

Community Education in Scotland, A Tale of Two Anniversaries: The Alexander Report (1975) and the Birth of the Performance Indicator (1985)

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Introduction

2015 sees the passing of two significant anniversaries for community education. The first is well known, namely the 40th anniversary of the publication of the Alexander Report, which brought together adult education, youth work, and community development, in the form of the Community Education Service. The second anniversary is a lesser-known event, but one I would argue - and I am being deliberately provocative here which is just as significant as Alexander in terms of its impact on the work of community educators. The second anniversary occurred in 1985, the year the Conservative Government introduced performance indicators into the NHS, education services and local government. The birth of the performance indicator in 1985 heralded the arrival of a new era in the public sector, the era of performance management, and in this article I want to argue that the implications for the community education field of practice has been profound.

The Alexander Report (1975)

For those of us who still wish to think of ourselves as community educators (regardless of current job titles), the 40th anniversary of Alexander offers an opportunity to reflect upon the origins of community education in Scotland. The Alexander Report, initially a report into adult education, was a progressive report, interested in the changing nature of society:

Society is now less certain about the values it should uphold and tolerates a wide range. Individual freedom to question the value of established practices and institutions and to propose new forms is part of our democratic heritage (Scottish Education Department, 1975).

The report suggested that the construction of an oppositional politics was important to the development of a democratic society:

The right to form groups, along with the right of opposition to and criticism of the government of the day and other forms of authority, is fundamental to a pluralist society...the very existence of such dissenting groups entitles us to describe our society as pluralist and to consider ourselves as living in a free community in which individuals have the right to unite with likeminded people and give expression to their opinions (Scottish Education Department, 1975).

In addition to this, Alexander approached the concept of work in a way which recognised that the meaning and nature of work was problematic, citing, *'the dehumanising aspect of many kinds of work and the impact of the mass media, all of which tend to erode individuality and paradoxically to increase a sense of isolation and alienation'*.

Furthermore:

The quality of industrial relations affects the lives of everyone. Human relations at work and collective bargaining form an area of activity which has not been backed by educational provision, (Scottish Education Department, 1975).

The insights of the report – for example, that it was important to question institutions and established practices, or the recognition that an oppositional politics was healthy for democratic societies, to the enlightened position that work can be dehumanising and alienating – and the insistence that these areas all had an educational component, helped to establish the notion that community education was a different type of occupation. Two distinctive features of the new occupation were first and foremost, a concern with promoting and supporting democracy (unique for an occupation), and, secondly the encouragement of a practice which was deliberately educational. Moreover, Alexander – whilst recognising the role of community education across

civil society - noted that if community education was to become a distinctive field in its own right, then the role of local authorities would be crucial. The establishment of a Community Education Service in Scotland, supported by local government, was an important achievement; McConnell notes that in 'no other part of the UK or Europe has the emergence of community education been so sustained or recognised' (McConnell, 2002, p. vii).

Yet, any appraisal of Alexander forty years on should also note that the report, and the Community Education Service it established, were the subject of on-going critique and debate. A common criticism was the suggestion that community education suffered from 'inflated hype', (Tett, 2010), and 'promotional hyperbole', (Kirkwood, 1990, p. 300). And, whilst the new Community Education Service unified the three strands administratively and established the concept of a 'generic worker' (Kirkwood, 1990, p. 323), the actual field of practice was more complex and problematic. Mackie (2013, pp. 401-402), et al, highlight a 'persistent competition' between the strands, noting a 'long term confusion between community education as a way of working and community education as an amalgamation of the three fields'.

Community education was born into a world characterised by the social democratic consensus (McConnell, 2002, p. 7). Yet, paradoxically, community education's historical appearance occurred at the very moment the social democratic consensus started to unravel. A series of crises, beginning in the early 1970s – the oil shock, rising inflation and a general crisis of capital accumulation, (Harvey, 2005, p. 14) brought the consensus to an end, and paved the way for what was to become a neoliberal revolution. This revolution gradually transformed Britain and one of the most significant transformations occurred in the public sector, which brings me to the second anniversary, the birth of the performance indicator.

The Birth of the Performance Indicator (1985)

In her memoirs, Margaret Thatcher identified three institutions – the British Labour Party, the trades unions, and local government, which she associated with collectivism and socialism, and she stated that the aim of her government was to transform each of

these three arenas (Thatcher, 1993, p. 339). In regards to local government, the story of the performance indicator, is a small, yet important part of a bigger story about how neoliberal discourses have transformed local government in the UK.

In 1985, the Conservative Government called for Performance Indicators (PIs), by then in operation in the Civil Service in Whitehall for two years, to be 'rolled out' across the NHS, education and local government. The thinking behind PIs can be found in a report published in 1983, entitled the 'Financial Management Initiative' (FMI). The primary concern of the FMI was to figure out at micro level exactly how the Government's longer term macro level economic policy of reducing public expenditure could be realised. The FMI called for a managerial revolution, and the introduction of PIs, whose purpose would be to constantly measure the activities and outputs of government. According to Day et al (1992) the position of the UK Treasury was a simple one; 'where is the money going and what are we getting for it'. The FMI was based on a marketised view of the world which encouraged the public sector to behave and act in ways borrowed from the private sector:

Public sector organisations are also involved in another market – the competition for shares of the public purse. One might speculate that the pressure to secure government finance will act as a spur to develop PIs that can be used to support the case for extra resources, (Day, et al, 1992, p. 30).

The 'managerial revolution' called for 'managers at all levels of government to have a clear view of their objectives and assess, and wherever possible measure, outputs or performance in relation to these objectives', (FMI, 1983, cited in Day, et al, 1992). For Walsh, PIs facilitated the 'micro-management' of public sector staff by managers (Walsh, 2006, p. 106). PIs were based on three mutually dependent components. First, the specification of objectives, not only for government policies but for individual units within the government machine; second, precise and accurate allocation of costs to particular units; and third, they should assess success in achieving objectives, (Day, et al, 1992, p. 5). Moreover, PIs decentralised

responsibility. According to the FMI, PIs would result in a 'standardisation of work tasks'. This is an important point. The 'standardisation of work tasks' would challenge the autonomy of professional workers in the public sector. PIs, when married to other strategies for measuring performance, aimed to curb the power of the professions and subject them to greater managerial and organisational control, and ultimately the control of central government. For Chan, the intention was to push control from the centre further into organisational structures, inscribing them with systems to be audited (Chan, 2001, p. 255); the Audit Commission was formed the same year as the FMI was published.

PIs are described as 'the children of information technology', (Day, et al, 1992). Yet, in 1985, public sector IT was in its infancy, which made the development of PIs and performance management in general uneven. However, in recent years a revolution in IT, coupled with greater strategic control from government, has intensified the levels of performance management being experienced in the public sector. Key features of the current context include a rigorous culture of managerialism; PIs have been accompanied by appraisals, performance related pay schemes, regular monitoring and surveillance by a computerised bureaucracy, individual work plans with quantifiable outcomes, regular target setting, and inspections. In this context, the practice of community education as initially outlined by Alexander has been qualitatively transformed.

One example can be found in the field of language. Contemporary practice is colonised by a technocratic language obsessed by 'outcomes', 'outputs', 'impacts', 'targets', 'actions plans', 'cost improvements', 'best practices', 'income generation opportunities' and so on. The new language lacks authenticity. The attempt to quantify and measure everything, to focus exclusively on performance, results, and impacts, betrays the more curious fact that performance management can distort the very thing it sets out to measure. Biesta suggests that educators are increasingly valuing what they measure rather than measuring what they value, (Biesta, 2008, p. 35). For Ball, performance management encourages educators to 'set aside personal

beliefs and commitments and live in an existence of calculation'. The result is the construction of a new 'performative worker' (Ball, 2003, p. 215).

Defenders of the system often argue that performance management is about accountability, or 'following the public pound', yet according to Dardot and Laval, what lies behind the normative assumptions of performance management is not so much concerns about performance, or accountability, but state power:

Measuring performance has become the elementary technology of power relations in public services, a veritable obsession with controlling public servants – it tends to shape the activity itself and aims to produce subjective changes in the 'evaluated' so that they meet their 'contractual commitments' to other bodies, (Dardot and Laval, 2013, p. 250).

The suggestion by Dardot and Laval that performance management 'shapes the activity itself', sheds potential light on why a practice defined in the main by quantifiable outputs has emerged. One of the consequences, is a depoliticised (and anti-intellectual) practice divorced from wider questions about the nature of society:

We take our collective pulse 24 hours a day through the use of statistics. We understand life that way, though somehow the more figures we use, the more the great truths seem to slip through our fingers. Despite all that numerical control, we feel as ignorant of the answers to the big questions as ever, (Boyle, 2001, cited in Ball, 2003, p. 215).

Conclusion

The birth of the performance indicator in 1985 was an important development in the history of performance management in the public sector. Moreover, the performance management agenda has transformed community education from the field of practice initially outlined by Alexander in 1975. In a world dominated by performance, results and impacts, it could well be the case that the ideas contained in Alexander struggle for air in the contemporary context. For example, official discourses on community

education, and by ‘official’ I am thinking mainly of government reports, do not mention oppositional politics, or ‘dissenting groups’. Instead a cosy (and false) consensus emphasising partnership working and co-production between the state and its citizens dominates the narrative. In the current austerity climate, community educators are potentially being called upon to facilitate communities into a manufactured consensus. The Alexander Report proposed a service which was deliberately educational. Yet, the concept of education has given way to what Tett (2010) refers to as the more individualistic concept of learning. With the question of education in mind, the Alexander Report, asked, ‘what is the educational character of community development and the relationship to adult education’? Today, local authority sponsored community development seldom stretches beyond the narrow parameters allowed by Community Planning frameworks, to the extent that few grapple with issues relating to pedagogy. Moreover, local authority provision – which was central to Alexander, is increasingly fragmenting, and with it another product of Alexander, the concept of the generic worker, is disappearing.

The discourse established by Alexander about the meaning of work and the suggestion that work can be alienating or dehumanising, are important ideas absent from contemporary narratives surrounding employability, a concept which on the surface contains no theory of power relations in society, only maladjusted individuals. The current obsession with a narrow construction of employability (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2004) and ‘positive destinations’, concepts partly produced themselves by discourses which fetishise measurement, pose a real threat to some adult education and youth work provision, potentially divorcing these arenas from community development and wider social concerns. On the subject of performance management, Ball wrote that ‘beliefs are no longer important – it is outputs that count’, (Ball, 2003, p. 223). When read against this backdrop, the Alexander Report enters our contemporary moment in the form of a powerful memory, constituting what Foucault once described as a *‘disqualified knowledge’ which when pressed against the dominant discourses of our time, exposes the ‘limits and forms of the sayable, and what it is possible to speak of’* (Foucault, 1991, p. 59).

Writing shortly after the 20th anniversary of the Report which bore his name, Kenneth Alexander wrote that '*community education has survived, partly as a result of an exciting evolutionary process*', (Alexander, 1996, cited in McConnell, 2002). Yet, on the Report's 40th anniversary, it might be appropriate for community educators to reflect on how much of what was in Alexander is recognisable in the contemporary field of practice. The old adage of 'old wine in new bottles' is always tempting, but potentially ignores the profound changes which have taken place. Moreover, contemporary trends point towards a troubling question: on the 40th anniversary of Alexander, has the concept of community education as framed in the Alexander Report been systematically hollowed out?

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