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## NEGOTIATING NEOLIBERAL EDUCATION: A POSITIONAL ISSUE AND AN OPPOSITIONAL STANCE

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### INTRODUCTION

The significant and rapid changes in policies that have occurred since the financial crisis in 2007/8 have, perhaps irrevocably, altered the educational landscape in the UK, and elsewhere. In what we term the *reconstituted neo-liberal period*, we have seen clear attempts to restore and enhance prior marketisation and privatisation strategies into an intelligible whole. This has occurred through a strategic reorganisation that has ultimately resulted in further systemic alignment to the principles and values underpinning neo liberalism.

Whilst the oversimplified links between education and the economy have been consistently utilised to support an increasingly financialised educational discourse and related policy developments, the financial crisis might equally have led us toward a more critical examination of the interrelationships between the two. Educational investment on any scale would have had little impact on the ability to foresee or halt the ensuing crisis. Moreover, the reasons for the crisis and the behaviours and the practices of individuals, companies and markets responsible, might also have warranted a thorough re-examination of the core purpose of education and the principles and social, moral and ethical values that should be central to it. Conversely however, the financial crisis led to a series of ‘austerity’ policies that ultimately reinforce and ‘enshrine’ neoliberal values at the heart of education.

This book seeks to explore the origins, realities and consequences of recent neoliberal policy developments, and to also highlight the refraction and reinterpretation that has, or may happen in different contexts and at various levels, thereby providing insights into viable alternatives.

### THE PRINCIPLES AND FEATURES OF NEOLIBERAL EDUCATIONAL REFORM

The key principles of neoliberal reforms are clearly visible in recent UK policy developments. They differ from the preceding developments however, in that rather than being focussed on the development of quasi markets, peripheral service provision and in applying market principles to reform aspects of the existing state system (See for example, Ball 2007), they are instead intended to transform core educational provision, enabling private sector interests to overtly run and manage

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institutions and core aspects of provision. Whilst we cannot undertake a detailed analysis of all recent developments, it is worth briefly considering some of the key policies that have emerged. These clearly illustrate how the central tenets of neo liberalism are this time positioned as central, systemic organising principles.

#### *Academies and Free Schools*

In the schools sector, the central tenets of neo liberalism are no more evident than in the development of the Free Schools and Academies Programmes. These see: *decentralisation and a move away from local authority control; the development of an emphatic discourse of privatisation and marketisation (habituation); and the conversion of public services to private.* Despite lacking both widespread sectoral support and a distinct lack of clear supporting evidence, the Free Schools and Academies Programmes have continued apace. Unfortunately however, we have already seen poorly performing academies with clear question marks over their claimed potential to raise attainment. As can be seen from similar developments elsewhere, there is little evidence to substantiate claims for improved standards (Böhlmark & Lindahl 2008), with emerging evidence of impending crises (Green et al. 2016), impropriety by vested interests, surreptitious profit making, and even potentially fraudulent activity (See also Burns 2016 & Philips in this collection).

Whilst we are currently witnessing a hiatus in terms of the conversion of all schools, there is a commitment from the current Government that this will occur in due course.

Interestingly, whilst it was academisation was deemed necessary in order to ‘raise standards’ and to provide alternative funding and organisational models following the financial crisis, the conversion of tax payer funded state schools requires specialist (often private) educational expertise and advice. This incurs huge, often unnoticed, costs to tax payer, belying the austerity mantra used to justify such policies. Greater freedom over their curriculum and the autonomy granted to schools could have been achieved through amendments to existing legislation, hence reducing costs significantly. So it is clear that the real driver was the transfer of tax payer funded state schools into the hands of private entities

#### *Grammar Schools*

At the time of writing, the British Prime Minister, Theresa May, has recently announced an end to the ban on the formation of new grammar schools – previously state secondary schools that ‘select’ pupils by means of examination at the age of 11. Opponents of grammar schools suggest this marks a return to a selective system that reinforces class divisions, social privilege and disadvantage. Additionally, as new academies remain state funded but privately run enterprises, it is quite conceivable that we will shortly see privately run selective schools, choosing ‘better’ students, resulting in higher results and rankings than **there** non-selective state counterparts, thereby justifying further calls for privatisation.

*HE Student Fees*

The significant rise in student fees (up to £9000 per year) in Higher Education (HE) in the UK has arguably resulted in fundamental shifts in perceptions of what HE is for, and the types of practices that should occur, within it. It is clear that this significant and fundamental change has re-positioned students as ‘customers’ or ‘consumers’, and Universities as producers and service providers in a more fiercely financialised and marketised landscape. Notions of democracy and participation have been clearly redefined in terms of consumer choice, with the propagation of the view that students (and their parents) are knowledgeable, fully and equally informed consumers. It is assumed that students and parents are equally capable of individual and economically rational decisions, reflecting the ‘logic’ and ‘rules’ of the reformulated HE educational marketplace. Yet, this has occurred with scant debate about potential increase in class or cultural differences and inequalities of access, supply and consumption of education. Little consideration has been given to who the real winners and losers may be in a system increasingly geared toward servicing the economy, with future employees (students) accruing significant debts to provide industry with more highly skilled workforce.

As a result of these consumerist values, we are also witnessing the increased ‘technicist objectification of teachers, students, curricula, and so forth. Highly qualified professional educators are increasingly being viewed as ‘factors of production’, resulting in de-professionalisation and less autonomy as they become cajoled into servicing and delivering learning to suit the newly imposed conditions. Since this development, we have also seen the growth of decontextualized and proxy measures to assess ‘teaching excellence’ and ‘value for money’, such as those found in the National Student Survey (NSS). The survey is made up of just 22 questions requiring attitudinal responses from students based on somewhat dubious criteria for measuring the effectiveness of teaching and ‘innovative’ pedagogy. As a result, many Universities have not only spent significant time and additional resources on specialist departments, concomitant processes and extensive marketing in order to achieve higher rankings, often without critically questioning the real purpose and wider values in education that may be at stake. One must question whether such processes are conversely actually undermining the type(s), and quality, of pedagogy, professional autonomy and also the ability to innovate. The significant time and energy spent servicing such measures may lead to practices and processes that actually result in dehumanisation, commodification, institutionalisation, and ultimately, ‘counter-productivity’ (Illich 1971; 1971a; 1973), which are clearly counter to proclaimed intentions. The extent to which this may happen however, remains to be seen, although tangible examples are already arising.

However, whilst such developments and questions need greater empirical research and analysis, explicit funding for such critical research appears to have been increasingly sacrificed in the name of austerity, in favour of evaluations of ‘what works’ within the existing system. What works however, is also rooted firmly within new financially motivated reinterpretations of educational ‘impact’.

The intensified financialisation of Higher Education, and the orientation toward a marketised system, also places students in a unique and compromising position. For students constantly bombarded with messages that a University education is essential, and with Universities becoming ever more effective in marketing to students due to fear of loss of income and profits, it may seem that there is no alternative but to go into extensive debt fund their Higher Education. Clearly positioned as customers, it may be that they will accept the somewhat dubious measures of satisfaction and quality and, in effect, become inadvertent gate keepers of the new model. However, as Edmond (in this collection) suggests, we need to consider, and empirically investigate, what it actually means to be a student in the neoliberal University, and what shifts in student practice are occurring as a result. Whilst it might seem logical that recent history has been constitutive of the 'neoliberal student', resulting in entrenched inequalities that markets dependent on ownership of economic capitals require, the reality is far more complex. As Edmond argues, whilst there have been clear changes in student practices toward the narrative presentation of a more 'entrepreneurial self', there is also a need to *re-conceptualise* students as more than 'neoliberal entrepreneurial subjects'. This can help us make sense of the '*refraction*' (Rudd & Goodson 2016; 2012; Goodson & Rudd 2016) of policy that can and does occur, and exemplify the varied forms of reinterpretation and resistance that arise.

At the time of writing, significant and interrelated pieces of legislation outlining Government plans for the future of HE in England and Wales are being hurriedly passed through policy making mechanisms. The Government's HE Bill and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), are together likely to transform the character of HE in England and Wales, recasting again what will be practiced.

#### *The HE White Paper*

The Higher Education and Research Bill (DBIS 2016), Government's position on reforming the HE sector. The Bill has the central tenets of neoliberalism at its heart. It will make it easier and quicker for 'innovative and specialist providers' to set up, award degrees and secure University status to compete alongside existing institutions. It will provide students (consumers) with more information by placing a duty on institutions to publish application, offer, acceptance and progression rates amongst different groups in order to promote greater transparency. And it will also create a single regulator, the Office for Students (OfS), and give them power to operate a new Teaching Excellence Framework.

From a more critical perspective, it may be viewed as: *placing performativity and standardisation measurements at the heart of its mission; bringing about the establishment of a new agency(s) for contracting out services and full provision to private suppliers; threatening the job and employment security of public University employees; increases the objectification of academic labour and indicating increases and shifts in a particular value form of labour; and increasing administration costs associated with new performativity metrics and compliance.*

Rather than reforms leading to better standards and system diversity, we suggest that we are equally as likely to witness a significant degree of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), especially amongst the group of institutions lacking the capitals required to place them in an elite position within the HE landscape. To some degree, this may occur as a result of the ‘rules of efficiency’ that might ordinarily regulate a marketplace and condition practice within it. Yet it may also arise be likely due to the new institutional constraints and measures of performativity imposed by neo liberal state regulations and the plethora of organisations set up and empowered to administer and police the new regulatory ‘technologies’. Moreover, in a rapidly changing landscape characterised by new constraints and uncertainty, many Universities faced with similar environmental circumstances are likely to reproduce the conditions for practice implied within the policy discourse in order to establish a sense of rationality. As a result, we are just as likely to see greater homogeneity and conservatism rather than a more heterogeneous and evolving landscape, at least in the short to mid-term. This may be most likely amongst the ‘rank and file’ institutions seeking system legitimacy and responding and reacting to externally imposed coercive pressures and the normative pressures within the field and profession, resulting in a tendency to mimic and imitate other institutions, or listen to the advice of ‘experts’ within the field. The extent of isomorphic responses in the field is likely to be dependent on a range of variables and issues, such as: institutional interdependence; levels of uncertainty; ambiguity over goals and purpose; the efficiency and acceptance of imposed regulatory frameworks and monitoring mechanisms; and so forth. However, the ensuing isomorphism and somewhat unexpected homogeneity, may also provide the ammunition for advocates of private enterprise to illustrate the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of existing ‘public’ institutions. In other words, those institutions offering the most compliant and faithful responses to the externally imposed principals of neo liberalism, may conversely be those most at risk in the new environmental conditions.

#### *Teaching ‘Excellence’ Framework*

One aspect of the HE Bill worthy of further consideration is the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), due to its potential to bring about significant changes in relationships, practice and pedagogy. It is argued the TEF will raise standards so that students and employers get the skills they need. It is also argued that it will place reputational and financial incentives to drive up the standard of teaching in all universities, placing clear information regarding quality and outcomes, including levels of employability, in the hands of students.

All of which brings with it a clear set of standardised and rigid metrics for instruction and performance, which will likely be in related forms of assessment. It also suggests an increase in judgement of performances according to consumer ‘values’ and proxy measures, with the likelihood of inequalities and degradation in the working conditions of staff. This in turn suggests a loss of critical mission of professionalism and professional autonomy in favour of practical and technical

training for largely assumed economic interests with criteria for reaching 'standards' increasingly focussed on student employability. The TEF, whilst externally imposed without sectoral and professional support, will no doubt result in a swathe of training programmes, committees, working groups, monitoring processes and functions, as institutions seek to maximise potential economic gains. However, ultimately resource will shift away from research and teaching in order to fund the growth of new managerial and administrative classes positions deemed necessary to service framework requirements. Of course, as with any market or performance table, there will be winners and losers. As the White Paper clearly states, it is seeking to bring in new providers into the marketplace and it is likely that the TEF will be used as a tool for implying poor(er) performance, justifying the business acquisition of HE and the creation of new markets for consolidating the processes of privatisation and accumulation.

What is often left out of wider debates about the TEF is that it is voluntary. Universities will enter into the TEF because theoretically, good performance ratings will allow them to charge fees higher than the current cap of £9000. This means Universities will be willingly accepting the new externally imposed conditions as a result of a perceived financial 'necessity' or desire. It also means that students will be asked to rate their 'satisfaction' - a key aspect of which will no doubt relate to perceived value for money - in order to enable their institutions to charge the next cohort of students even higher fees, if the response is favourable. However, they may also be required to reduce fees if performance is deemed unsatisfactory. In other words, (most) Universities have accepted the neo-liberal tenets and have internalised these at the very core, meaning that the critical mission underpinning Higher Education may have irrevocably changed, as demonstrated by their willingness to gamble on a voluntary process that sits uncomfortably and counter to the professional beliefs of huge swathes of professional educators.

To push through such radical policies, as those outlined above, required a concomitant manufacturing of consent based around the seemingly perpetual 'crisis' in education, leaving many viable alternative unexplored. Whether this is quite the level of shock doctrine Klein (2008) and others (cf. Mirowski 2014) suggest are central to unpopular neoliberal reform, is open to debate. The growth of numerous key performance indicators at the institutional, local, national and international levels that have arisen due to infection from global education reform movement (GERM) and their associated characteristics (Sahlberg 2012), result in 'paradoxes of improvement' (Sahlberg 2011). In turn, the tendency toward uniformity in education also ensures we are seldom far from the next manufactured crisis, as there are a plethora of potential comparisons that can be drawn and taken to imply success and failure.

However, one of the 'elephants in the room' is that after almost three decades of educational 'crises', subsequent neo liberal reforms, a huge growth in metrics and measurements, performance tables, monitoring agencies, managerialist policies, private involvement, and so forth, there is little evidence to suggest that educational standards have actually improved, even utilising the limited measures

imposed on the system. Pring *et al.* (2016) suggest that despite the recent period of intense policy developments purportedly aimed at driving up standards in the schools sector, there is little evidence that English pupils are performing better in international comparisons. Moreover, on the basis of evidence from practitioners, they conclude that education has suffered from far too many policies, which often short term and partisan in nature, whilst professional opinion and serious research has been brushed aside in favour of a measurable, yet flawed, outcomes and simplistic Ofsted judgements. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest we are seeing questionable outcomes, de-professionalisation amongst the workforce (Beckman & Cooper 2004), low morale, the devaluing of teaching as desirable profession, and teacher recruitment and retention crises (National Audit Office 2016) that are likely to bring greater challenges still.

Now similar developments are being introduced into Higher Education to raise standards, with the omission of any acknowledgement of how highly regarded the UK HE sector is, being recently ranked 4<sup>th</sup> out of 50 overall in the 2016 Universitas 21 annual ranking of national systems.

However, the intensified financialisation, competition and performativity is significant and is likely to result in ‘misrecognition’ (Bourdieu 1980; 2000), whereby social processes reflect taken for granted assumptions implied by the neoliberal model, resulting in new forms of knowledge and capital unwittingly normalised by the practice of social actors. This in turn, reproduces and reinforces the particular ideological world view and ultimately provides it with its legitimacy.

Whilst on the one hand this may be seen to imply a deterministic inevitability, it also highlights how important it is for research and researchers to focus upon individual and collective interpretation, mediation, challenge and resistance. Moreover, it conversely also demonstrates the active agency and power individuals and collectives hold and which they may bring to bear, offering hope for reconceptualization and for coming to know and to ‘recognise again’ (Bourdieu 1989) alternative visions and possibilities.

#### THE SIX ‘R’s’ OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

The five R’s of educational research (Goodson 2015) have been proposed as a set of ideas to guide future educational research, and also as a partial antidote to the dubious and damaging educational rhetoric associated with the promotion and normalisation of the neoliberal order. *Remembering*, *regression*, *reconceptualisation*, *refraction*, and *renewal* (briefly outlined below), all provide a set of conceptual lenses that allow us to draw out points of reinterpretation and *resistance* (the sixth ‘R’) across varied cases, contexts and writings. Throughout this volume, the authors consider how the seemingly unrepentant and unstoppable advance of neo-liberal policies, and its underlying logic, might be challenged and reconsidered, as well as highlighting some of the alternatives that already exist in order to help us reimagine education otherwise.

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*Refraction* (Goodson & Rudd 2016; Rudd & Goodson 2016) is a conceptual and theoretical lens whereby the field is analysed in relation to historical periodisation, wider movements and ideology and waves of reform, against which national and local policies and practice emerge. However, in mobilising ‘refraction’, there is an acute awareness that ideology and related policies do not occur and play out ‘unopposed’. Instead, they are mediated through a plethora of cultural, institutional and individual identities, pre-figurative practices, beliefs, values and cultures. In exploring refraction, we are thus better placed to both elucidate alternatives and see the ways in which the symbolic violence exerted may be mediated and subverted through individual and collective action.

*Remembering* enables an historical analysis and location of accounts in national (and personal) trajectories and ongoing continuities, as well as the occasional episodes of change and transformation.

*Regression* analyses can enable explorations of transformations in the political landscape and the positionality of ‘change forces’. How individuals (and systems) perceive themselves in relation to others and other historical contexts, and the effect this may have on perceived need for either conservation or change.

*Reconceptualisation*, highlighting the value in the reconceptualisation of both the meaning of politics and also the nature of social inquiry. It can help to keep alive and reinvigorate the social imagination against ideological attack by considering and conceptualising pre-figurative practices and alternative worlds. It promotes the analysis of the variety of responses to the promotion of ‘world movements’ and of change restructuring, highlighting the wealth of complexity that can generate an ongoing social imagination of alternatives.

*Renewal* prompts consideration of historical responses and memories not only as reflective and possibly coloured interpretations of the past but also as potential sources through which to reimagine and reconceptualise alternative futures.

In utilising the above concepts, we are better placed to consider a greater range of alternative practices, discourse and systems, which may highlight ways of challenging the prevailing neoliberal orthodoxy and logic, ultimately demonstrating pathways to *reinterpretation and resistance*.

#### REINTERPRETATION AND RESISTANCE

Reinterpretation and resistance can, and do, take many forms, from calls for complete revolution, to smaller acts of disobedience through to the identification of viable and better alternative approaches. Highlighting all forms and potential routes may be valuable in documenting the realities and negative consequences of the current logic, fending off the tendency toward normalisation, and also in providing accounts of alternative systems, discourse and action. Such alternatives might



include larger and established movements, such as co-operatives and the different forms, positions and roles they might occupy with in educational landscape, as highlighted by both Schostak and Woodin (this collection), through to a range of other alternative accounts. As Humphreys (this collection) argues, the solutions for resisting and reconceptualising neoliberal education may already be found in the ongoing history of alternatives and educational practice at the margins. Identifying and sharing contrasting stories and experience of education requires accessible communication and the development of a common, if not shared, language in order to present viable alternatives. As we explore and debate these, a whole range of experiences and examples of learners being active agents and co-constructors of their own dialogical learning experiences become apparent, which sit in stark contrast with the predominant prescriptive and rigid curricula, forms of assessment and ‘banking’ models of education (Freire 1972).

As Edmond points out, alternatives to the bio-financialised ‘student as consumer’ model have also arisen in the form of the growth of voluntary ‘free universities’, challenging the taken predominate assumptions of what it actually means to be a student and what the purpose of (Higher) education might be. Indeed, resistance can also occur within the ‘neo-liberal University’ through sensitive reflection and informed action that demonstrates alternative ways of viewing and creating knowledge and demonstrating how learning and professional practice can be emancipatory, critical and challenge the status quo. Moreover, as Downs (this collection) suggests, we also need to be careful not to present a binary between completely financialised visions of the future of (Higher) education and a counter ‘nostalgic view’. Instead we should focus on the realities for individuals, paying particular attention to those groups who are refracting the neoliberal worldview and logic, so that we might develop new ways forward.

Furthermore, as Stray and Eikeland (this collection) also point out, we also need to be aware how global education reform movements are being played out differently across different nation states, the potential effects that this may have on embedding new forms of inequality, but also on how these are refracted and lead to different outcomes in various locations.

Hayler also notes (this collection) that collective professional action has been hamstrung but it has not disappeared. Pockets of resistance still exist through Unions and other campaigning networks. Moreover, he argues that as well as these collectives, routes to resistance and reinterpretation always have their starting points in the ‘site of subjectivity’, in demonstrating and presenting ourselves, developing narratives about what we are and in what we believe, and then putting the theory into action.

Some groups form specifically to address and redress some of negative consequences of neo liberalism through awareness raising, collective action and developing watching briefs. For example O’Brien (this collection) highlights the development of the Third Level Workplace Watch, a collective of precariously employed staff seeking to raise awareness of and challenge unequal labour conditions. He also points to the possibilities and potential of *bricolage* (Kincheloe 2001) in bringing about new movements transformative possibilities arising from

collaborations between different actors from within and across different scholarly (and sectoral) traditions.

All of these examples provide insights, knowledge and values on which critiques and alternatives might be built. There are of course significant questions regarding whether, and how, seemingly disparate groups might come to work together to bring about change. As Hall (this collection) points out, what is at issue is how to connect, and indeed who with. One way might be to reconceptualise and reimagine a more critical pedagogy that looks at aspects of inequality and injustice in a range of different fields and contexts and considers how these all relate to one another. Moreover, how we might form alliances across different areas, sectors and with various groups facing similar day to day challenges arising as a result of neoliberalism. Sugrue (this collection) further argues that it is necessary to highlight what more may be done to create and amplify a collective (professional) voice that also connects with the wider public, in order to re-present education as a 'common good' and rescue it from the lie(s) at the heart of neoliberalism.

#### HORIZONTAL RESISTANCE

Finally, we must also consider the regulating effects of the system itself and what it means for individuals within educational and academic institutions. With power being exerted 'top down' through austerity policies and prescribed practices, the opportunities for collective professional resistance are constantly being undermined. Therefore opportunities for vertical resistance within institutions may become severely limited and stifled. Thus, we need to consider opportunities offered for *horizontal allegiances* and the formation and development of organic networks of like-minded intellectuals and actors across different institutions and fields. Such horizontal networks are not bounded by the same institutional restraints, yet carry the collective weight of combined intellectual capital and endorsements, somewhat ironically, of multiple institutions. Such horizontal networks are likely to have greater influence than isolated individuals and atomised groups working in isolation and provide a fertile ground for reimagining possibilities, disseminating alternative perspectives and sharing strategies for resistance. In working together in this way, professionals may also seek out new directions and opportunities to reassert their professional autonomy and intellectual capacity through meaningful individual and collective action and free will.

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