

Hollowing Out of the Public: Human Capital Logic and the Erosion of Collective Dimensions in Education

Keywords:

Human Capital Paradigm; De-Territorialisation; Collective Well-Being; Educational Outcomes; Publicness of Education

Research Objectives (48 words)

This study critiques the dominant human capital paradigm that aligns measurable individual outcomes with system performance. It examines how this orientation, misaligned with global mobility, hollows out the “public” character of education, proposing a reframing of the use of educational evidence toward collective well-being and shared social life.

Purpose of Study

While rooted in nineteenth-century nation-building and moral discipline, public education systems have increasingly focused on individuals and the development of human capital, a dominant paradigm since the latter half of the twentieth century and today. Within this paradigm, public education is compelled to mediate between three competing imperatives: democratic equality, economic efficiency, and social mobility, creating tensions that problematise its “public” character.

International large-scale assessments (ILSAs), such as PISA, intensify this tension. By measuring individual achievement and aggregating results into comparable indicators, they construct system performance as a function of individual attainment. This approach embeds a human capital logic in which aggregated competencies are assumed to drive societal productivity and cohesion. As a result, education is instrumentalised to serve societal and economic demands, and its communal and transformative potential is subsumed within a meritocratic discourse based on (externally defined) standardised performance.

Under conditions of globalisation, characterised by intensified connectivity and growing volatility, the link between individual achievement and collective/societal benefit is weakened. This instability is compounded by the fact that individuals are no longer bound to the societies in which their competencies are formed, particularly as policies driven by ILSAs have increasingly supplanted regionally defined competencies with standardised, decontextualised metrics. Consequently, the

assumption that individual success naturally translates into societal gain becomes untenable. Yet, policy and practice continue to operate within this paradigm, further individualising educational purposes and marginalising its civic and relational dimensions. This situation raises fundamental questions about the rationale of public education.

This study examines the limitations of this paradigm and explores the need to reshape the purposes of public education in a global age. It seeks to reconceptualise educational evidence beyond aggregating individual outcomes and to propose a framework oriented toward collective well-being and shared capacities for a “beloved community”.

Research Methods (Approaches)

This study adopts a conceptual and analytical approach combining two lines of inquiry.

First, it examines how educational outcomes are defined, measured, and attributed in policy discourses. It focuses on the individualisation of constructs such as achievement, resilience, and non-cognitive skills, analysing how these are operationalised as measurable competencies and how socially constituted conditions are reframed as individual attributes.

Second, it conceptualises educational evidence as a boundary-crossing medium through which evaluative logics travel across contexts. Instruments such as ILSAs are analysed as policy technologies that stabilise and circulate decontextualised representations of educational success, thereby enabling actors beyond the professional field of education to engage in policymaking and decision-making. The study examines how the complex purposes of public education are translated into simplified, human-capital-oriented indicators and how such representations may reshape the profession.

The study further employs an analytical framework on empowerment that distinguishes between individual and collective dimensions and between resource-oriented and relational forms of agency, to analyse how policy discourses privilege measurable individual outcomes while marginalising collective capabilities and relational dimensions.

Results and Discussion

The study shows that the dominant paradigm of educational evaluation is progressively hollowing out the “public” character of education by reducing it to the aggregation of individual competencies.

First, by constructing system performance as a function of individual attainment, current frameworks

assume that individual competencies generate collective benefit. This reflects a human capital logic tied to territorially bounded systems. Under global mobility, this logic becomes unstable as the link between where competencies are formed (or defined) and where their benefits are realised weakens. The aggregation of individual outcomes no longer sustains a shared social basis.

Second, this instability is reflected in socio-spatial transformations. In Japan and South Korea, intensified competition for human capital has coincided with rural depopulation and urban concentration. Education systems oriented toward individual optimisation risk eroding local communities and undermining regional sustainability.

Third, the emphasis on measurable outcomes redefines the purpose of education in individualised terms. Education is increasingly oriented toward enhancing individual market value, while its civic and relational functions are marginalised (or converted into a narrow set of skills). As individuals are positioned as units of skill formation and economic utility, professional judgment becomes constrained by externally defined indicators. Those who do not acquire valued competencies risk exclusion, potentially intensifying social fragmentation.

Taken together, these dynamics indicate that current evaluative frameworks actively erode the public dimensions of education and society. In response, this study calls for a shift from comparability to community, proposing to add a framework that foregrounds collective well-being and reorients evaluation toward sustaining inclusive, cohesive, and democratic forms of social life.