

CLASSROOM BUSINESS AS USUAL? (WHAT) DO POLICYMAKERS AND RESEARCHERS LEARN FROM CLASSROOM RESEARCH?

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I have called this contribution:

“Classroom Business same as usual? (What) Do Policymakers and Researchers Learn from Classroom Research?”

I would like to use this opportunity to address a recurring problem in educational research:

The problem of change within educational change – or more precisely – the denial of change within educational change.

This is often framed as a problem for the practitioners. The problem of change – the lack of change – is a problem that belongs to the professionals and the practitioners: to schools and teachers, to the pupils and their parents. In this contribution I will discuss this as a problem – and a challenge – for researchers and policy makers. How come researchers (and policy makers) continue to reproduce schools, teaching and learning in terms of status quo? The research literature tells us that despite a huge amount of reform efforts teachers, students and parents continue to reproduce a rather stable and familiar pattern of interaction and repertoires in schools and classrooms which could be summed up by the following phrase: Classroom business as usual.

In Norwegian a saying goes:

“Reformer kommer og går – klasserommet består”

This might of course be an empirical fact – in the sense that established patterns of activities, communication and interactions in schools – the “grammar of schooling” – are so strong that they continue to set their regime through – despite all sorts of reform efforts.

But it might also reflect an embedded problem in how educational research practices grasp, analyse, document and envision dimensions of change within the same practices.

The epistemologist I. Wallerstein has been occupied with the denial of change within social sciences, which he links to the absence of a critical examinations and analyses of concepts, theories and methodological practices within the social sciences.

Wallerstein states for example that concepts, theories and analytical framework developed throughout the 19th century no longer are adequate for defining and describing political and social changes, movements and activities in today's rapidly changing society. As a consequence social sciences are locked up with "...the denial of change in theories of change" (Wallerstein 1991).

The American educationalist Tom Popkewitz claims that policy studies in education (and he actually uses Norway as an example) tend to reproduce their own common sense understanding because analytical concepts, categories and practices are not critically examined and analysed. This has as one of its consequences the "... denial of change within educational change "... and where the "... knowledge system of policy and research denies change in the process of change." (Popkewitz 2000: 25)

In this paper I will address the denial of change within educational change by focusing on three factors relevant for how the educational research community frames and approaches the process of change within educational practices.

- Theoretical perspectives underlying the different studies
- Types of data and methodological practices that establish the bases for analyses and conclusions
- Conceptual and analytical framework for analysing the situation.

I will use later empirical research from Norway, Sweden, UK and US to discuss these issues. Especially I will lean on later classrooms studies from elementary and lower secondary schools in Norway. These studies were conducted during a period of large reform efforts in Norway. In the 90's Norway – as a lot of other Western countries – experienced educational restructuring in education implying new ways of funding and steering the educational sector as well as new professional roles for educational stakeholders. A new national curriculum was introduced in 1997 putting new professional demands on the teachers as well as requiring new forms of classroom practices. The comprehensive school system was extended from 9 to 10 years of schooling (meaning that children start at school at six instead of seven).

Along with the reform efforts in Norway a large research program was initiated on the basis of the reform trying to grasp some of the effects and impact the reform had on the daily practices of teachers and schools and on their forms of interaction. This research and evaluation program, Reform 97 (implemented by the Research Council of Norway), had a twofold ambition. Firstly, the program wanted to focus on how the reform functioned and developed and what measures might be taken to make improvements. Secondly, the evaluation program also intended to provide general knowledge and information about the compulsory school. The program would combine the evaluation ambitions with research ambitions.

The program funded 25 different research groups or projects varying from subject specific investigations in school subjects such as written Norwegian, maths, science and the use of drama to the role of textbook as curriculum facilitators, assessing different types of curriculum policy instruments, new challenges for the municipalities a.o. The program implied the most extensive support for school based research in Norway with a price tag of 6 mill. Euro, extending for a period of 4 years (Haug 2003).

The problem of status quo in education

How come educational research tends to arrive at status quo as a way of describing how reform efforts interplay with educational practices?

A vast research literature seems to sum up the relation between policy (such as educational reforms) and practice (in terms of school practices) as the following research titles suggest:

- The persistence of recitation (Hoetker and Ahlbrand 1969)
- The more you change the more it will remain the same (Sarason 1982)
- Teaching Practice: Plus que ça change (Cohen 1988)
- Reforming Again, Again and Again (Cuban 1990)
- The Grammar of Schooling (Tyack and Hanson 1990)
- The predictable failure of educational change (Sarason 1991)
- No news on the reform front (Monsen 1998)

Decades of reforming the curriculum (and school practices) again and again had obviously not brought about the changes that the reform authorities had hoped for. The research on the impact of the new curricula supports this impression even further:

- Most teachers reported that the curriculum guidelines had no or little impact on their lesson planning, teaching, their students' involvement, student achievement, etc.
- The format, size, level of detail, etc. of the guidelines had no or very little impact on how students and teachers cope.
- Higher stakes, added content, etc. led to almost nothing, or rather the opposite.
- The main effect of the external process evaluation tools seemed to be legitimation and the distribution of new argument around the curriculum, neither innovation nor quality enhancement. (Hopmann 2003; 127)

The impact of educational reforms such as curricular reforms on educational practices points to a complicated and complex discussion which I will not go deep into here. David Cohen, Deborah Ball and their colleagues have for example underpinned how:

“... Schools and teachers simply cannot meet the expectations of the center (reforms), because they do not have the fiscal and human resources that are required, teachers do not have the skills that are asked of them, and/or they are not given the training and education required to develop those skills.” (Cohen, Raudenbusch, & Ball 2002)

In this presentation I will take a slightly different perspective on how educational and curricular reforms have an impact on educational practices in schools and classrooms and discuss the lack of change – or the denial of change to quote Tom Popkewitz – as an interior or embedded part of research design and research methodology.

This I will do by getting more deeply into three different – but slightly interrelated – arguments:

- i) Theoretical perspectives underlying the different studies (reform perspectives /reform fidelity vs reform hybrids/looking for large scale change)
- ii) Methodological tools and types of data that establish the bases of analyses and conclusions
- iii) Analytical framework and established concepts for analyses.

But first I will give a brief description of how educational literature describes educational practices in classrooms.

Classroom business as usual? An overview

What defines/constitutes educational practices in the classrooms? According to a vast research literature there are some inhibited patterns of schooling and teaching that seem to continue to define interaction, roles and repertoires in classrooms – the so called “grammar of schooling” (Tyack and Hanson 1990).

The persistence of plenary teaching - Plenary teaching dominates

Teachers dominate, regulate, define and evaluate communication and activities. This communication can be described by the rule of the 2/3 which means that for approximately

75 % of the time teachers talk and/or regulate all official classroom conversation.

The dominant pattern of interaction follows a predefined IRF (E) pattern of communication.

The pupils are left with small possibilities for participation and influence.

If we examine the impact of reform and curriculum on schools and classrooms the picture becomes even more grimy, or, as stated earlier from different studies, teachers

report that the curriculum guidelines had little or only limited impact on their lesson planning, teaching, their students' involvement etc. The bottom line could be summed up by one the titles quoted earlier: "Reforming Again, Again and Again" or "The Predictable Failure of Educational Change"

The different studies identify different mechanisms for explaining this situation such as:

- School structure and school organisation
- Epistemological traditions of schooling and teaching
- Teachers' and students' competences and repertoires
- Power relations
- Schools as certificates for social reproduction.

I will not go deep into the different explanations here. My point is that despite reform efforts during different periods researchers continue to report that principal modes of instruction (lecturing, recitation, demonstration, seat work) continue to dominate despite the increased range of possibilities.

In my further argumentation I will penetrate these findings and conclusions by carefully examining how our theoretical, conceptual and methodological framework might lead us to scrutiny of conservatism and status quo.

i) Theoretical perspectives underlying the different studies

The way analytical and theoretical perspectives inform and shape your analyses and conclusions is not a controversial issue and argument in research today. To some degree we all find what we look for in the sense that our theoretical perspectives inform and impregnate our interpretation of the world. (A certain degree of curiosity or astonishment should however guide our research practices – taking the Bourdieu argument on epistemological ruptures seriously.)

For the case of educational reforms we can at least distinguish between two analytical traditions in evaluation approaches. The first tradition, a structural – instrumental – tradition, focuses on structures, implementation tools, legitimacy, etc. Who were involved in the process, central means of the reforms, types of implementation processes etc. A structural/instrumental approach focuses on rational and cognitive structures, tools and implementation processes.

A cultural – institutional – tradition takes a slightly different stand. Instead of focusing on intentions and implementation mechanisms and tools the focus will be on how institutions and their agents meet and interact with the different reform policies. In this approach the focus is neither on the programmatic or the intentional part of the reform nor on how the institutions neglect and counteract towards the reform efforts

but rather how institutions and agents selectively negotiate, ignore and adapt to the reform.

In this last perspective rather than seeing how reforms change the schools one is interested in how schools change the reforms.

Larry Cuban is among those who speaks for the value of such a perspective if we want to know more about how reforms impact on schools and teaching and learning. Rather than looking for what is being described as a fidelity or efficiency approach to how reforms impact on schools and teaching and learning he speaks for the value of perspectives that enable us to grasp how schools change reforms such as a popularity perspective or a diffusion perspective. Such a perspective enables us to locate how educational practitioners adapt to innovations to the ongoing lives of their schools and seek coherence where it counts the most – in classroom instruction. Cuban finds it useful viewing reform plans “... not as clearly mandated policies but as concepts to be evaluated on their practical effects, positive or negative, and then reframed accordingly” (Cuban 2004). In his work together with historian David Tyack (1995:64), Cuban argues how reforms should be deliberately designed to be hybridized, to be able to fit local circumstances.

In his overview on how reforms impact on teachers, instruction and learning (based on American experience) Cuban states that over time teachers ignore, combine and adapt different reform strategies. Educational reforms do affect educational practices if they

- i) are built on and reflect teachers’ expertise
- ii) acknowledge the realities of the school as a workplace
- iii) accept the wisdom of those teacher adaptations that improve the intended policy

Let me take an example from the Reform 97 evaluation program. One of the projects identifying a fairly high degree of reform success in relation to the new curriculum reform is within written Norwegian in lower secondary schooling. The scholars Evensen et al. underpin a robust and vital picture of Norwegian writing skills based on in depth analyses of National tests in written Norwegian. In their study Evensen et al. highlight two central findings. First of all it has become more difficult to achieve good marks as well as bad marks after the new grading system was introduced. Despite the intention of the new grading system, one is now more likely to achieve an average learning result (and get a mark in the middle) than with the earlier grading system. This is what the scholars call an unintended consequence of the reform. But the second and more important finding is as follows. The writing culture in lower secondary schools in Norway can be described in terms of vitality and pluralism. This vitality can be identified in the way the students write their texts (use of textual tools,

approaches, etc.) as well as within established norms for good writing among the evaluators (sensorer). Textual pluralism, trust and confidence impregnate both the students' way of writing and the established norms for good writing within the evaluators' corpus. Evensen et al. underpin how this situation reflects a *sensus communis* in first language writing skills between literacy teachers' established norms for good writing in upper secondary classes and the way the national curriculum defines textual competence. Process writing has become a national standard for good writing, recognised by both teachers, students, evaluators and curriculum designers. Process writing has been spread and made popular through a systematic and deliberate use of developmental teachers' pioneer work in this respect and is today recognised as the good way of writing among professionals, students and national evaluators and in curriculum texts.

ii) Methodological tools

How methodological tools interplay with conclusions arrived at.

Another way to understand the denial of change within educational change is linked to methods of measurements used in the different studies.

If we look at later studies – and especially the studies identifying some aspects or traces of change – they are all relying on some sort of *in depth studies* and *how data*. If we use the Reform 97 evaluation as an example, the studies identifying new forms of practices are all based on some sort of qualitative data or a combination of survey data and qualitative data. To put it another way: Studies leaning solely on survey information tend to be good at grasping established forms of educational practices in terms of the *what* aspect, but seem to be less able to identify ongoing changes and especially changes related to the *how* aspect. Survey studies enable us to see patterns of distribution and variation across groups, individuals and contexts on a large scale. Survey studies are however less fitted for identifying substantial and detailed variances. Maybe ongoing changes in educational practices are related to substantial rather than structural elements and are better envisaged by *in depth* and *how* related data.

Misunderstand me right. I do not mean to speak for a methodological program – in terms of observation data/discourse analysis data or the like. What I want to address is how our methodological tools interplay with, and define, the conclusion we arrive at. Once again although frontal teaching and teacher centered instructions – and especially the IRF pattern – still define central aspects of classroom organisation in Norwegian classrooms they are differently played out today than those defined by Bellack, Mehan and other well recommended studies. One of the big differences compared to earlier studies is related to the role of the students and their possibility for participation and contribution. In that sense the IRF patterns of today are much

more “student centered” in terms of students’ possibilities for initiation, negotiation and involvement.

What data might bring you to the wrong conclusions. The persistence of an activity over time does not mean that we are describing the same activity and phenomenon. If we use *how data* we see that teacher centered questions – recitation patterns of today to paraphrase Hoetker and Ahlbrand – give much more room for student participation and student latitude. Let me give you an example from a recitation sequence in a math classroom at the 9th grade:

Pursuing an interest in details

In English there is a saying: The devil is in the details. In a sense, educational research should play along with the devil and endeavour to go beyond everyday language and search for the epistemological ruptures (the Bourdieu argument). For those of us interested in educational practices and how to cope with change there might be strong arguments for detailed in depth studies (alongside with more comprehensive studies) in education. Carefully designed and clearly focused in depth studies enable us to see how classroom activities interact with ongoing societal changes. The changes in classroom activities and interaction themselves (from plenary activities to seatwork in pairs or groups) ask for in depth studies as well as detail studies, simply because the most common practices in Norwegian classrooms today are desk interaction **and not** plenary teaching.

Context vs Content

So far I have been arguing for qualitative studies – or to be precise the need of both comprehensive data and in depth data – as a way of grasping ongoing changes in educational practices. But in depth data or contextual data could be grasped in different ways – or more precisely context means different things during different periods and from different perspectives. The shift from studying teaching to studying interaction can illustrate one such shift in perspective. Another aspect of what defines context can be recognised in how a mathematician versus an educationalist interprets and explains classroom interaction.

iii) Analytical and conceptual language

A third road to understand “the denial of change within educational change” can be linked to the established analytical and conceptual language offered for analysing teaching and learning in educational practices. Within the field of education we have a lot of concepts established for analysing educational practices such as:

- teacher centered vs student centered
- traditional vs progressive
- mimetic vs transformative

- monological vs dialogical
- process vs content
- control vs autonomy.

Based on the data played out throughout the qualitative and quantitative descriptions of Norwegian classrooms after the new Curriculum Reform our teachers and students cut through these dualistic and polarised concepts. If we use teacher style as an example our teachers combine and merge aspects of teacher centered methods with student centered methods in a rich, nuanced and flavoured fashion.

Dualistic concepts such as teacher centered vs. student centered or traditional vs. progressive do not offer an empirical, sensitive and synthesizing way of describing the observed classroom practices. In most classrooms the teachers combined aspects of teacher centered organised activities with more student centered and activity organised pattern of organisations. For a lot of classrooms (and especially at the higher levels (grade 6 and grade 9)) the work plan (arbeidsplan) or work schedule seems to be the driving force for the activities during the school day. Rather than describing the classrooms as teacher vs student centered they seem to be activity and work schedule centered. This implies an indirect and written ruling of the classrooms and where the teachers use a lot of the plenary activities to secure, direct and metacommunicate around the predescribed activities. In their comparison of Swedish classrooms from the 70's and the 90's, Lindblad and Sahlström state that although plenary sessions are less frequent in the classrooms of the 90's (where seat work at desks dominates), the teacher as a master and conductor of the activities seems to be more central in the classrooms of the 90's. They state for example:

“What we also find when comparing the materials (1970 classrooms and 1990 classrooms – speaker's comment) is that there are substantially longer sequences of instruction of *how to perform* in the 90's material, often with a high level of detail.”

And they continue:

“The introduction of desk work thus seems not only to have introduced a new way of working, but it also affects the organisations of the seemingly plenary teaching.” (Lindblad & Sahlström 2004)

Available established concepts and analytical framework might contribute to a prolongation of established practices and an inscription of status quo also during periods impregnated with changes.

Concluding remarks

In this essay I have discussed how educational research relates to, frames and identifies educational change. As the scientific epistemologist Wallerstein has

underpinned, concepts and analytical framework (and we could add methodological tools and theoretical perspectives) need critical examination and analyses so they can fulfil their potential as tools for describing social changes, movements, and activities. Without examining the common sense of its own analytical understanding, research can preserve the very systems that are to be interpreted and engaged in critical conversations.

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**COMMENTS TO KIRSTI KLETTE:
CLASSROOM BUSINESS SAME AS USUAL? WHAT DO
POLICYMAKERS AND RESEARCHERS LEARN FROM
CLASSROOM RESEARCH?**

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Kirsti Klette offers an interesting shift of perspectives on the problem of a ‘denial of change’ i.e. the problem that classroom practices seem to stay more or less the same despite decades of reform efforts. Her suggestion is that this problem, often attributed to teachers’ reluctance to implement new modes of teaching, may instead be due to inadequacies in the researchers’ analytical frameworks, which she urges us to re-examine. I propose that in our scrutiny of current research practices we take into account not only how theories and methods frame aspects of the implementation process but also how we, as educational researchers, relate to reform ideas.

INTRODUCTION

In her plenary talk Kirsti Klette invites us to reflect upon a seemingly obvious fact: despite decades of curriculum reform in Norway and elsewhere there is little evidence of real change in teaching practices. This ‘denial of change’ is often viewed as a problem that rests upon the practitioners. Klette cites David Cohen and his colleagues who state that schools and teachers often lack the “fiscal and human resources” needed to meet the demands of the policymakers. Teachers may not have the knowledge and skills necessary to implement the changes that the policymakers and agencies hoped for or are not offered the appropriate in-service training required to improve their skills.

In her talk Klette contests this way of framing the problem of a ‘denial of change’. Instead she invites us, as educational researchers, to re-examine critically how we frame and identify educational change. She argues that the problem of a ‘denial of change’ may well be an artefact of our own research practices; scrutinising conservatism and the status quo may be an interior or embedded part of the theoretical and methodological perspectives used to analyse how institutions and agents adapt to the reforms. If our analyses are based on superficial or incomplete accounts of what is going on in the classrooms we may not be able to identify reform success, or worse, we may ourselves be instrumental in reproducing a traditional ‘grammar of schooling’ (Tyack & Hansot 1990)

Klette argues that in-depth studies are needed to evaluate the impact of educational reforms on classroom practice. She emphasizes that we need to look more closely at the lives and work of teachers and students in order to understand how the

policymakers' guiding principles are transformed into classroom practice. I agree with her. An activity such as 'recitation' may easily be identified as such if we describe it solely in terms of *what* is going on in a classroom, but may turn out to be a varied and nuanced activity, maybe not even 'recitation' at all, if we view it in terms of *how* it is done and how it is interpreted by the participants.

I deeply sympathise with Klette's call for self-scrutiny amongst researchers engaged in studies of social change. I would even like to bring her argument a bit further by addressing a question that is not elaborated in her talk: How do we as researchers relate to educational reform, in particular to the reform ideas of today? Is there not a need for greater self-reflection in regard to our own roles and responsibilities when it comes to the relation between policy setting and classroom practice?

TEACHERS' RESPONSES TO CURRICULUM REFORM.

Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that there exists such a phenomenon as a 'denial of change' in teachers' responses to curriculum reform. Following Klette we need to ask ourselves how we should interpret such responses. In a recent article Klette (2002) points out that there are two ways of viewing current educational reforms in the Nordic countries: we may either regard them as efforts of empowerment and professionalisation for schools and teachers, or as tools for trivialising the teachers' work and subjecting education to economic regulations (p. 266). Under the former interpretation we can view teachers' reluctance to implement the required changes in their teaching practice as a manifestation of inertia or even conservatism (or as Klette suggests even as an artefact of the researchers' analytical frameworks). Under the latter interpretation we may view professional resistance to change as both rational and well-founded.

Are there reasons to believe that current school reforms may be detrimental to the quality of teaching and learning? Thematic approaches to curriculum delivery, active, meaningful, cooperative learning, and pupil autonomy are guiding concepts in the official rhetoric behind Nordic efforts to restructure compulsory education (Broadhead 2001). How could such seemingly positive efforts possibly cause concern among practitioners?

WHAT CAN POLICYMAKERS AND RESEARCHERS LEARN FROM CLASSROOM STUDIES?

Klette would like to see more in-depth studies of the interplay between reform efforts and educational practices. Such studies already exist, studies that address issues highly relevant to the debate over current reforms and their practical meaning (e.g. Bergqvist & Säljö in press; Siegler & Hiebert 1999, Siegler 2004). I will refer to some of these studies below, since they shed light on the reasons why teachers may be reluctant to unreservedly implement the policymakers' ideas, and why there is cause to discuss critically the researcher's role in relation to these ideas.

**“Pedagogy is never innocent. It is a medium that carries its own message”
(Bruner 1996)**

Current curricular reforms in the Nordic countries focus on certain qualities in student learning. In doing so other aspects of the learning process may shift out of focus and appear to be less important. A clear message of the current reforms is that meta-cognitive and social skills are of primary importance to schooling, whereas content knowledge plays a secondary or auxiliary role in fostering active, independent and cooperative learners (Bergqvist & Säljö in press). For instance, the concept of the ‘autonomous learner’ seems to have paved the way for patterns of social interaction that “encourage, and require, self-observation, self-control, and meta-awareness on the part of the individual” (*ibid* p. 3). Bergqvist and Säljö draw this conclusion from an extensive in-depth study carried out among children seven and twelve years in six primary schools in Sweden. Their results show that planning one’s work and monitoring the time spent on various tasks have become more important to the teachers and students than engaging in the content of these tasks.

“It is the demonstration of being able to perform the planning that is the decisive element.

In what sense the planning actually supports children’s work remains far from clear.”
(*ibid* p. 9)

Since the theme of this conference is *Inclusion and Diversity* it is worth pointing out that this new focus, or rather this new content of learning, seems to benefit students who are responsive to the demands that they self-govern their activities, which in turn may favour students from certain social strata (cf. Bernstein 1971-75).

Be Prepared to Scrutinize the Reform Ideas

The TIMSS study provides a rich offering of 231 video-taped eighth-grade mathematics lessons from three countries, Germany, Japan and the U.S. documented from 1994-1995. In their book *The Teaching Gap*, Stigler and Hiebert (1999) comment on the differences in teaching practices in these three countries. The Japanese and the U.S. lessons stand in sharp contrast to each other. While the Japanese teachers gave the students subtle hints, encouraging them to think for themselves and guiding them towards correct and effective problem-solving methods, the U.S. teachers’ discovery-learning practice left the students more or less to themselves to discover mathematical principles and techniques by ‘grappling and telling’. Stigler and Hiebert conclude that:

“Japanese teachers, in certain respects, come closer to implementing the spirit of current ideas advanced by U.S. reformers than do U.S. teachers.” (*ibid*, p. vii)

However, the empirical studies give little weight to such a notion. In an independent study of excerpts from the TIMSS video-recordings Alan Siegel (2004) shows that the Japanese lessons include “...more lecturing and demonstration than even the more traditional U.S. lessons” (*ibid*, p. 28) and, perhaps more striking:

“The video excerpts show Japanese lessons with a far richer content than the corresponding offerings from the U.S. and Germany.” (*ibid*, p. 20).

Even if the videotapes as well as the statistical data gathered within the TIMSS project show that Japanese styles of teaching differ significantly from those in the U.S. (*ibid*, p. 17), Stigler and Hiebert do not find any cause for questioning the reform ideas. Instead, based on the results of the TIMSS study, they conclude that something has gone wrong in the implementation of the reforms. My suggestion is that we, as researchers, prepare to scrutinise not only the key ideas emanating from our own sphere that underpin reform initiatives but also precisely how these ideas may transform classroom practice. The in-depth studies that Klette calls for in her talk can be used for such a purpose as well; in fact, the studies cited above show that such data, in combination with more comprehensive studies, is needed if we want to know how idealised reform goals are met when realised in classroom practice.

CONCLUSIONS

Educational inquiry often develops in close contact and cooperation with policymakers. Not only do we offer our services as advisors or evaluators, we are often active partners in the shaping of educational policy. This may make us reluctant to question reform ideas since in many cases they begin with us. We concentrate on the problems of implementing the ideas or of reflecting on the theories and methods we use to make sense of the implementation process. My main comment to Klette is that we should also and maybe first and foremost, concentrate on scrutinising the very ideas that form the basis of these reforms.

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