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Popular perceptions about the comparability of assessments in England. A tension between academia and the mainstream broadcast and print media?

Conference Paper Abstract

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Abstract

Comparability is the academic term used in education to describe studies which make comparisons about features of education, assessments, and education systems over time or between different jurisdictions (Elliott, 2011). An enormous amount of academic energy has been expended over the past quarter-century in developing methods and theories to explain and adequately deal with comparability of assessments (Newton et al., 2007).

Since the millennium there have been a number of broadcast programmes and newspaper articles which address the same issues of making comparisons between assessments from different eras (Rushton et al., 2011). In the same way that 'pop psychology' is an English term used to describe psychological concepts which attain popularity amongst the wider public, so 'pop comparability' can be used to describe the lay-person's experience of comparability at the hands of mass media communication. Examples of pop comparability include the television series *That'll Teach 'em* (Twenty Twenty Television) which ran for three series' between 2003 and 2006, and versions of which were shown in Holland, Germany, Belgium, France, Norway and Spain. Newspaper articles frequently feature social experiments wherein commentators or students (re-)sit examinations from the past, for example, Griffiths (2008); Naughton (2011).

Broadcast programmes and mainstream newspaper articles attract a much larger, and broader, audience to that of academic papers. For example, the National Readership Survey (NRS PADD, 2017) estimate that 66% of British adults aged 15+ consume quality daily news brands across print and online. It is likely that students', parents' and, to a certain extent, teachers' opinions about assessments are influenced by these offerings within mainstream media. These people are key stakeholders in the educational assessment world. Since Rushton et al. (2011) was published a number of further popular experiments have been aired in the media, and the issue of whether these experiments add anything to popular understanding of comparability over time is in urgent need of review. In particular, it is necessary to consider the possibility that this type of study promulgates a damaging message amongst the general population which could unfairly negatively influence public opinion of awarding organisations and of regulatory authorities in the field.

This presentation describes a selection of the recently broadcasted and printed material about the comparability of assessments in England. The social experiments which underlie the messages presented to the audience have been analysed in detail, and the extent to which they

are based upon sound research principles has been examined. In some cases there are evident advantages of the social experiments, in terms of the nature of the research which can be carried out but, in many, there are considerable limitations arising from the assumptions which have been made. Both the advantages and the limitations of social experiments will be discussed in the light of how their presentation can influence key stakeholders.

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