Author accepted manuscript

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Title

Commodifying diversity: Education and governance in the era of neoliberalism

Publication

Human Affairs, 2012

Volume and Issue

22 (2)

Page Number

122-130

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Short bio

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Abstract

In this paper I explore the pedagogical and political shift marked by the meaning and practice of diversity offered through New Labour education policy texts, specifically, the policy and practice of personalized learning (or personalization). The aim of this paper is to map the ways in which diversity relays and mobilizes a set of neoliberal positions and relationships in the field of education and seeks to govern education institutions and education users through politically circulating norms and values. These norms and values, I want to argue, echo and redeem the kinds of frameworks, applications and rationalities typically aligned with modes of neoliberal or advanced liberal governance, e.g. marketization, monetarization, atomization and deregulation. I conclude the paper by considering how diversity in education renders problematic conventional antinomies of the citizen and consumer, public and private, state and civil society, etc., and forces us to confront the rhizomatic character of contemporary governance and education in the era of neoliberalism.

Keywords

neoliberalism, diversity, consumerism, personalized learning, pedagogy

Introduction

In this paper I discuss the role of diversity in British education and trace its emergence to the global diaspora of neoliberal discourses and practices. The context for this paper concerns specifically the policy of personalized learning or personalization which was developed during the years 1997 to 2009 when the New Labour government came to power in Britain. This particular policy idea constituted key elements of the broader education reform sought by the New Labour government at the time, namely the revision of education around complimentary and intersecting notions of diversity, choice and consumer voice. Introduced in 2004, the concept of personalized learning was regarded by critical theorists and sociologists of education as a successor to the "New Public Management" ethos favoured by neo-conservative governments during the 1980s and 90s (a historical juncture I will return to later), and was branded the latest phase in the seizure of public education by trends of marketization. This is because the policy of personalized learning echoed and redeemed a set of philosophies, strategies and practices which many regarded as preponderantly neoliberal in character, i.e. it necessitated the transmission, dissemination, inculcation and legitimation of contemporary notions of educational choice, flexibility, parental control and school independence. Personalized learning in effect constituted and relayed key components of New Labour's overall pedagogical and political programme during their terms in office. It reflected a governmental rationale or strategy to facilitate a vision of a centre-left variant of neoliberal reform, one that was commensurate with aligning educational processes with market rationality and market conceptions of

"modernization" and "progress". In this way, I want to highlight the significance of the idea of diversity as elements in the crystallization of a neoliberal political consensus and address its importance as a discursive tool exercised as part of the New Labour government attempt to reorganize around education around neoliberal pedagogies, subjectivities and frameworks.

At this point I want to stress the specificity attached to this notion of diversity in the context of New Labour education. On one level, it connects with notions of social inclusion and social cohesion, of multiculturalism and ethnic or racial difference. The need to reorganise education services so that they are responsive to the needs, interests and aspirations of a socially diverse public is ostensibly at the heart of the policy of diversity. Since early 2000, however, many analysts, observers, intellectuals and opinion-makers in Britain have challenged the efficacy of multiculturalism as a political and cultural project,

e.g. the idea that people of different cultural and religious backgrounds can pursue their own group-based attachments in private or in public while at the same time adopting and assimilating themselves into a broader framework consisting of national-based allegiances and identifications. Despite the consternation of some, there are those who continue to refine the language of multiculturalism (Modood 2010) with a view to strengthening its character and endurance as a viable political project in the promotion of social and cultural justice. There is evidence to suggest, however, that difference becomes flattened under the figurations and relations generated through neoliberal framings of active citizenship (Johansson and Hvinden 2005), the dominant model of citizenship in Britain today and many other democratic-capitalist societies. In opposition to a socio-liberal or republican variant of active citizenship, a neoliberal model of active citizenship operates through reorganizing the relations between society and the state so that citizens come to view themselves and others as bearers of consumer rights and responsibilities, and more importantly, come to interact with public services as providers of consumer needs and interests. Within such a state-society "assemblage", to use Deleuzian terminology, difference is abstracted or reified into an object of consumption and is coded and translated through the same logic which characterizes consumable goods on the market place (or so the argument goes). It is for this reason that this paper seeks to address how the notion of diversity supports and compliments such an assemblage in the realm of education.

Methodology

Similar to a Foucauldian governmentality approach, this paper seeks to better understand and conceptualise the efforts of governments to produce governable subjects; in this case, how children are positioned through the frameworks, logic, language and applications pertaining to the exercise of personalized learning. This paper is concerned also with how diversity serves to structure schools as autonomous entities, insignias of choice, marketable goods, enterprising and professional institutions, and diverse and competitive providers of unique and tailored services. In this critical vein, I wish to demonstrate how diversity operates, on the one hand, at the macro level through facilitating and supporting a field of educational choice and on the other hand at the micro level through interpellating (or hailing) children as autonomous and self regulating subjects. This means paying attention to the various apparatuses, techniques and technologies through which governments aim to

control, normalize and shape peoples conduct. As Nikolas Rose (1999) suggests, political authorities under advanced liberal rule do not seek to govern through "society", but through connecting individuals to a plethora of micro structures that seek to integrate subjects into a moral nexus of identifications and allegiances. Borrowing from these insights, this paper sets out to explain how certain identifications and allegiances become inflected and mediated in the realm of education and, in particular, become subsumed within consumer-based notions of agency, an ethics of self-care and self-responsibility, and a battery of market-led rationalities and procedures.

At the same time, it is important to emphasize that frameworks and applications of governance do not always constitute subjects in the way that governments would presuppose, and it is critical to stress the open-ended character of policy strategies and thus the incomplete, unsettled and unfinished character of welfare subjects and the structure of the welfare state itself. From this perspective, public policy can be thought to constitute dynamic, productive spaces in which governments formulate, revise and repeal policy suggestions on the basis of implicit and explicit value systems, rationalities and ideological dilemmas. Critical discourse analysis for example reminds us that the truth value of a proposition is entirely a matter of its social function, a reflex of the power interests it seeks to promote, and as such public policy formulations can be interpreted as engaged, pragmatic attempts to constitute rather than reflect reality. This forces us to consider how the articulation and mobilisation of diversity functions, pedagogically, politically and culturally, to produce a field of education in which market trends are not simply maintained but are made to appear desirable; useful, even. Taking the role of diversity—in particular, personalized learning—in education as its focal point, this paper demonstrates what a critical policy perspective might offer as a conceptual and analytical tool for better understanding the politics of policy making under neoliberalism and the different kinds of institutional orders and subject positions it aims to make available in the realm of welfare. While alluding to some of the pedagogical implications suggestive of the policy of personalized learning, this paper is concerned mainly with mapping elements of the argumentation, rhetoric and evaluation through which personalized learning (and diversity more generally) has acquired political force, as well as meaning and representation in education policy texts. To this end, this paper sets out to mobilize a critical, political reading of personalized learning—as against a pedagogical or psychological one, for example—in order to demonstrate its indissociable links with the broader cultural-intellectual shift that epitomizes neoliberal education.

Education and governance

Since the neoliberal revolution in education in the 1980s, successive British governments have wasted little time in encasing education institutions in market values and practices, culminating in the creation of what today can be described as a market-led, consumer-driven education system. From primary and secondary schools offering education to children aged 5- to 16-year-olds to further and higher education institutions providing postcompulsory education to young and adult learners, there is not a school, college or university in Britain which has managed to escape the twin demands of pro-market governments and the Post- Fordist economy. Forced to adopt frameworks, discourses and

strategies based on efficiency, competition, innovation and flexibility, education institutions have become subsumed within the logic and vocabulary of business and entrepreneurial literacies and shackled to managerial-bureaucratic practices focused on making education institutions intelligible to the corporate world and malleable to the task of delivering consumer-oriented services. Similar trends in governing can be traced to countries within and across Europe, South America, Australasia and even South-East Asia, with evidence to suggest that, despite the financial meltdown in 2008 and some commentators pronouncing the end of neoliberalism as a globally dominant framework, the spectre of neoliberalism continues to haunt and colonize the imaginary guiding government attempts to "modernize" and reform welfare services.

The electoral victory of the Conservative government on 6 May 2010 in Britain, together with the support of the Liberal Democrats (conjoining to make the Conservative-Liberal or Coalition government), has resulted in an unprecedented acceleration of these trends in governing. Framed within the language of efficiency, partnership and value for money, the Coalition government has mobilised a number of key policy strategies in a bid to further entrench education policy and practice in the logic, language and ontology of business and managerial practices. Specifically, one of the ways in which British governments have attempted to facilitate the unfettered operation of markets in education over the last decade has been through the introduction of diversity. But here the term diversity registers a departure from traditional commitments to the social-democratic welfare state with its attendant language of fairness and equality. Forcing a view of state-funded education as out- dated, standardized, demoralizing and encumbered by the monopoly of local government, democracy has come to be presented as an "unaffordable" (Harvey 2005, 66). This is because it is presented as incompatible with the expectations, desires and aspirations of a burgeoning "consumer culture". Hence, centre-left and far right governments since the 1980s have appealed to the idea of a minimalist state coupled with a deregulated and market-driven welfare system structured through diverse forms of provision. In the estimation of pro-market governments, this is the best way to support and facilitate fairer and equitable models of service delivery and to meet the demands of an increasingly porous and culturally mixed society. The importation and circulation of concepts of choice and consumer voice have been inscribed into the political rhetoric of governments accordingly. In what follows I want to unravel some of this rhetoric, especially as it relates to New Labour education policy. To situate the analysis in its proper context I will offer a brief overview of the development of British education policy during the 20th century before moving onto an analysis of its more recent incarnations.

Diversity in British education

Following the Second World War the British government embarked on an ambitious project of "social reconstruction" to develop a system of free and universal welfare predicated on social-democratic principles of equality and fairness. In education, for example, the government worked towards overturning some of the class bias underpinning the education settlements of the 19th and early 20th century, namely the division between public elementary schooling on the one hand and secondary or higher grade schooling on the other. Up until the post-war period, public elementary schooling was made available

primarily to children from lower socio-economic backgrounds (namely, the "working classes") and was structured through a curriculum focus on the three Rs: reading, writing and arithmetic. In contrast, admission to secondary or higher grade schooling was chiefly determined by an oral examination and therefore was characterised as a selective and socially exclusive form of education. Moreover, the curriculum focus guiding secondary schools extended beyond the three Rs to include languages, the sciences and the arts. In this way, the expansion of elementary and secondary schools during the 19th century served distinct pedagogical and cultural functions and had the effect of creating a two-tier system of education, thus reinforcing and reproducing the relations and attitudes which underpinned the social class structure of English society (Ball 2008).

As part of the post-war effort to reconstruct education in the image of a fairer and more just society, the government implemented the 1944 Education Act. This act served to abolish the existing differentiation between elementary and secondary schooling and therefore to eradicate the class-bias and elitism engendered through those educational forms. Instead, a new system of education was proposed in which education provision would be organised and made available in three stages: primary, secondary and further. Under this new education settlement, all state-maintained schools would be free and available at the point of delivery (with the exception of direct grant grammar schools). Despite these changes to the education system, it quickly became obvious that the post-war British education system would come to symbolize the continuation of the 19th century class-based system of education (Jones 2003). Following the Second World War, state-maintained secondary schools were organised around three categories of schooling: secondary modern, technical and grammar (what came to known as the tripartite system of British education). Secondary moderns continued the pedagogical and cultural mission of educating the majority (namely, the "working classes"); technical schools made available the kinds of education provision suited to those with a technical or scientific aptitude; and grammar schools existed as the preserve of the most able, with admittance determined by examination, a selective admittance process commonly referred to as the "11 Plus".

Following the failure of the "comprehensive ideal" in the 1960s—a political project envisioned by left wing Labour governments to reorganise education on the basis of progressive approaches to teaching and learning—the 1980s ushered in a new era of education reform. During the 1980s the then Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher altered dramatically the landscape of education through implementing the 1980 and 1986 Education Acts, and later the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA). The 1988 Education Reform Act (DES 1988), in particular, signaled a decisive break from post-war education policy in that it systematically dismantled the education settlement which had been developed between 1944 and 1979. With its appeal to the efficiency of markets, the liberty of individuals and the non-interventionist state, the Conservative governments of the 1980s and early 90s worked tirelessly to reform education in the image of neoliberal conceptions of progress and modernization. To correspond with the pro-market anti-state position of the 1980s Conservative government, schools were encouraged to adopt a managerial-professional approach to service delivery within a context of devolved management. This included raising money from industry and charity. A consequence of this has been the expansion of the role of "public accountability" to encompass political, business and other interest groups, with schools forced to be attentive to market

conceptions of supply and demand and operate under new forms of market and professional measures of accountability.

If we look at some key government policy texts from 1997 to 2007 (DfEE 2001; DfES 2004; DfES 2005; DfES 2006), the seduction and reproduction of neo-conservative policy ideas is obvious. These ideas were not simply maintained by the New Labour government but renewed and revised to facilitate a vision of a centre-left or "Third Way" variant of neoliberal reform, reflected most consistently through the idea of personalized learning. In 2006, the then UK Schools Standards Minister, David Miliband (2006, 23), outlined the educational and moral purpose underpinning personalized learning: we need to do more than engage and empower pupils and parents in the selection of a school: their engagement has to be effective in the day-by-day processes of education. It should be at the heart of the way schools create partnerships with professional teachers and support staff to deliver tailor-made services. In other words, we need to embrace individual empowerment within as well as between schools. This leads straight to the promise of personalized learning. It means building the organisation of schooling around the needs, interests and aptitudes of individual pupils.

Contributing to the debate on personalized learning at the time were policy-think tanks, quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations (Quangos) and research institutes, e.g. DEMOS and OECD. Charles Leadbeater, a Senior Research Associate with DEMOS, promoted the idea that personalized learning could be utilized as a mechanism for displacing producer paternalism through empowering users of education services to "create a learning programme more suited to their goals […] In theory at least, this means that resources can be allocated to reflect consumer demand rather than reflecting what producers decide should be made" (Leadbeater 2006, 103). Leadbeater (2004, 68) further argued:

Young people are far more avid and aware consumers than they used to be. This culture is bound to have an effect on how they view education. Many secondary school age children now have mobile phones for which they can get 24/7 telephone support, different price plans, equipment and service packages. They are used to a world in which they can search for, download and share digital music on the internet. Children have quite different kinds of aptitude and intelligence, which need to be developed in quite different ways.

In a similar vein, Christine Gilbert, then Chief Inspector of Schools, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), argued in a report commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills that "Schools also need to ensure that young people develop the skills and attitudes that employers value, many of which are becoming even greater priorities in knowledge-based economies". These skills include: "taking responsibility for, and being able to manage, one's own learning and developing the habits of effective learning…being resilient in the face of difficulties…[and] being creative, inventive, enterprising and entrepreneurial" (p. 10). Here, personalized learning is promoted on the basis that it is responsive to the changing demands and dynamics of the global economy and the necessities attached to producing subjects who fit with and compliment these arrangements in the labour market. In fact, these trends in education reform signal a broader transition from the old Keynesian Welfare State (KWS) to a Schumpeterian Workfare State (SWS), characterised by Jessop (1993) as tendencies relating to the shift in Western economies from Fordist to post-Fordist or neoliberal regimes of accumulation. Ethnographic studies of education have demonstrated

the effects of these changes on classroom practices, for example (see Wilkins 2012a, 2012b). Here, pupils can be observed adopting and resisting dominant learning orientations that privilege attitudes of independence, oneupmanship, entrepreneurialism and perseverance. To ensure compliance, it is typically those pupils who successfully inhabit and perform the neoliberal subject— namely, someone who militates against complacency, reveres competiveness, tolerates precarity and evinces flexibility—who are rewarded in these contexts.

As the above quotations indicate, a key component of personalized learning was a strict focus on generating choice and voice in learning. A central claim of these writers is that education needs to support work-based and skills-focused learning in order to cultivate the necessary personal attributes and knowledges to enable children to work later in life. In this framing, personalized learning is promoted and legitimated on the basis that it structures the organisation of schooling and learning in a way that makes it responsive to the demands for a more customized education, ostensibly precipitated by a burgeoning consumer culture. In this vision of education, personalized learning serves to build the character of schooling around the needs, interests and aspirations of individual pupils, with pupils incited to behave and look upon themselves as "educational shoppers in the market place…and creators of their own educational experience" (Miliband 2006, 29-30). What is being echoed here is something I touched on at the beginning of the paper, which is that difference becomes flattened as a result of neoliberalism with its insistence that welfare providers can and should improve their services through appealing to citizens as consumers with values and tastes which can be surveyed and provided for with rational detachment. Consistent with the character of early Anglophone liberalism (of the transcendental subject posited by Kant and the theory of self-originating sources of valid claims proposed by Rawls) what personalized learning does is champion the moral and ontological primacy of the subject and its supposed "rational centre", namely the idea that children and young people share the ability (as consumers) to calibrate their behaviour on the basis of a set of narrow calculating, utilitarian norms which they all possess. The child in effect is positioned as a self-generating and self-actualizing agent, subject to the proper conditions. In other ways, it promotes the idea that children's educational abilities are somehow genetically hard-wired or psychologized, that they have personal learning styles, personal competencies and skills, and personal curricular choices. Learning in effect is reduced to a commodity and the learner—constructed as a rational utility maximizer, someone who starts from a position of complete rational knowledge about his or her own wants and needs—is reduced to a consumer in a marketplace.

Conclusion

To insist that children are self-determining, self-authoring agents has enormous benefits for a consumer- and market-oriented conception of education. First, it reinforces the neoliberal drive towards atomistic individualization and attributes learning orientations to a private psychological propensity or "attitude" that is particular to each individual. As a result of this, education institutions are encouraged to respond through adjusting their provision on the basis of custom-made, tailored, consumer-focused services to reflect the idea that preferences reflect innate personal wants and needs. Subsequently, a field of educational

choice and consumer voice is legitimated, both pedagogically and politically. Diversity in education can thus be understood to extending the reach and scope of market- based mechanisms of choice and consumer voice, as well as induce children and parents as productive sites for the mobilization of neoliberal governance. In other words, through their compliance, parents, teachers and children become modalities for the exercise of neoliberal rule, the vehicles for the articulation and strengthening of neoliberal frameworks, ethics and subjectivities. Second, the emphasis on persons as self-contained entities, free and autonomous, becomes strictly commensurate with its own de-politicization. This means that advocates of personalized learning can bypass accusations concerning the ideological content of their arguments and frame them instead in pragmatic terms.

These observations also provide evidence for disputing the ostensible anti-state position which underpins much of neoliberal policy rhetoric, e.g. the idea that neoliberalism functions in the absence of state power and a regulated welfare state. In fact, neoliberalism and state power go hand-in-hand. We might consider, for example, how the importation of tasks, responsibilities and power to schools and parents under neoliberal governance necessitates the removal of certain forms of external control and authority at the very same time that it involves the spread of new forms of surveillance, regulation and intervention, forms which are typically enacted by voluntary and private organizations funded directly by the government. Take auditing, for example. Auditing refers to the practice of calculating the value and efficiency of an organization according to its output, and for a long time was conventionally associated with profit-making organizations. Now, public services are subject to the same rules and regulations. In schools, pedagogic decisions in the classroom are often manipulated by a remote auditor who evaluates the efficiency and flexibility of the school, usually in terms of economical utility and value for money. Similarly, in higher education institutions, lecturers must contend with the accountability measures being forced through by a scaled-back government which wishes to see less bureaucracy, but who are in fact producing more bureaucracy through demanding audits of teaching hours, transparency levels of work practices, peer teaching evaluation, teaching quality and research audits. In schools and colleges, this opens up spaces for stakeholder modes of governance, which refers to the inclusion of business, political and other interest groups to the running of schools. Additionally, it gives further weight and authority to the increasingly pervasive role of “experts” as arbiters of professionalism and efficiency in the realm of welfare.

This suggests that diversity contributes to generating a field of relationships in which state power becomes greater even as it ostensibly appears to be rolled back. This is what Clarke and Newman (1997) refer to as the “managerial state”: a context of welfare governance in which processes of centralization and de-centralization combine with the reduction of central state power coupled with the expansion of non-state actors. In other words, what we are witnessing with the arrival of neoliberal governance is not so much the rolling back of the state (the state funds or gives generous tax breaks to non-state actors, namely voluntary, charity and private organizations, to intervene, monitor and sanction the governing of civil society, for example); rather, what we are witnessing is the rolling out of state power through non-state actors and the outsourcing of state responsibility and power to individuals and welfare institutions.

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