidgeon et al, 1992: 113).

Organizations in a “risk society” (Beck, 1992) must be alert to potential danger – the danger of not performing in ways that are morally and politically acceptable, as well as economically viable. As Beck (1992) argues it, risk society is characterized by negative logic, a shift away from the management and distribution of material/industrial “goods” to the management and distribution of “bads”, ie, the control of knowledge about danger, about what might go wrong and about the systems needed to guard against such a possibility. For a publicly or privately funded school, this means guarding against the danger of waste (of resources), of failure (of students), of declining standards (intellectual, ethical and moral).

Guarding against unacceptable standards of morality is an imperative whose impact is exacerbated for professional caregiving by an atmosphere of “child panic”. At a time when there is unprecedented anxiety around the vulnerability of the child (Wallace, 1997), the imperative to risk minimization has meant a burgeoning of legislation around child protection and an increase in professional development programs targeting teachers. The logic is that teachers must learn to manage themselves in accordance with policy directives designed to protect the child from potential danger. Thus teachers are enrolled as risk managers who understand how to manage the child and themselves in relation to the child.

The professional management of risk demands knowledge of risk, and knowledge of risk produces new risks for the school and its personnel. As Ericson and Haggerty (1997) point out, the risk society is a knowledge society “because scientific knowledge and technologies are sources of major risks and the primary basis of security efforts aimed at controlling such risks” (p.88). In Beck’s (1992) terms, “the sources of danger are no longer ignorance but knowledge....Modernity has become the threat and the promise of emancipation of the threat that creates itself” (p.183). So

knowledge about risk (to children or anyone else) is no escape from danger. Indeed such knowledge *is itself dangerous*. It threatens all professionals because it gives them processes for deciding what action to take and at the same time provides the means by which they can be found to have done the wrong thing (Ericson and Haggerty, 1997: 89). Thus it is not simply that child panic has ‘caused’ a heightened vigilance in the school sector, just as it is not simply that the identification of another instance of child abuse ‘causes’ teachers to become more accountable for their practices. As necessary professional expertise, risk knowledge itself has within it the seeds of its own proliferation as because it is both a means to manage danger and a danger to professionals everywhere.

Central to the ‘negative’ logic of risk management, as indicated above, is the idea that there must be more self-scrutiny, regularity and control within and across an organizational sector. The introduction of audit mechanisms, whether as measurements of ‘teaching effectiveness’, or ‘quality control’, or ‘accountability’, has been for some time now a feature of educational institutions, particularly in post-welfare nations (Shore and Wright, 1999). Whether or not the appearance of these mechanisms heralds “a new form of coercive and authoritarian governmentality” (Shore and Wright, 1999: 1), the fact remains that managing the diverse populations who are now engaging in schooling requires knowledge and activity that is outside the “unique, informal culture” (Ericson and Haggerty, 1997: 57) of teachers’ traditional work. Thus the craft knowledge of teaching is being reshaped by administrative interventions that work to achieve fair and efficient institutional practice. It is not that traditional classroom “know-how” is being displaced altogether. Rather, it is being made over as ‘professional expertise’ through a process that Ericson and Haggerty (1997) describe thus:

[P]rofessionals obviously have ‘know-how’, [but] their ‘know-how’ does not become expertise until it is plugged into an institutional communication system. It is through such systems that expert knowledge becomes standardized and robust enough to use in routine diagnosis, classification, and treatment decisions by professionals. (p.104)

The idea that teaching is being made the subject of “routine diagnosis, classification, and treatment decisions” is open to interpretation as a sinister, Orwellian development. Nevertheless, the point to be made here is that teaching, as a sub-set of the organizational activities of schools, cannot exist outside risk management as “a system of regulatory measures intended to shape who can take what risks and how” (Hood et al, 1992: 136). For better and worse, teachers are now being required to ‘plug in’ to audit technologies, those “supremely reflexive” practices through which the school can make sense of itself as a risk-responsive organization, ie, can “perform being a [risk-conscious]...organization through the act of self-description” (Strathern, 1997: 318).

Generating categories of risk

For organizations to become more visible to themselves (and thus more capable of self-regulating self-audit), it is necessary that expert knowledge become standardised and routinised so that it can be used to diagnose, classify and treat potential dangers within the school as an organization (Ericson and Haggerty, 1997). This has the effect of changing the focus of professional service from the client to *information about* the

client. Put another way, the target of practice is no longer an individual student/client, but *factors* which have been deemed by institutional policy to be those most liable to produce risk to the organization. An effect of this, according to Robert Castel (1991), is the *mutation of the practitioner-client relationship*, so that the direct relation with the assisted subject that has characterized classical forms of treatment is transmuted into a relationship of *practitioner-to-information*. Castel elaborates:

The essential component of intervention no longer takes the form of the direct face-to-face relationship between the...professional and the client. It comes instead to reside in the establishing of *flows of population* based on the collation of a range of abstract factors deemed liable to produce risk in general...These items of information are then stockpiled processed and distributed along channels completely disconnected from those of professional practice, using in particular the medium of computerized data handling. (Castels, 1991: 281; 293, emphasis original)

While Castel's theorizing is focused on changing practices in the field of mental medicine and social work, there are, I suggest, clear parallels here with the changing nature of pedagogical work in schools and childcare organisations. As pedagogical practitioners, teachers are required to pay increasing attention to the collation of a range of abstract factors that, when taken together, come to define a child/client as a case of (more or less) potential risk. As is the case for medical organizations, new preventive policies in school management reconstruct children, through statistical correlations of heterogeneous elements, as differentiated student population categories (late developer, low SES, indigenous, learning disabled), each demanding new modalities of intervention commensurate with the risks deemed to be associated with that population category.

The imperative to diagnose and classify children – ie, to manage through systematic documentation – builds on more long-term proliferation of documentation around the 'developing' child. In recent decades, welfare workers, guidance officers, juvenile aid bureaus, health professionals, court personnel counsellor and therapists have been enrolled, along with teachers, in the work of providing an information flow for the purposes of ensuring that the child is safeguarded from danger (physical, sexual, moral, psychological) and thus is able to develop "normally". When the discipline of psychology was able successfully to link 'problem children' to individual psychological maladjustment, it became possible – indeed necessary - to dismantle the punitive regimes of child management that were traditional in schools and replace these with models of management based on therapeutic practice.

In Queensland Australia, a 1980 Parliamentary Report on student indiscipline signalled precisely the shift of focus that was being sought at that time. The logic of the Report centred on two key ideas: namely, that many discipline problems have their roots in the home, and that these problems are best addressed by a team of professionals in addition to teachers. It was recommended that efforts should be made to improve improved school-community communication and to seek input from officers of the Queensland Department of Children's Services. (Meadmore, 1992: 11). The significance of this sort of reasoning is the extent to which it legitimates new populations of professional workers as contributors to the educational governance of the child. The officers referred to in the Report were child psychologists and social

workers, whom the Report held to be better equipped than educators to deal with the problem of indiscipline, framed as child “maladjustment.” As non-teaching professionals, psychologists could get to the heart of the problem because they understood about the sources of the maladjustment - home contexts in which abuse was leading to low self-esteem and subsequent poor behaviour.

A further significant development was signalled in the Report. Alongside the claim that the knowledge of the psychologist/social worker is a necessary supplement to the work of teachers in schools, the claim was also made in the report that many teachers are themselves lacking the sort of personal qualities needed to solve the problem of child indiscipline. This is linked, in turn, to a deficit in teacher training: “teacher training institutions have placed too much emphasis on academic success and too little on the personal qualities which will make for a successful teacher” (Ahern 1980, 16). The idea that a potential teacher’s personality should be monitored for ‘suitability’ has been significant in terms of its potential to render the teacher calculable as a pedagogical subject. It is an idea that has been taken up with some vigour by contemporary policy-makers as a defence against the sexual abuse of children by teachers and other professional caregivers.

It would appear, then, that moves to reconstitute the ‘maladjusted’ child as a more suitable case for therapeutic treatment, must implicate the teacher. The teacher needs to be made over as a new sort of pedagogical worker, one who more closely approximates the therapeutic clinician than the disciplinarian. It is a victory for the counsellor over the cane. The teacher-as-counsellor knows that poor behaviour, when it happens, is symptomatic of some abnormality or tension in the developmental process, and this demands professional management, including close observation, documentation and testing in order to diagnose correctly and then to deliver the appropriate techniques of remediation.

More recently we have seen the ‘maladjusted’ child reframed as the ‘at risk’ child (Scott, Jackson and Backett-Milburn, 2001) and with this a more precise rendering of the child as a case for risk management. The effect of a climate of “child panic” – of heightened concern about the [sexual] vulnerability of the child does is to widen the category of ‘at risk’ to include *all* children, and thus to require documentation on all children, not just those who are deemed to have ‘special needs’.

To be responsive to all children as ‘at risk’, all teachers need to pay closer attention to, and actively engage with, the risk minimization policies and practices of the school as a risk-conscious organization. This means teachers must plug into and co-produce the flow of information that actively constitutes not only their clients but also themselves. Like their students/clients, teachers are thus made available to be read as population categories through the large store of information through which educational employer organizations develop, measure and thus individualise performance. The crucial point is that the institutional priorities have served to shift teachers’ attention from “unique, informal” relationships with the actual bodies of children to a more formal culture based on the relationship a worker has with the ‘expert’ information systems through which the performance records of clients and self are managed.

Caring as seeing and noting

If teaching, as a professional service of the (risk-conscious) school, is increasingly focused on *information flow about* the child-as-client, then this has important implications for the notion of what it means to care about children in educational settings. Much has been made in progressive educational texts (eg, Goldstein, 1997; Noddings, 1984) of the centrality of the warm and caring teacher-child relationship in pedagogical work. Indeed, the importance of having such a relationship is unquestioned in many contemporary texts on ‘effective teaching’ (see Abbot-Chapman and Hughes, 1991). Having only recently learned the importance of ‘child-centred’ teaching, teachers must now come to understand that ‘child-centredness’ is *about informing and being informed by the organizational record of the student as a performing subject*. It is not that teachers are to give up on liberal humanist versions of ‘good teaching’. What is interesting here is that teachers need to remain wedded to the idea of ‘child/client-centredness’, as a rationale for engaging closely with the individual student as *a work-in-progress case* compiled by the school in conjunction with other authorities.

It is in this way that rationalities of risk come to reconstitute the practitioner-client (teacher-child) relationship, as one characterised neither by immediacy nor by the child as “the concrete subject of intervention” (Castel, 1991: 288). It is not that an individual teacher may no longer have close personal relationships with children; however, such relationships must be carefully managed in order not to distract from the real work of demonstrating accountability by way of minimizing risk and maximising quality in ways that are organizationally sanctioned and approved. Put bluntly, what really counts in the self-auditing school is the degree of intimacy a teacher has with *the record*. In terms of the “sexualisation of risk” (Scott, 1999), this might be thought to have the added advantage of creating a sort of distance between the actual bodies of teachers and children – ie, if the driving logic is that the best understanding will come through engagement with the ‘case’ documentation.

Investment in the new relationship of expert-to-portfolio changes what an individual teacher does as part of a normal working day. The risk-conscious teacher is more informed about, more focused on, and more likely to contribute to, the information storage systems that exist within the school or childcare centre and its network of human service organisations. They may be more likely to invest in the self-development workshop opportunities¹ that are a hallmark of the self-managing professional worker.

Most importantly, they are likely to invest in with “hyper-rational and deeply pragmatic” (Ericson and Haggerty, 1997) logic of risk minimization by documenting and observing as many aspects of a child’s activities as possible, and by enrolling

¹ See Lash and Urry (1994) for an analysis of the intensified processes of aestheticisation and emotionalisation that are part of the work of self management in a performance culture. The proliferation of ‘professional development’ workshops is one feature of this highly individualising imperative at work to produce stylized identities for the enterprising workplace.

other caregivers in doing likewise². The imperative here is that children need to be read, and read closely, for signs and symptoms of danger. In this sense the body is very important, despite being at the same time ‘displaced’ by the record about the body. Every word a child utters, every object s/he draws, every angry outburst and every moment of delight, take on a degree of significance that teachers can only now, through their professional training, begin to understand. In Nikolas Rose’s terms, this works as a “psychologization of the mundane.” He explains:

A psychologization of the mundane, involv[es] the translation of exigencies from debt, through house purchase, childbirth, marriage, and divorce into “life events,” problems of coping and maladjustment, in which each is to be addressed by recognizing it as, at root, the space in which are played out forces and determinants of a subjective order (fears, denials, repressions, lack of psycho-social skills) and whose consequences are similarly subjective (neurosis, tension, stress, illness). Such events become the site of a practice that is normalizing, in that it establishes certain canons of living according to which failures may be evaluated. It is clinical in that it entails forensic work to identify signs and symptoms and interpretive work to link them to that hidden realm that generates them. It is pedagogic in that it seeks to educate the subject in the arts of coping. It is subjectifying in that the quotidian affairs of life become the occasion for confession, for introspection, for the internal assumption of responsibility. (Rose 1990, 244, his emphasis)

The risk-conscious professional thus comes to ‘see’ dangers that others do not. In a paper called “Playing Doctors in Two Cultures” (1997), Joseph Tobin demonstrates this principle at work by carefully documenting the reactions of pre-school teachers in the USA and Ireland to a sixty-word description of the behaviour of a fictional child, Emily. The passage read:

Emily touches herself a lot. When she’s excited, she keeps touching herself with one hand. During story time, she rubs her legs together with a sort of far off look in her eyes. Even at lunch she’ll have a hand in her pants sometimes. I don’t mean she’s doing it every minute, but it’s not like it’s only now and then, either. (Tobin 1997, 130)

Tobin indicates the dramatic difference he found in interpretations of the passage, with the twelve American focus groups “detecting the tell-tale signs of child abuse” while not one of the eight Irish groups saw the signs of abuse in this case. Tobin comments:

Because Emily is a fictional character who appears in a text barely sixty words long, we cannot say she was or was not abused. Nor can we know how these teachers would react to the reality of a girl masturbating in their classroom. Presumably their reaction in real life to a girl like Emily would be based on intuition and contextual knowledge that they cannot bring to a vignette. Still, it

² Tom Popkewitz’s term, the “pedagogicalization” of the parent (Popkewitz, 2002), is suggestive of the fact that this work is not limited to professional caregivers outside the home, but involves ‘caring parents’ also.

is striking that eight of the twelve American focus groups brought up sexual abuse as a possible explanation of Emily's masturbation. (p. 133)

Understand the imperative to psychologise children in the interests of risk minimisation makes it possible to read the reaction of the American professional caregivers (ie, to suspect child abuse) not as the product of irrational moral panic, but of forensic work conducted in the interests of Emily as a potential case for therapeutic treatment. In discharging their duty of care differently from the Irish teachers, they may or may not have been better teachers, but they were more 'professional' in their risk-oriented response. Put another way, 'seeing' Emily as a possible case of abuse was the most appropriate way for a risk-conscious teacher to interpret this scenario. What is crucial in the context of this paper is the constitution of Emily as 'at risk' – ie, how the teacherly work of seeing and noting requires her vulnerability as a pedagogical subject, and how this, in turn, has the effect of requiring further monitoring and vigilance on the part of the caring professional teacher.

Conclusion

It has not been the work of this paper to make judgments about whether the effects of rationalities of risk on the pedagogical subjectivities of child and adult are positive or negative. Nor has it been to advocate a particular response to this in terms of teacher resistance and/or accommodation. The issue has been, rather to describe how risk consciousness and the culture of pastoral care work in symbiosis to produce governable subjects – the vulnerable child and the risk-managing teacher – within and for schools and childcare centres as *risk-conscious* organisations.

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