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Abstract

‘Personalised learning’ has become a popular term within education policy and practice in England, and is part of wider moves towards the ‘personalisation’ of public services and the promotion of personal responsibility within social policy discourse – including education, welfare, health and adult care. In analysing personalisation in education policy as a discursive formation, this paper visits some of the tensions, ambiguities and apparently ‘uncommon’ trajectories in contemporary education policy, including its association with the ‘de-schooling’ movement. It is argued that personalisation cannot be understood simply as the most recent incarnation of the neoliberalisation of education policy, nor as a politically neutral set of learning practices. In conclusion, unpacking personalisation as a generative discourse enables us to understand the continuities and contradictions in New Labour social policy without relying on the sometimes heroic, revelatory and emancipatory intentions of critical analysis.

keywords

discourse; learning; moralisation; neoliberalism; person-centred policy

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Introduction

Personalisation in public service provision is high on the public policy agenda in the UK, particularly in England, but also elsewhere¹. It describes an agenda for the public services based on providing for the needs and desires of individuals as opposed to the universal provision of the post-war welfare state. Personalisation has been promoted by the think-tank Demos, particularly in the work of Charles Leadbeater (2004; 2006). It has been described as an “epochal” form of argument in debates on government modernisation (Cutler *et al.*, 2007: 847), and as “one of the keywords of twenty-first-century social work in Britain” (Ferguson, 2007: 388). What is at stake within debates on personalisation is a question of the government’s duty to ensure the welfare of its citizens weighed up with the personal responsibility of citizens to care and provide for themselves. Critical analysis of the concept and implementation of personalisation across the public services has judged that the balance is far too skewed towards the “individualization, responsabilization and the privatization of risk” (ibid.: 389) to the neglect of social dynamics of poverty and to the abandonment of paternalistic government (Cutler *et al.*, 2007: 851).

In the educational sphere, ‘personalised learning’ has become a pervasive idea in current policy and parlance. It is often associated with the use of digital technologies in and beyond the classroom, but has implications for school admissions practices,

¹ References to personalised learning can also be found in government departments of education in Wales, Scotland, Canada, New Zealand, USA, Australia, France and South Africa and a wider study of the various national manifestations of personalisation would be worthwhile.

new school building programmes, timetabling, assessment and learning theories. Personalised learning also contributes to the reframing of the ‘learner’ or person as the ideal subject of educational policy and philosophy. As Pollard and James (2004: 5) point out, “Personalised Learning is a ‘Big Idea’ for school education in England”. Its significance should be considered in the context of the increasing predominance of centralised, target-driven, performance-led, managerial and competitive education systems, which have been well-documented by sociologists of education (e.g. Ball, 2003; Gewirtz, 2002; Whitty *et al.* 1998).

In 2004, in a conference organised by the DfES (Department for Education and Skills, now the DCSF), Demos, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), David Miliband described the five key components to ‘choice and voice in personalised learning’ (Miliband, 2006: 21). These were “assessment for learning”, “teaching and learning strategies which build on individual needs”, “curriculum choice which engages and respects students”, “school organisation based around student progress” and “community, local institutions and social services supporting schools to drive forward progress in the classroom”. Miliband described a move away from paternalistic approaches to public services towards providing choice for those who “are not satisfied to rely on the state or the market” (*ibid.*: 23).

This paper analyses personalisation as a discursive formation and aims to disentangle some of its apparently contradictory roots, including the way in which it draws on the ‘de-schooling’ literature, and on anti-bureaucratic and privatising agendas to paint a picture of the ideal personalised learner. Personalisation is not simply a neutral and practical set of classroom activities which will necessarily benefit individuals. In

pointing out the politics of personalisation, critical analysis of education reform might easily attribute personalisation to the further intrusion of neoliberalism into the governance of citizens. However, by outlining the ambiguities and tensions present within personalisation, it is argued here that the connection between personalisation and a philosophy of de-schooling throws into question linear accounts of neoliberal education policies. It is important to unpack the various ways in which the ‘learner’ or person is conceived and constructed through accounts of personalisation as it is promoted in practice through education policy, by think-tanks, non-governmental organisations and in learning theories. Through this account, it is possible to show how both the neutral and critical positions rely on the same principle of education as a moral value both aimed at freedom and founded on essentially or potentially free persons. This can help to account for the apparently unlikely trajectories of naturalised, psychologically- and morally-inflected discourses of the personal held by many educational actors and policy-makers today.

Contemporary critiques of personalised education policy

There has thus far been very little said by critical theorists and sociologists of education on the subject of personalisation. This could be because the circulation, implementation and interpretation of this policy discourse are in their infancy, or because it is taken simply as another example of a neoliberal policy trajectory already so exhaustively condemned by critical scholars. Hartley (2007: 630) traces personalisation back not to any philosophy of education or learning but to marketing theories of customisation and tailoring of services and co-production of value, identifying personalisation as a “successor to the ‘new public management’ in the

provision of public services” and the “latest phase in the marketisation of education”. Campbell *et al* (2007: 136) trace personalisation only as far as Leadbeater’s (2004: 16) vision for the reformation of public services more generally – as a form of “bottom-up, mass social innovation enabled by the state”. Campbell *et al* (2007: 139) examine how the core concept is rife with ambiguities and vagueness through its various incarnations in key policy documents. They (*ibid.*: 153) conclude that these policy documents demonstrate that the rhetoric of personalisation is not met in practice and does not live up to its ‘deep’ forms. They highlight the inconsistency of pursuing personalised learning in an education system in which the government has been increasingly controlling. Both analyses regard the discourse and associated policies of personalisation either as a cover story for older agendas such as privatisation and de-regulation, or as a missed opportunity to live up to their own idealisations of educational policy. Whilst it is difficult to paint a picture of contemporary critiques of personalisation in education from such a small field, the remainder of the paper looks at some common threads in critical education policy analysis and suggests instead a more contradictory genealogy of personalisation as a policy discourse. This places greater emphasis on the ways in which policies acquire and generate meaning through their adoption and adaptation, and interrogates the role of critique in public policy analysis.

In contrast to the limited number of analyses of personalisation in education, there are numerous accounts of the educational sector which point to the increasing neoliberalisation of education policy (Apple, 2001; Basu, 2004; Bonal; 2003; Fitzsimons, 2002; Mitchell, 2003; Olssen *et al*, 2004). These could be used straightforwardly to explain the political and economic context and rationale for the

policy of personalisation in England. For instance, Torres (1998: 42) identifies recent trends in educational policy as a “cover” for the neoliberal regime. Similarly, many authors writing about the Australian and New Zealand policy context have outlined the way in which neoliberal policies in education have travelled and reformulated in different national contexts (Davies and Bansel, 2007; Lewis 2003; Olssen *et al*, 2004: 176; Peters *et al* 2000), suggesting that education reform is following an international trajectory towards marketisation, privatisation, de-regulation and individualisation. These accounts often share the basis for critical analysis with current critiques of personalisation.

However, such analyses risk reifying neoliberalism as a policy entity which travels from a unified origin which can be uncovered, and as a context which researchers must always take for granted as a backdrop for their findings. It is portrayed as a catch-all for education, practices of citizenship and the key driver of subject-formation. Hence, neoliberalism is posited as both the starting point *and* the end point of education (and many other) policy agendas. Other scholars too have noted the risk of bolstering the idea of neoliberalism, with specific calls to better understand the specificity of the New Zealand ‘experiment’ described by some of the authors above. Lerner (2003: 509) notes that “at the most general level, neoliberalism appears to have usurped globalisation as *the* explanatory term for contemporary forms of economic restructuring”, and calls on researchers to understand its nuances, complexities, techniques and practices, its geographical variability, its multifarious political roots and trajectories, its exceptions and its counter currents. Furthermore, this work seeks to challenge the notion that neoliberal policies play out straightforwardly in practice when considered in light of our understandings of subject formation.

In response to these debates, the next section seeks to understand the uncommon political and philosophical trajectories of personalisation and de-schooling, and to outline the relationship between these two agendas. In problematising linear analyses of education policies, an important opportunity emerges to understand the discourse of personalisation as both internally contradictory and generative in its circulation and translation.

Uncommon policy trajectories: personalisation as a discursive formation

Personalisation in education is a contested term, with a contradictory history. Whilst Hartley (2007) and Campbell (2007) trace back of the roots of personalisation to the marketing and marketized agendas of the business literature and the political rhetoric of deeply personalised public service reform, a different policy route can be equally explored – one which examines the relationship between key personnel, the sharing of common literature, and the role of policy think-tanks. In examining the convergence and divergence of core concepts of the person and of freedom within personalisation as a contemporary discourse circulating the education policy arena, it can be shown how personalisation means different things to different people *at the same time*. An emphasis on its contemporaneous discursive agency opens up a seemingly unlikely confluence of personalisation denounced as a linear, right-wing, neoliberal project and the ‘progressive’ philosophies of the de-schoolers of the late 1960s and 70s. The relationship between contemporary education reforms and older ideas of the de-schoolers and proponents of child-centred learning have not gone unnoticed in the education literature (Middleton, 1996; Robertson, 2008).

For some proponents of personalisation, the idea denotes a modern notion of educational choice, flexibility, parental control and independence from the state. For other, ‘progressive²’ educators, commonly regarded to be from a more left political tradition, it denotes an education which values personal differences, learner control and democratic schools, and is opposed to rigid national testing. In this latter sense, the idea of the school is seen as a depersonalising environment in which children and young people must conform to social (and nationally tested) norms which pay little regard to people as individuals with different needs and interests. This has its history in the ‘de-schooling’ movement of the 1960s and 70s, education writers such as John Holt (1969) and Ivan Illich (1971), and can be seen today in campaigning organisations such as ‘Personalised Education Now’ (PEN). This organisation “seeks to develop a rich, diverse, funded Personalised Educational Landscape to meet the learning needs, lifestyles and life choices made by individuals, families and communities”³. This includes more curricular choice, individual formative assessment, democratic school organisation and teacher-pupil relationships, and the extension of learning outside the formal environment of the school. These principles have formed the basis for some experimental schools in the UK and have been influenced by earlier writing on child-centred learning and democratic schools, such as that of A.S. Neill, publishing on his ‘free’ approach to children, experiential learning and self-governed schooling from the 1920s to the 1970s. Though as Stronach and Piper (2008: 33) point out in their recent account of the liberal potential of Neill’s *Summerhill* School within the audit culture of contemporary education policy, Neill’s philosophies came from his experiences of 1920s fascism rather than

² The ‘de-schooling’ authors I cite here notably do not refer to themselves as progressives.

³ <http://c.person.ed.gn.apc.org/>, accessed 06/11/07

“60s permissiveness”. Schools such as *Summerhill* in Suffolk (Neill, 1968), Countesthorpe in Leicestershire (Armstrong, 1973) and the White Lion Street Free School in London (Wright, 1989) are just some examples of democratic school experiments which have drawn practical insights from the educational philosophies of ‘de-schooling’. Understanding the differences between these key actors and writers, and between their liberal, democratic, critical, free, progressive or de-schooled approaches is imperative if we are to avoid clumsy or vague analyses of the personalisation debate.

A brief perusal of the evocative titles of the ‘de-schooling’ literature gives a clear indication of the standpoints of its authors: *Deschooling Society* (Illich, 1971), *The Underachieving School* (Holt, 1970), *How Children Fail* (Holt, 1969), *Freedom and Beyond* (Holt, 1972), *Instead of Education* (Holt, 1977), *School is Dead* (Reimer, 1971), and *Education Without Schools* (Buckman, 1973). Their analysis of schools is of state-sanctioned institutions which serve only to indoctrinate, subdue and control children, robbing them of their unique personas at the behest of the system. It is little comfort to them that state schools in the UK and USA (where these authors’ critiques are primarily situated) are free at the point of use.

These very same ideas are promoted by the think-tank and publishing collective, Education Now, which later became Personalise Education Now and the Educational Heretics Press. One of their more recent publications, by their founder, Roland Meighan (1995) entitled *John Holt: Personalised Education and the Reconstruction of Schooling*, seeks to revive the ideas of John Holt for a new generation, pointing out in stark (and sometimes extreme) terms the main principles that can be derived from

his work: that the current ‘dogma’ of schooling fails children, is authoritarian, destroys motivation and love of learning, is anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian. It produces children who are not only “timid, docile, easily-led men [sic]” (Meighan, 1995: 130) but are also “ready to hate and kill whomever their leaders might declare to be their enemies” (Holt (1970) cited in Meighan, 1995: 130), and who practice “Unquestioning Obedience [which] will lead us inevitably into the bully or pre-fascist mentality” (Meighan, 1995: 131). Holt himself claimed that the logic of schooling was to prepare children for a life of slavery, making the direct assertion that schools serve only to indoctrinate, to police and to imprison children (Holt, 1970: 134-5). He (1970: 72) wrote that “the schools can be in the jail business or in the education business, but not in both”. Illich (1973: 9-10) paints teachers as people literally ‘licensed’ to misinform, through the promulgation of a curriculum which is of no genuine interest to children. He suggests that there is a hidden curriculum in which teachers are complicit in promoting the idea that what is taught in schools is of value. But Illich (1973: 13) goes further than many to argue that even so-called progressive ‘free’ (autonomously run) schools are guilty of this – indeed all schools “de-personalize the responsibility for ‘education’. They place the institution *in loco parentis*.” Another common theme of this literature, then, is that *real* learning goes on naturally amongst family, parents and in the home, and that schools ‘de-personalise’, denying the freedom of children and parents. This contention shares much with Conservative policies on education for independent state-funded schools⁴ and the religious Right in the USA, for instance, the growth of home-schooling amongst Evangelical Christians (Hanson Thiem, 2007: 7).

⁴ Conservative shadow education minister, Michael Gove, speaking on the BBC Radio 4 Today Programme (20th November 2007), for instance, spoke of their plans to allow parents to set up new secondary schools away from the “Byzantine bureaucracy” of local authorities – in order to increase discipline, increase standards and increase competition between schools in deprived areas.

Mention of Conservatives and Evangelical Christians may seem a long way from the work of Everett Reimer (who came across Illich and Paulo Friere⁵ in Puerto Rico in the 1950s), whose call for “education for freedom” (1971: 89) reflects the appeal of notions of liberation and emancipation to such writers. He states that (ibid.: 90, my emphasis) “what man’s [sic] *true* interests are and what he needs to know to pursue them are the starting points not only of educational philosophy but also of any general philosophical basis for social policy”. What is wrong with schools, he argues, is that they deny people the right to information and knowledge that they actually need to know. He states that schools perpetuate secrets, mythologies and propaganda (ibid.: 93), and argues for an education which will “lift the veil” and reveal the truth to people (ibid.:96).

The alternative to mass state schooling offered by such authors is therefore characterised by five main tenets. First, they favour more meaningful autonomy and choice between different types of schools (here choice is based on diversity of educational organisation and philosophies rather than between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ school standards), and learner-managed choice in terms of what, how, where and when children should learn (Meighan and Toogood, 1992: 92). Secondly, they favour home-schooling, and the increased involvement of parents and families in making decisions about how their children learn. Third, they support work-based and skills-focused learning as a more ‘authentic’ form of education, arguing that children should have the right to work, since it is only through work that they gain a ‘true’ education. Fourth, they consider that the purpose of education should be to produce flexible

⁵ Although Illich was a Catholic pastor and Friere associated with Christian liberation theology

people (Meighan and Toogood, 1992: 138). Finally, their strategies for educating run counter to what they identify as the key enemy to education – schools. Schools, for them, are part of the technocratic, authoritarian, bureaucratic state which denies children and families the right to flexibility, choice, home-schooling, authentic, self-directed learning and freedom. Colin Ward (1973: 48), for example states that the education system serves to “protect the values of the state”. Hence, the argument is for a personalised education system in which personal autonomy, choice and flexibility is paramount, and the state’s involvement curtailed.

At this point, the ‘de-schooling’ thesis seems to share much with what has been termed ‘neoliberal’ or free market thinking on education. What was originally widely regarded as a broadly left, critical or emancipatory educational tradition is therefore also being used to justify calls for the dismantling of comprehensive state schooling in England today. Here parents are seen as discerning consumers of an educational product (i.e. a ‘good’ school catering specifically for their unique needs and ideals), where school choice is open to market forces and where schools are independent from state control. In a more recent revival of such ideas, non-governmental organisations such as PEN and Human Scale Education (HSE) as well as quasi-autonomous public bodies such as the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) and the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) argue for learner-centred, democratic schools in which parents are more involved, and in which children enjoy more diversity and choice in their own learning. John Taylor Gatto (2005: 72), writing in the USA, but whose book is available from HSE, plainly instructs readers⁶ to:

⁶ This book, along with many of Holt and Meighan’s publications seem to be aimed at parents.

“Break up these institutional schools, decertify teaching, let anyone who has a mind to teach bid for customers, privatize this whole business – trust the free market system.”

For others in HSE, this conclusion is not so clear cut, despite the provocative title of books such as *Freeing Education* (Carnie *et al*, 1996). Carnie (1996: 50), of HSE, favours the Dutch and Danish models of state funding for private schools. There, she writes, state-funded schools are run independently from state interference in the day-to-day running of the school or its curriculum. Carnie considers this the only way in which education can keep up with the modern pace of economic, environmental, technological and societal change. She believes in the right to a diversity of types of educational provision and for the rights of parents to participate in school decision-making, in terms of choosing schools as well as governing them. As part of their philosophy for freeing education, authors in the same volume endorse voucher systems (Mees 1996: 42) and charter schools in the USA (Peterkin, 1996: 36). Another contributor to this volume is James Tooley, a key proponent of the globalisation of private education markets. Tooley (1996: 136) writes that the government’s own reforms have created an internal market in education which, if left to function naturally, will dismantle the “bureaucratic monolith [which] stifles the creativity and energy of teachers in many schools”. The re-articulation of the de-schooling thesis in the personalisation story has taken what may seem an unlikely path in favour of privatisation, autonomy and against bureaucracy. Here it is proclaimed that the globalised market in education requires new lessons for learning.

In a similar vein, and indeed reflecting the more ‘official’ view of personalisation, David Hargreaves, (2004: 2), of the SSAT argues that schools must change to reflect the post-fordist economy and demands for a more customised education. His vision sets out new principles to shape education round the needs of pupils, incorporating the “nine gateways” of “curriculum, advice and guidance, assessment for learning, learning to learn, school organisation and design, workforce development, new technologies (ICT), mentoring and student voice”. Teaching and teachers are notably absent, but rather teaching becomes advice, guidance, choice counselling, mentoring, coaching and flexible to the needs of independent students. (ibid.: 3-4). The infrastructure of personalisation requires leadership, “disciplined innovation” (ibid.: 15), networked organisation, knowledge transfer, organised dissemination of best practice, and the reconfiguring of traditional teaching and learning roles. These are all arguably key tenets of what Hargreaves identifies as a post-fordist service economy.

Many of the ideas of the earlier ‘de-schoolers’ and their more recent incarnations have been taken up in the UK by the Department for Children, Families and Schools (DCSF). They are based on the idea that the state is not as an education provider but an enabler – enabling choice and voice and acting as a broker between state and market in education services. However, there remains an important distinction; though the boundaries of the school become more porous, its organisation more decentralised and its curriculum more diverse, the institution of the school remains central to the New Labour vision of personalisation.

The Government vision of personalisation is based on “building the organisation of schooling around the needs, interests and aptitudes of individual pupils” (Miliband,

2006: 23). Though it may appear hard to disagree with this assertion, Miliband's exposition of these key points belies some problematic assumptions. For instance, his version of 'assessment for learning' (formative assessment practices which aim to help learners understand their strengths and weaknesses) includes the "Pupil Achievement Tracker" (ibid.: 24) (software which allows schools and LEAs to review their performance against national standards) – hardly an empowering technology for pupils or schools, one could argue. He also appeals to the controversial and inconclusive literature on multiple intelligences⁷ to argue for the need for teaching and learning based on individual needs.

His main assumption though is that the parent and learner are consumers of education, albeit through an underlying rationale of "consumer voice", rather than simply 'choice'. In this scenario, the market mechanism for educational choice is imperfect and uncompetitive, given (as he points out (ibid.: 27)) that the desire to choose schools generally only occurs twice in a lifetime. He states that neither the market nor the state can provide a universally high standard of public services for all. Consumer voice, he argues, is about change from within – notably in political arenas such as local councils and governing bodies. Drawing heavily on the ideas of Leadbeater (2004), Miliband (2006: 29-30) argues that "students are not merely educational shoppers in the marketplace: they are creators of their own educational experience". The idea that enabling children and parents to have a voice will create choice is one in which the market and political enablement sit side-by-side. This account assumes that parents and children are automatically the best placed to choose their education. But as Biesta (2005: 59) has noted, "most parents do not – or not yet – send their children

⁷ White (2004) has criticised Howard Gardner's (2005: 6) theory of multiple intelligences, which claims that intelligence consists of eight or nine separate and computational "biopsychological information-processing capacit[ies]".

to school with a detailed list of what they want the teacher to do”. He argues that “the underlying assumption that learners come to education with a clear understanding of what their needs are, is a highly questionable assumption”. The emphasis on learner-centred education and consumer voice therefore “forgets that a major reason for engaging in education is precisely to find out what it is that one actually needs” (ibid.).

This section has examined the contemporary relationship between personalisation and the intellectual tradition of the de-schooling movement, through both non-governmental organisations and key quasi-autonomous public bodies, to its contemporary manifestation in prominent policy documents. I have identified a conceptual alliance between de-schoolers and conservatives, congregating around the ideas of the autonomy of natural, personalised learners, an emancipatory role for education, the freedom of schools from state bureaucracy, and opportunities for parental control and family involvement to promote authentic learning outside the school. These similarities are unlikely to be recognised by critical education scholars, many of whose work is invoked in the new discourse of personalised learning. The next section outlines the way in which personalisation as a discursive formation is in a state of emergence, reworking our understandings of the person to be educated. Various articulations of ‘personalised learning’ generate particular conceptions of the learner or person, and there is much at stake in these competing constructions for our critical understandings of the personalisation agenda in public policy.

Educating the person: divergent constructions of the learner

The idea that the education system should be person-centred leads Charles Leadbeater (2004: 4, emphasis added), already noted as a key actor in New Labour's personalisation policy, to the apparently inevitable conclusion that "in this changing world we *know* that education has to put the learner at the centre." The different trajectories of personalisation generate distinctive conceptions of the ideal learner. These can be identified as naturalised, 'psychologised' and moralised.

The naturalised 21st century child

Miliband's conception of the child as person in his account of personalisation rests on the assertion that learners are best placed to choose their own education. His vision for education states that "the system is moulded around the child, not the child around the system" (2006: 30). He thus perceives there to be a natural child who exists prior to the education system, around which schools should be shaped, much like the de-schoolers. However the 'natural' child – if the personalisation philosophies, policies and promoters are to be believed – is very particular in its nature. S/he is a highly innovative, self-motivated, responsible, entrepreneurial and creative person.

Therefore, a common-sense notion of an ideal person in a rapidly changing global economy is the focal point for personalisation. This is central to key policy texts and commentary on personalisation, though some distance emerges between the accounts offered by Miliband, by Leadbeater and its manifestation in teacher training, teaching advice and in texts and technologies produced for schools. But it is the implementation and realisation of personalisation that attracts so much attention in policy documents and in case studies of good practice. Hence it is a policy discourse

which both acquires and generates new visions of the ‘natural child’ through its circulation, its implementation and its interpretation by policy-think tanks, quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations (Quangos) and non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs). The ‘2020 Vision’ Report, for example, was commissioned by the DfES to recommend ways in which a “fully personalised education system” (DfES, 2006: 51) could be achieved in practice through national educational changes. Christine Gilbert⁸ and her colleagues write that there is general agreement that personalised learning is “what every parent wants, what every child deserves and what the country needs if we are to meet the global challenges of the 21st century” (ibid.: 3). They argue that the demands of the changing global economy, the requirements of employers, and the gaps in education attainment between different social groups necessitate pupils who are creative, risk-taking, adaptable individuals with functional numeracy and literacy skills, and who are adept at communication, team-working, responsible for their own learning, showing attitudes of independence, resilience, inventiveness, entrepreneurialism, reliability, punctuality and perseverance (ibid.: 10). The learner is certainly at the centre of these accounts, but s/he is not a natural learner; we have to *produce* an ideal child. Here, the current form of personalisation at the heart of education policy diverges from the earlier writings of John Holt, Ivan Illich and others – schools should produce flexible citizens, as Holt had suggested, but the vision is still one which promotes basic skills, ‘soft skills’ required by employers: ‘punctuality’, reliability and so forth.

The National College of School Leadership (NCSL – a non-departmental public body of the Department for Children, Schools and Families) have also produced

⁸ Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted)

publications promoting the idea of personalisation. They posit parents and children plainly as consumers of education, and “the workforce and school leaders” as providers (NCSL, 2004: 3). They argue that key to its success as a policy reform from the bottom up is communication with parents and school leadership, and the use of new technologies to “update parents about grades, homework, absences or alerts”, as they point out, just as banks use technologies to reach their customers. In this publication, David Hopkins, former head of the DfES Standards and Effectiveness Unit is keen to distance the approach from the more ‘liberal’ educational philosophies of the past, stating that:

“Some people might see personalised learning signalling a move away from the standards agenda. But this isn’t so. Neither is it a return to child-centred theories or letting pupils coast along at their own pace or abandoning the national curriculum.”

The vision set out by the NCSL appears to be more concerned with surveillance of pupil attainment and customisation than about personalisation as a means to recast relations between the state and citizen. It diverges from the de-schooling accounts of personalisation, which were precisely about abolishing the national curriculum and structuring education around the pace of individual learners. The distinction between customisation and personalisation is a key distinction which Charles Leadbeater (2006: 105) himself is at pains to point out, but which appears to have been lost in translation in this case.

Charles Leadbeater's (2004) Demos publication, *Personalisation through Participation* promoted the idea of students as autonomous service-users seeking individual choices. He outlined a new direction for public services based on the ideas of active citizenship, user-centred and "co-produced" services and mixed market provision. This built on his Demos colleagues' notion of an "adaptive state" (Bently and Wilsden (2003: 14) which should offer "a sharper moral and political vision of the role that public services play in people's lives". They promoted "systems capable of continuously reconfiguring themselves to create new sources of public value" (ibid.: 16) and "far greater flexibility to meet personal needs" (ibid.). This applies even more so in education, where Leadbeater paints a picture in which the fabric of childhood has radically broken with the past. He describes young people as natural consumers, able to express their choices, flexibility and needs through their own 'authentic' consumer world (Leadbeater, 2004: 68-9):

"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."

He is keen to stress that this is not just a euphemism for privatised learning, and distances himself from ideas about privatisation. He writes (ibid.: 70):

“Personalised learning does not apply market thinking to education. It is not designed to turn children and parents into consumers of education. The aim is to promote personal development through self-realisation, self-enhancement and self-development. The child/learner should be seen as active, responsible and self-motivated, a co-author of the script which determines how education is delivered.”

The justification of personalised learning therefore seems to reside not only in children’s ability to act as savvy consumers of mobile and other technologies, the popularity of what is called ‘user-generated content’ and ‘connectivity’ (i.e. websites such as YouTube, and trends such as interactive television), but also in the possibility of their self-realisation, self-enhancement and self-development. Here, children are presented as active citizens in a participatory consumer environment. Rather worryingly, it takes Leadbeater only a small leap of the imagination to suggest that this could extend into a new form of participatory politics.

The account of personalisation promoted by Miliband relies on a conception of the learner as a naturalised, self-determining consumer of education services, whilst Leadbeater’s account generates a vision of the 21st century child as an active co-producer of education who is capable of describing, defining and mobilising resources to create their own ideal learning environment. The de-schoolers too invoked the figure of the natural child who should learn free from the constraints of bureaucratic state schools.

The ‘psychologised’ child

The idea of the natural child with personal attributes in educational discourse shares much with the tradition of developmental psychology and an emphasis on ‘how children learn’. Central to these approaches is a notion of the person as a psychological entity around which education should be centred. This section considers the implications of unpacking the concept of the learner or person, where s/he is not regarded as an essential self-generating property, but someone who comes into being in particular places. Lessons from feminist critical-psychology are drawn here in order to draw out some of the contingencies surrounding how the person is made as person; how we are ‘personised’ in particular places, rather than ‘personalised’ out of context. In unpacking the concept of personalisation from these perspectives, one can more readily account for the unlikely alliance between so-called ‘progressive’ or alternative approaches to education (the de-schoolers) and proponents of a free-market in education.

The question of ‘how children learn’ and thus how this can be personalised according to individual choice and voice is likely to remain a matter of great debate. The implication of the developmental psychology approach common in teacher-training courses and textbooks in the UK, is that all children should reach particular levels of literacy at particular ages, arrive at school at a particular level of ‘readiness’ and have innate learning styles and particular intelligences which must be catered for. The national testing regime in the UK is arguably based on these major assumptions. Indeed, the dominant paradigm of developmental psychology, a more recent enthusiasm for neuroscience, and the notion of ‘learning theories’ are becoming ever

more prevalent in educational discourse. These trends suggest an already personalised or individualistic notion of subject-formation.

However, developmental psychologists increasingly recognise that their theories depend on children growing up in a literate environment. Hence they acknowledge that literacy, for instance, is not an innate competency but is learnt in particular contexts. One of the most important critiques of the cognitive psychological approach comes from feminist theory. Burman (1994), for instance argues that developmental psychology is guilty of constantly calling into question the “adequacy of mothering” which has implications for the provision of children’s services and moral judgements about working mothers. She argues that developmental psychology makes claims to biology which are devoid of social, cultural, political, economic analysis and context-dependence – serving to de-politicise the regulation of ‘normal’ development milestones through national testing and measurement. Furthermore, as Walkerdine (1992: 18) has argued, the practices of developmental psychology in addition to the ‘progressive’ pedagogy of the 1960s *created*, rather than reflected, the concept of the ‘child’ as a free and natural person. At the same time these educational theories subjected the supposedly free child to ever more normalising and regulatory processes. This was achieved through the constitution of women teachers as moral arbiters in the classroom – controlling not through oppressive power, but through ‘love’ and the nurturance of ideal, natural children. Scientific and developmental discourses thus became part of what Walkerdine (1992: 16) terms the “sham” of personal liberty. The systematic processes by which social and spatialised entanglements of power (where people live, where they go to school, and where they become persons) impact on educational opportunities, school reputations, attainment

outcomes and teacher-pupil relations were obscured. Indeed the whole situated educational experience was reduced to notions of (personalised) psychology.

The lessons of critical psychology therefore call into question the possibility and desirability of personalised learning and its self-actualised learners. An emphasis on personalised learning promotes the idea that children's educational abilities are innate, that they have personal learning styles, personal competencies and skills, personal curricular preferences. In the 'psychologised' discourse of personalised learning, the learner is an ideal type whose interests should be served by flexible schools, by a personalised education system, and within a system in which they can remain autonomous, free, naturally curious and with the potential for personal emancipation.

The moralised child

The discourse of personalised learning is not only 'psychologised', but also generates a moralised conception of the learner. There is an assumption that personalised education serves learners as individual persons and that both the moral purpose of and basis for education is autonomy and emancipation. David Hopkins asserts (2006:17-18, original emphasis):

“My argument is that the foundations of personalisation are partly historical but mainly reflect an ethical root: it is *moral purpose* that drives personalisation. We see this moral purpose most vividly in the concern of the committed, conscientious teacher to match what is taught, and how it is taught, to the

individual learner as a person...Emancipation is the heartland of personalisation”.

Hence Hopkins and other key proponents of personalisation develop an image of the individual learner as a person *before* any education. Here, the learner is king. In this paradigm, where the learner is sovereign and where the moral purpose of personalised learning is emancipation, learning can be reduced to a commodity whose value and outcomes can be prescribed and ‘matched up’ with individuals, who are responsible for ‘freeing themselves’. Like the de-schoolers, this presumes that the ideal learner exists prior to education.

But what if we abandon the assumption that education has an emancipatory purpose and is aimed at a pre-existing ideal person (the sovereign learner), and instead understand schooling to be aimed at *producing* self-reflexive people who are able to separate their private, moral concerns as persons from their public status as citizens? (Hunter, 1994: 37). Such an account, informed by Du Gay’s (2000: x) project to praise bureaucracy’s “capacity to divorce the administration of public life from private moral absolutisms”, is in stark contrast to the “moral purpose” favoured by Hopkins, Leadbeater, conservatives *and* the de-schoolers, in the way in which they seek to reshape the public and private spheres as they relate to educational governance. This approach revives a central role for state involvement in education and state responsibility for the public wellbeing of citizens, in the face of dominant ideas about personalised moralities, and learner choice and voice.

Conclusions: Personalising the social?

The contemporary drive to personalise education, as with the writing of the de-schoolers of the 1960a and 70s, constructs the learner as king. The naturalised, ‘psychologised’ and moralised person generated by the discourse of personalisation, however, obscures our socialised or spatialised positioning as people.

Whilst the ‘learner’ is constructed as a self-actualising, self-motivated, active and participatory co-producer of her/his own educational destiny, parents too are urged to take more responsibility as active consumers of education, getting their children ‘ready’ for schooling, participating as school governors, and through parental involvement policies. As Newman (2007: 70) has pointed out, this idea of ‘participative governance’ relies on the *creation* of particular kinds of publics which marginalises less powerful voices, and is insensitive to the “conditions that enable such participation”. The personalised learner cannot therefore be considered natural but is created by a particular political agenda.

Personalisation leaves little room for the geographically-located person who learns through their gender, class, and ethnic social position, and who can only mobilise the resources required to ‘co-produce’ their own education in relation to the capacities afforded them in particular geographical contexts and within an uneven educational terrain. This assertion recognises that space is not a given but rather plays an important role in the production of particular social positions or subjectivities – through the ability of social groups living in particular areas to attain symbolic or material resources including education, through representations of their ‘place in the world’ (Massey and Jess, 1995), and through the intersections between social

relations and space. This can be seen in representations of the educational experiences of young white men living in specific cities in the UK, and the geographical differentiations of “place-based identity in the construction of masculinities” (McDowell, 2003: 95). The ‘psychologised’ learner must therefore be considered in his/her social and spatial circumstances. As Biesta notes (2006: 34), learning is itself a process of becoming a person, or “coming into presence”. We do not educate ideal or complete persons, nor do our preferences reflect innate personal wants and needs. These are a product from a complex and differentiated set of social processes and our geographical circumstances. This is something recognised by Leadbeater himself (2004: 22): “the more that personalised learning promotes self-provisioning, the more it could widen inequalities. As more learning would be done in the pupil’s own time, so the state will have to work harder to equalise the conditions for learning outside school.” The educational marketplace is also predetermined by the endurance of residential socio-economic inequalities and persistent geographies of educational disadvantage, meaning that *where* you go to school has a determinant effect on your educational attainment irrespective of supposed individual talents and aptitudes (see Dorling, 2005; HEFCE, 2005). The discourse of personalisation serves to render these social and spatial inequalities a matter of psychology.

The argument is not here that a hidden curriculum of privatisation exists behind the rhetoric of personalisation, nor that we can trace it back to the agenda, context or consequence of neoliberal policies. The hidden curriculum is not hidden – there is an *explicit* moral imperative at the heart of New Labour education policy to govern citizens through their freedom. Leadbeater (2004: 24) even cites Nikolas Rose on this point, stating that “[p]ersonalisation through participation is part of the solution to this

dilemma of how to rule through shaping freedom”. It could therefore be argued that personalisation is not based on moral imperative for education but instead is *generative* of a moral purpose for education. Indeed, it could be argued that we are not witnessing the “subordination of moral obligations to economic ones”, as Ball (2007: 185) has suggested, but the moralisation of social policy through personalisation (see also Munice, 2006).

However, in aiming to ‘free’ schooling from state control, to impose new rationalities of parental participation, consumer choice, authentic and ‘natural learning’, autonomous behaviour and the flexibilisation of state and citizen alike, the social and spatial dimensions of person-formation are played down. The active role that space plays in constituting people’s different experiences of the education available to them is underplayed. This renders questions of the social justice or fairness of policy agendas such as personalisation as problems of a natural, psychological and moral nature rather than subject to political contestation and critical analysis.

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