Studies in Philosophy and Education (2019) 38:657–668
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-019-09675-y

What Kind of Society Does the School Need? Redefining the Democratic Work of Education in Impatient Times

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Published online: 7 August 2019
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Abstract

In many places around the world the modern school is under a relentless pressure to perform and the standards for such performance are increasingly being set by the global education measurement industry. All this puts a pressure on schools, teachers and students but also on policy makers and politicians, who all seem to have been caught up in a global educational rat-race. There is a discourse of panic about educational quality, which seems to drive an insatiable need for improvement, geared towards ever narrower definitions of what counts *as* education and what counts *in* education. The surprising result is that the modern school is increasingly seen as a problem, with high levels of dissatisfaction amongst teachers, students, politicians, the media and the public at large, who all want something better from the school, although they disagree about what this may look like. The question this raises is whether it is time to give up on the modern schools and its promise and hand it over to Pearson, Google and other educational capitalists, or whether we should try again and, if so, where we might go. The reflections I offer in this paper are primarily meant to think again about the relationship between the school and society, arguing for a more 'obstinate' school and a more 'patient' society. I argue that whether such a recalibration of the relationship between school and society is possible, is ultimately a test of the democratic quality of society itself.

Keywords The modern school · The welfare state · Democracy · Quality · Performativity · The impulse society

The Modern School, Solution or Problem?

The history of the modern school is closely connected to the promises of social democracy and the welfare state. In this set up, the school is generally seen as part of the solution, so to speak, that is, as the institution that will contribute to, or even will bring about individual progress, social inclusion, democratisation, prosperity and well-being. Of course, there are ongoing concerns about the degree to which the modern school is able to deliver on these ambitions. But the very fact that these concerns are being expressed, indicates that

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the particular 'horizon of expectations' is generally still in place (see, for example, Hopmann 2008; Ravitch 2011). This is not to suggest, however, that everything is well with the modern school. In many places around the world schools are under a relentless pressure to 'perform' and the standards for such performance are increasingly being set by GEMI, the global education measurement industry (Biesta 2015a), with OECD's PISA still leading the way (for an in-depth analysis of these developments see D'Agnese 2017).

All this puts a pressure on schools, teachers and students but also on policy makers and politicians, who all seem to have been caught up in a global educational rat-race. There is a discourse of panic about educational quality, which seems to drive an insatiable need for improvement, geared towards ever narrower definitions of what counts *as* education and what counts *in* education. The surprising result is that the modern school is increasingly becoming part of the problem, so to speak, rather than seen as part of the solution, with high levels of dissatisfaction amongst teachers, students, politicians, the media and the public at large, who all want something better from the school, although they disagree about what this 'better' may look like. The question this raises is whether it is time to give up on the modern schools and its promise. Whether it is time to hand the school over to Pearson, Google and other educational capitalists, who are probably keen and ready to make lots of money out of online personalised learning. Or whether we should try again and, if so, where we might go.

The reflections I offer in this paper are primarily meant to think again about the relationship between the school and society, arguing for a more 'obstinate' school (see Biesta 2019a) and a more 'patient' society (see Roberts 2014). Whether such a recalibration of the relationship between school and society is possible, is, as I will argue, ultimately a test of the democratic quality of society *itself*. There is, therefore, quite a lot at stake. And it all begins with the question of quality.

A Question of Quality

One remarkable thing about the present state of education is that there is a very lively and 'visible' debate about the *quality* of education. Although this may give the impression that many are concerned about the quality of education, the focus on quality is not without problems (and perhaps it is even the case that the focus on quality distracts us from the questions that we actually should be concerned with).

One problem with the focus on quality is linguistic and has to do with the fact that the word 'quality' could be characterised as a 'non-objectionable,' that is, one of those words that it is difficult to be against. This already indicates that just to say that one aims for quality—or even more problematic: that one aims for 'quality education'—is not saying very much at all. There are, after all, competing definitions of what quality is, competing views about what counts as quality; and these, in turn, have to do with competing underlying values. Quality, after all, is a judgement and, more specifically, a judgement about whether we consider something to be good or not. This reveals that the question of the quality of education is not a technical question but a deeply political one. This, in itself, should not surprise us. What should surprise us, instead, is that many seem to think that questions about quality, about what good education is, can be resolved by technical means, such as in the ongoing obsession with generating evidence about what apparently 'works' (see Biesta 2010).

With regard to discussions about the quality of education, there are three common misunderstandings. The first has to do with the (mistaken) idea that the quality of education has to do with matters of effectiveness and efficiency. The problem here is that although effectiveness and efficiency are values, they are process values that indicate how good a particular process is in bringing about what it intends to bring about (effectiveness) and how it utilises resources for doing so (efficiency). But effectiveness and efficiency are entirely neutral with regard to what the process is supposed to bring about. To put it crudely: there is effective torturing and ineffective torturing just as there is efficient torturing and inefficient torturing, but that doesn't mean that effective and efficient torturing are good. So, the real question is not whether particular educational processes are effective and efficient, but what they are effective and efficient *for*—a question I will return to below.

A second misunderstanding in the discussion about quality is the assumption that quality consists of giving customers what they want. Quite remarkably, this dictum is the first 'quality management principle' of the ISO 9000 quality standards. It says:

Organizations depend on their customers and therefore should understand current and future customer needs, should meet customer requirements and strive to exceed customer expectations.[1]

While this may sound attractive—some might even call it 'logical'—and also has entered the domain of education in the idea that educational institutions should first of all satisfy the needs of students, that is, give them what they want, problems arise, of course, when customers want something immoral or students want something *un*educational, such as the right answers to exam questions or written guarantee that they will succeed (see, for example, Eagle and Brennan 2007; Nixon et al. 2018).

And then there is the problem of 'performativity' (Ball 2003; Gleeson and Husbands 2001) where *indicators* of quality are taken as *definitions* of quality so that, for example, organisations begin to define their strategic ambitions in terms of reaching a certain position in a league table and cynically steer their performance towards the indicators that would result in such a position. How such behaviour can significantly erode a concern for the quality of education has, for example, been documented in much detail by Ravitch in her 2011 book *The death and life of the great American school system: How testing and choice are undermining education.* The problem of performativity is also visible in the rise of the 'age of measurement' (Biesta 2009) in education, where the real question is whether we are measuring what we value, or whether we have reached a situation where we are valuing what is being measured—and 'forget' about the rest, about what is not measured or what cannot even be measured.

Aims, Purposes, and Doing What Needs to be Done

The foregoing observations about quality show that the real question is not how we can make education more effective or efficient, how we can ensure that the customers of education remain happy, or how we can achieve high scores on quality indicators. All this remains vacuous as long as we do not (re)turn to the question what education is *for*. I wish to suggest that there are three 'layers' to this question: one having to do with the aims of

[1] See http://www.iso.org/iso/pub100080.pdf Accessed 16 April 2019.

education; a second having to do with the wider purpose of education; and a third having to do with 'doing what needs to be done' (which I will explain below).

In the current 'age of learning' it often seems as if the sole purpose of education is learning. While it could be argued that learning is important in education—although it is definitely not the be all and end all of education (see Biesta 2013, 2015b)—the real question for education to the extent to which it is concerned with learning, is about what the learning is *for*. Rather than suggesting that educational learning should only focus on the acquisition of knowledge and skills—which is a popular focus in many discussions in education—I have suggested that there are three aims that come into play in education (see, for example, Biesta 2009). The first is that of *qualification*, which is indeed about the presentation and acquisition of knowledge, skills and understanding that allow students to 'do' something (in the narrow sense of vocational qualification, for example, but also in the broad sense of navigating complex modern societies). In addition to this, educational learning also has to do with *socialisation*, that is, with providing students with a sense of orientation in the many traditions and practices that make up modern societies and modern life. Thirdly, educational learning should also have a concern for the student as individual or, more specifically, for the student as *subject* of their own actions, rather than as object of teachers' interventions. This concern for 'subjectification' is not just important for their own sanity; a democratic society actually needs citizens who can make up their own mind, rather than simply follow orders.

To move from the bland language of learning to the question what learning is supposed to be *for*, begins to add substance to the discussion about the quality of education. The suggestion that education has three aims or, if one wishes, a threefold aim, helps to move beyond the exclusive focus on knowledge and skills—and particularly measurable knowledge and skills—towards an acknowledgement of the broader remit of the school in modern society. Such a wider perspective is important in order not to approach the aims of education in purely instrumental ways, that is, just looking for the most effective and efficient ways of achieving them. One particular 'quality' of education, after all, is that form matters, to put it briefly. That is: students do not just learn from the content we provide them with but also from the ways in which we provide them with this content, so to speak. Again, what may be effective—for example paying students for good test results—may not be educationally desirable. This is not just because payment for good test results may promote short-term repetition but not deeper understanding. It is also because what may be effective vis-à-vis the aim of qualification may actually undermine what we seek to achieve in the domain of subjectification, where we may wish to communicate that there is more to a worthwhile human life than doing things for money. Concrete aims always need to be considered in light of the more encompassing *purpose* of education, that is, the ambition to make sure that students gain enthusiasm for leading their own life, and leading it well.

A third consideration with regard to the substance of educational quality lies in the fact that we should not just focus on the outcomes of education, that is, on what all our educational endeavours are supposed to bring about or are actually bringing about. In addition to the 'outcomes-argument' there is also the 'civilisation-argument' that comes into play, which is about the things we value per se, as a civilised society so to speak, irrespective of whether they may or may not have an impact on (measurable) outcomes. That students deserve decent and even beautiful school buildings may be such a consideration, irrespective of whether such buildings have an impact on outcomes or not. Or that the school should be a place where students can meet other students they would not 'normally' meet could be an important civilisation argument, irrespective of the impact on outcomes—or to go one step further: even if it would have a negative impact on certain outcomes. The

civilisation argument may also be a reason why we may decide not to hand over schools to the market or the private sphere, even if we were to save money doing so. The point, as Oscar Wilde reminds us, is that we should not forget that knowing the price of something is very different from knowing its value.[2]

The Double History of the Modern School

I am trying to understand *why* the modern school seems to have become a problem and *how* the modern school seems to have become a problem. So far I have shown that this has something to do with discussions about the quality of education which, as I have tried to explain, are at least misleading and probably misguided, particularly because they are disconnected from substantial questions about the aims and purposes of education and about the concerns a civilised society should have about schools anyway, that is, irrespective of whether or not there is an 'impact' on 'outcomes,' so to speak. The question about educational quality is, however, not only a question about definitions of quality and the values that are at stake in such definitions. There is also a more sociological dimension, if one wishes to use that phrase, that is, the question who has a legitimate voice in defining and assessing the quality of education. This brings me more directly to the theme of the relationship between school and society and the question of the history of the modern school. The suggestion I wish to make with regard to this, is that the modern schools comes out of two different and in a sense competing histories that create a fundamental tension at the very heart of the modern school. So, what is this 'double history'?

The 'standard' history of the modern school argues that the modern school emerges as a result of the modernisation of society, where modernisation first of all means functional differentiation (see, for example, Parsons 1951; Mollenhauer 1973). In a society where everyday life and work are closely interwoven, such as an agricultural society, the new generation will 'pick up' everything they need to know by just 'hanging around'.[3] But when work moves to offices or factories this becomes increasingly difficult—one could say that as a result society begins to lose its intrinsic educative 'power'—and as a result the need arises for a special institution where children are prepared for their future participation in society. This institution is the modern school which, itself, can be seen as part of the process of functional differentiation as the task of preparing children for their future participation in society now becomes the task of the school (see also Mollenhauer 2013).

The key thing about this history of the modern school is that the school appears as a function of and a function for society. In more everyday language: in this manifestation the modern school has an important 'job' to do for society, which does not just mean that the school has to do this job well, but also that society has legitimate expectations towards the school. This history of the modern school gives society not just a strong voice in deciding what the school should do, but also gives it a legitimate right to check whether the school is giving society what it wants from it. It is in this history that contemporary concerns about educational quality fit well, and one could see the whole global measurement industry simply as the logical conclusion of this history.

[2] In Lady Windemere's Fan, Oscar Wilde had Lord Darlington quip that a cynic was *"a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing*".

[3] The principle of 'picking up by hanging around' has been made popular by Lave and Wenger under the label of legitimate peripheral participation (see Lave and Wenger 1991).

If this were all there is to say about the modern school and its relation to society, we could well stop here, or just turn to technical questions about finetuning the ways in which the school can become a 'perfect' instrument for society.[4] I wish to suggest however, that there is another history of the school—perhaps an older one and perhaps a more 'hidden' or more forgotten one. Here the school is not a function of society but rather a place in between 'home' and the 'street,' in between the private life of the family and the public life of society, a halfway house that is neither 'home' nor 'work,' but a place and space for practising, for trying things out.[5] This history of the school connects well to the Greek meaning of '*schole*' as free time, that is, as time not yet claimed or determined by society (see also Masschelein and Simons 2012). And what is perhaps also interesting to know, is that 'pedagogue' was first of all the name of the slave who brought children to the school, to this 'zone' of free, unclaimed time. If in the first history society has a legitimate claim on the school and school has a duty to 'perform,' that is, to meet this claim, in the second history there is a need for distance—school as a place that needs to be shielded off from the demands of society precisely in order to give the new generation the time they need to meet the world and meet themselves in relation to the world.

What this double history of the modern school thus helps to see is that there is a tension at the very heart of the modern school—a tension between the demand to be useful for society and a demand for keeping society at a distance; a tension between the demand to perform and the demand for free play, so to speak. Many teachers, and perhaps all teachers, know this tension well and generally also know how to deal with this tension. They know that they sometimes need to be strict and demanding; and that sometimes they just need to let go, need to give their students time. The problem is not, therefore, that the tension is not known or understood or that teachers lack the capacity for navigating the tension. But if what emerges out of this double history is the image of the school as a 'servant of two masters,' the problem with the school in our time is that the voice of one master—the master that says to the school: perform! give society what it needs! be functional! be useful!—has become much louder than the other voice, the voice that understands that the constant pressure to perform ultimately ends up as a form of terror (see Ball 2003). It is not, then, that there is a legitimate and an illegitimate voice—in which case there's a danger that we would replace a too functionalist conception of the school with a too romantic one. The main problem is that the situation is out of balance, and it is this that requires a redress or, as I have put it above, a recalibration: a system reset.

Good Intentions with Problematic Consequences

While the current interest in the quality of education is problematic in the pressure it is exerting on schools, it is important to acknowledge that this interest did not (just) emerge out of a desire to make the school into a perfectly functioning machine—'robot' might be the right image here—but that there lies an explicit social justice argument at the start of many contemporary concerns about the quality of education and the performance of the education system. The issue is more, then, that this argument has run out of control, so to

[4] On the problem of perfection see Biesta (in press).

[5] Hannah Arendt writes: "Now school is by no means the world and must not pretend to be; it is rather the institution that we interpose between the private domain of home and the world in order to make the transition from the family to the world possible at all". (Arendt 1977, pp. 188–189).

speak, so that the good intentions have yielded rather problematic consequences. What has happened?

Starting point is the indubitable claim that every child and young person, irrespective of where they are or where they are from, should have equal access to good education—the argument for equal educational opportunities.[6] The question how to ensure that education is everywhere of sufficient (or ideally: the same) quality, raised the question how one can judge the quality of education. One decisive step was taken when the question of *judgement* about educational quality became 'translated' into the question how one can *measure* the quality of education. A second decisive step was taken when the question of measuring the quality of education turned into the question how one can measure the quality of educational *outcomes* (see, for example, Spady 1994; and for an early critique Jansen 1998). The question which outcomes *should* be measured, soon turned into the question which outcomes *can* be measured, and so the good intentions of the social justice argument eventually turned into the current 'age of measurement' (Biesta 2009), in which the key question is whether we are (still) measuring what is being valued, or whether we have reached a situation where many just value what is being measured and take the latter simply as a valid indicator of the quality of education.

What emerged alongside and partly in interaction with these developments was, as mentioned, a global education measurement industry that, through an overflow of data, measurements and statistics, managed to create a new 'common sense' about educational quality—narrowly defined (achievement in a small number of academic subjects), narrowly measured (test performance at one particular age), and focusing on outcomes. It is not just this narrowing that is worrying about the impact of the measurement industry, but also its questionable focus on national education systems, thus 'forgetting' that the performance of Finland as a whole could easily be matched if one were to compare it with, say, a selective slice of 5 million inhabitants from the wealthier parts of London, for example. And there is the problem that by presenting the findings in terms of a distribution of league-table positions it creates a competitive mindset and a desire to be at the top, again 'forgetting' that a position at the bottom of the table doesn't automatically mean that things are bad, just that the measurements are lower than of those higher up. Yet the logic of league tables feeds fear, first and foremost the fear of being 'behind' or being *left* behind.

The result of these developments is not confined to the current obsession with measurement and with the widespread comparison of educational systems in order to indicate which system is better and which system is best, but has also influenced perceptions of what counts *as* education. This is partly about shifting the focus from the quality of provision and processes to the quality of outcomes, and partly about reconceptualising the dynamics of education in terms of interventions and effects, that is, in terms of an input–output logic that quickly turns education into a matter of production—*poiesis*, not *praxis*, to put it in Aristotelean terms (see Böhm 1995). Perhaps most worryingly, all this has also repositioned the teacher from a thinking, judging and acting professionals to a 'factor' in the production of measurable learning outcomes. And even the fact that the teacher appears as the most important factor in all this, doesn't do away with the problematic view of the teacher as *factor* (on this see also Biesta 2019b).

[6] In the UNs Millennium Development Goals, to be reached by 2015, goal number 2 was that of achieving universal primary education. In the Sustainable Development Goals, set in 2015 and to be achieved by 2030, the educational goal has become that of 'quality education,' operationalised as the goal of ensuring "inclusive and equitable quality education" and promoting "lifelong learning opportunities for all".

Changing the Question: The Rise of the Impulse Society

The problems surrounding contemporary education seem to stem from a rather one-sided view of the relationship between school and society, one in which it is assumed that the only legitimate and, for some, the only possible question to ask about this relationship is the question what kind of school society needs. In this set up we can clearly see the influence of the first history of the modern school—one where society asks, and the school serves. Yet it is not the only question that can be asked about the relationship between school and society, and a simple reversal—suggested by Eckart Liebau (1999, p. 5)—begins to open up an altogether different set up. This is the question what kind of society the school actually needs and, more specifically, what kind of society the school needs in order to be school or 'schole,' and not just a more or less well performing 'function.' It is here that it becomes possible—and necessary—to turn the spotlight away from the school and its alleged problems towards society in order to ask what becomes visible when we look in that direction, and how that may change our perception of whether the school is in trouble or not.

The compelling, highly relevant analysis of contemporary society that I wish to introduce to the discussion is the claim put forward by Paul Roberts who has suggested that contemporary society has, to a large degree, become an 'impulse society' (Roberts 2014). The rhetorical question Roberts asks in the subtitle of the British edition of his book—"What is wrong with getting what we want?"—already reveals where the problem may lie, although the subtitle of the American edition—"America in the age of instant gratification"—very accurately summarises the diagnosis Roberts gives. One important distinction in Roberts' discussion is between needs and wants, showing that nowadays about 70% of the US economy focuses on 'discretionary consumption,' that is on the things we don't really need but nonetheless want. And this creates problems, not just because of the fact that "an economy reoriented to give us what we want … isn't the best for delivering what we *need*" (Roberts 2014, p. 8; emph. in original), but also because it may be quite difficult to "cope with an economic system that is almost too good at giving us what we want" (ibid., p. 2)—think, for example, of obesity as one of the 'outcomes' of such a set up. This does, of course, raise the question where our wants actually come from, which has something to do with the dynamics of contemporary capitalism.

One of the problems with capitalism—or at least with 'mainstream' contemporary capitalism—is that it needs to grow in order to sustain itself. For a long time, capitalism could do this by means of spatial expansion, that is, constantly opening up new markets. This strategy which, in a sense, started in the age of colonialism, reached its limits when the economy literally became global. Instead of making money out of space, so to speak, global capitalism discovered a different way to grow, by making money out of time, mainly through the logic of the stock market. Again, as long as one could stay ahead of others in buying and selling on this market, one could make money out of time, giving the old idea that 'time is money' an altogether new meaning.

But with ever faster computer algorithms, this endeavour reached its limits as well, as became clear in the most recent financial crises where modern capitalism literally ran out of time. There was, however, one 'register' left, and this has really become the defining focus of contemporary capitalism. The best example of what has emerged here is probably Apple, once we see that Apple doesn't sell mobile phones but actually sells the desire for a *new* mobile phone. It sells this desire for free, but once it has arrived 'inside' we often find ourselves more than willing to exchange our hard-earned cash for the latest model.

Contemporary capitalism, so we might say, is in the business of producing desires and 'installing' them inside ourselves. "Bit by bit," as Roberts summarises, "the consumer market place has effectively moved *inside* the self" (ibid., p. 6; emphasis in original), and what is genius about this 'turn' is that it seems to be without limits as "only the bottomless appetites of the self [can] contain all the output of a maturing industrial capitalist economy which can never stop growing" (ibid., p. 7).

In his book, Roberts shows that the logic of instant gratification has not just become the defining quality of contemporary capitalism, but has affected all dimensions of society. That is why we are not just suffering from an impulse *economy* but from an impulse *society*. What is new in the impulse society is not that we have desires and that some of our desires are selfish but "that the selfish reflexes of individuals have become the reflexes of an *entire society*" (ibid., p. 4; emphasis added). What is also worrying, and this is an important aspect of Roberts' analysis as well, is that "government, the media, academia, and especially business—the very institutions that once helped to temper the individual pursuit of quick, self-serving rewards, are themselves increasingly engaged in the same pursuit" (ibid.).

This is how we can understand—or at least characterise—the recent rise of populist politics, where politicians say that when people vote for them they will give them everything they desire (not bothering too much with the fact that in most cases this is simply impossible). And it is how we can understand the predicament of contemporary education which has been caught up in the desires of an impatient society that wants the school to become 'perfect,' and that finds it increasingly difficult *not* to succumb to the logic of giving its 'customers' what they desire rather than asking the difficult but important question whether what students—or their parents—say that they desire is what, on reflection, they should actually be desiring or should want to desire.

The Urgency of the Democratic Work of Education

It is exactly here, however, that we find the work of education which, as I will make clear below, is not just the educational work of education, so to speak, but also its democratic work. The point is made rather well by Philippe Meirieu (2007) who argues that the wish to simply pursue one's desires is a normal phase of the child's development. Whether we call this phase 'initial narcissism' or 'infantile egoism' doesn't matter that much. The point is that children, caught up in their own desires and not yet able to name and identify them and make them a meaningful part of their encounter with the world, are tempted to spur into action—instant gratification—and do not yet understand that not everything they desire can be achieved or realised. The (slow) work of the educator—and hence the (slow) work of education—is to accompany children on this journey, encouraging them to go on the journey, and helping them to gain insight in their desires, to gain a perspective on their desires, to come into a relationship with their desires so as to find out which desires are going to help with living one's life well in the world with others, and which desires are going to hinder in this task (see Meirieu 2007). This is the kind of resistance that education needs to offer—hence Meirieu's claim, summarised in the title of his book, that education has a duty to resist (*Pédagogie: Le devoir de resister)*—so that we can come into a relationship with 'our' desires rather than that we remain entirely determined by our desires.

This is the challenge of trying to exist in the world in a 'grown-up' way (for this term see Biesta 2017, chapter 1) rather than in what we might term an 'infantile' way, being

mindful that this is not a matter of age because, as Meirieu puts it, the 'infantile' haunts us throughout our lives; the desire just to pursue our desires without asking difficult questions is never permanently resolved. There is always the temptation, Meirieu writes, to destroy the other and see ourselves, even for a short moment, as the sole ruler of the universe (see Meirieu 2007, p. 54). This is why Meirieu argues that it is really difficult to escape from our desires on our own. We rather need social configurations that help us—or where we help each other—to come into a relationship with our desires, to gain a perspective on our desires, to figure out which desires we should desire, and which desires we should leave behind.

When we put this next to Roberts' analysis of the impulse society, two rather shocking conclusions follow. The first is that the impulse society actually doesn't want us to question our desires; the impulse society therefore doesn't want us to grow up precisely because it makes so much money out of keeping us infantile. The second conclusion is that the impulse society has eroded the very institutions that used to be able to help us—or rather: where we could help each other—to rise 'above' our desires, to *have* desires rather than *be* (our) desires. It is here that democracy enters the discussion, because one could argue that the whole point of democracy—unlike populism—is precisely to ponder all the desires of individuals and groups in order then to find out which of those desires can be 'carried' by society as a whole and which of those desires cannot be carried, for example because they put pressure or run the risk of undermining the key democratic values of liberty and equality. Unlike populism, the very point of democracy is that you can*not* always get what you want (see Biesta 2014), which is not just the reason why democracy is difficult, but why it is becoming increasingly unpopular in an age in which we are being told again and again that there are no limits.

Can the School Still be School?

If the preceding reflections and observations make sense—and I believe they do—they begin to raise an important question for contemporary society, namely whether in such a society the school can still be school or, to put it more precisely, whether the school can still be 'schole,' the halfway house in between 'home' and 'the street.' Rather than thinking of such a view of the school as romantic or outdated, I have tried to suggest that we need such a space or place in order to give the new generation an opportunity to meet the world and themselves and, most importantly, to meet their desires vis-à-vis the world and themselves, and be given time to 'work through' what they meet there and begin to come into a relationship with their desires rather than be determined by them. This is the school as place and space but perhaps first and foremost the school as time—as the time we give to the new generation to try, to fail, to try again and fail better, with the words of Samuel Beckett.

What kind of society does such a school need? Obviously not an impulse society that just wants the school to 'perform and deliver' but rather a democratic society that understands that not everything that is desired or emerges as a desire can and should be pursued. Whether such a school, a school that comes out of the second history of the modern school, is still possible is therefore not just an educational matter but ultimately a test of the democratic quality of society itself. For this we need a school that understands that it stands in a double history where, on the one hand, it needs to serve society but where, on the other hand, it also needs to offer resistance and be obstinate, precisely in order to show

that not everything that society desires from it is desirable—for the school, but ultimately also for society itself. Ironically, then, offering such resistance, being obstinate in precisely this way, is perhaps the most important way in which the school can serve society if, that is, society becomes interested once more in its democratic and grown-up future.

Acknowledgements I would like to thank Christoph Teschers for alerting me to the brilliant question posed by Eckart Liebau, which forms the main title of this paper and also a major point of inspiration.

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