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Globalization and the Neoliberal Imaginary of Educational Reform

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ABSTRACT

Most recent policies and programmes of educational reform have been framed, justified and promoted on a widely held belief that aligning educational policies and practices with the economic, political and cultural changes that globalization signifies is necessary. However, this signification has mostly been couched in neoliberal terms– the view that globalization is largely an economic phenomenon, in which markets play a fundamental role in reconfiguring the nature of social relations. So globally ubiquitous has this mode of thinking become that it can appropriately be referred to as a ‘social imaginary’. The neoliberal imaginary of globalization has re-cast the purposes and governance of education, viewing it in human capital terms while supporting individual self-interests in an increasingly competitive society. This paper suggests that the contemporary era demands new ways of interpreting global interconnectivity and interdependence beyond globalization’s economic possibilities, but also as underpinned by moral and intercultural concerns. Hence, the need to work towards global common goods is greater now than ever before, as a way of ensuring that the world does not continue to slide into ever-increasing levels of inequalities, distrust and social conflict.

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INTRODUCTION

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), adopted by Member States to guide governments, the private sector and civil society to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all, are calling for a new kind of globalization— one that combines economic, social and environmental benefits (Sachs, 2016). For Education, the idea of globalization has become embedded in the popular imagination of educational policy-makers around the world. Most policies and programmes of educational reform are now framed, justified and promoted on a widely held belief that aligning educational policies and practices with the profound economic, political and cultural changes that globalization signifies is necessary. In their *Handbook of Global Education Policy*, Karen Mundy and her colleagues (2016) have provided a comprehensive account of these changes and the ways in which they are affecting prescriptions for educational reform. They have suggested, for example, that the globalization of knowledge and economy have demanded new ways of thinking about education. They have noted that the global circulation of people has transformed and diversified communities around the world, enabling them to remain connected across vast distances. They have shown how the emergence of new digital technologies has transformed the nature of communication, encouraging global circulation of educational ideas and ideologies in ways that are unprecedented.

At the same time, globalization has given rise to new patterns of consumption, cultural tastes and economic challenges, especially among the young. Globalization impinges on the lives of young people in a wide variety of ways, affecting their aspirations, and the conceptions they have of the changing social and economic conditions they will have to encounter in the future. For example nowadays, most young people are aware of the pressures of relentless economic and cultural change to which they are subjected. They realize that they will encounter new ways of working and earning a living; and that cultural diversity, exchange and conflict have become a permanent feature of social life. Given the dynamics of increasingly globalized social media, young people are also aware that formal institutions are no longer the only source from which they can access knowledge.

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Globalization has transformed the social space in which education takes place. Most educational policy-makers realize that educational institutions can no longer promise their students professional lives that are predictably secure. They admit that the profound transformations associated with globalization have raised the issues of legitimacy and trust in educational institutions. They maintain, however, that globalization has not only given rise to a set of new challenges for educational institutions, but has also created a range of new opportunities for rethinking education. To meet the challenges of globalization and to realize its potential, they insist that major reforms to the ways in which education is organized and governed are not only desirable but also necessary. These concerns are expressed in the Education 2030 framework for action which stresses that an education that helps build peaceful and sustainable societies is essential in the context of the globalized world we live in- with unresolved social, political, economic

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and environmental challenges. The framework also emphasizes the importance of strengthening education's contribution to the fulfilment of human rights, peace and responsible citizenship from local to global levels, gender equality, sustainable development and health (UNESCO, 2015a).

Indeed, some educational thinkers such as Zhao (2009) have insisted that the purposes of education need to be re-thought; and that major adjustments to curricular priorities, pedagogic approaches to learning, and assessment practices at all levels of education are required. This line of thinking about globalization and its implications for rethinking educational purposes and governance appears to have become conventional. Indeed, perhaps the use of the term 'globalization' in educational discourses has itself become 'globalized'. Yet while globalization has become something of a buzzword, it is an idea that is also hotly debated. Little consensus exists with respect to its definitions and its implications for policy. It has divided theorists and practitioners alike, and major disputes have emerged surrounding globalization's historical origins, its various forms and its political and cultural consequences. Some associate the idea of globalization with progress, prosperity and peace; while for others, it conjures up a sense of deprivation, disaster and doom. In normative terms, globalization has been variously regarded as a major source of new opportunities and optimism in the world, but also a source of dangerous levels of instability and inequality, both within and across nations.

As contested as the concept of globalization is, what is beyond dispute is that it refers to something new about the ways in which the world is now organized, how knowledge is produced and disseminated, how communities relate to each other

and social identities are forged. These are issues of enormous educational significance. For example, the questions of how educational purposes might now be conceptualized to drive communities into socially productive directions, reconciling the competing demands of the economy and the society, are of critical importance. Equally important is the question of how educational reform might simultaneously respond to global, national and local pressures and priorities.

This paper is intended to encourage reflection on recent debates surrounding issues of globalization and the politics of education reform.

It suggests that while the processes of globalization have been variously described, a particular approach to interpreting its forms and effects has nonetheless become globally dominant to the point of appearing self-evident. This approach is underpinned by a set of deeply ideological assumptions associated with the concept of 'neoliberalism' – an idea that markets ought to be allowed to play a foundational role in determining educational priorities and policies. This understanding of globalization has now become so widespread and implicit in our collective consciousness that it might appropriately be said to constitute a 'social imaginary' (Taylor, 2004).

This paper suggests that the neoliberal social imaginary of globalization has resulted in privileging a particular way of conceptualizing the requirements of educational reform, around the valorization of the market. A major consequence of such an approach to reform has been to undermine the link that education has traditionally had with the notion of common goods – that is, goods that are common to all people as part of a collective societal endeavour, that emphasize a participatory process in defining them, while taking into account a diversity of contexts, concepts of well-being and knowledge ecosystems (UNESCO, 2015b). This paper, however, argues that there is nothing inevitable about the neoliberal imaginary of globalization, and that the assumptions upon which it is based need to be politically challenged. While globalization is a phenomenon whose realities can no longer be overlooked, the paper insists that it must be possible to consider the requirements of educational reform in ways that are not trapped within the conceptual prism of its neoliberal imaginary. This will allow recovering the notion of education as a common good, in a manner that recognizes the realities of global interconnectivity and interdependence while not abandoning the importance of ethical imperatives of giving equal importance to economic, social, cultural and civic dimensions of learning.

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GLOBALIZATION

Over the past three decades, two major historical developments can be said to have driven the processes of contemporary globalization. First, developments in information and communication technology have influenced the global flows of capital, information, people and objects, in volumes and rates that are unprecedented. Second, the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, symbolized most visibly by the fall of the Berlin Wall, has transformed the ideological landscape, rendering globally dominant modes of thinking about economic, political and cultural exchange in market terms. For writers such as Fukuyama (1992), the end of the Cold War amounted to an 'end of history' – an irreversible triumph of market principles and liberal democracy as the sole organizing tenets for societies around the world.

While Fukuyama's pronouncement might have been premature, it cannot be denied that the demise of competing ideological narratives such as communism has created conditions that have enabled a singular understanding of economic globalization to become globally hegemonic. This understanding is tied to a range of assumptions about the market's importance in organizing economic and social life. Over time, many aspects of human life have gradually begun to be defined in market terms, leading some economists such as Stiglitz (2002) to refer to it as a form of 'market fundamentalism'. In various ways, the assumptions underlying this fundamentalism have legitimized ideas of free trade, promoted new ways of thinking about and organising work and labour relations, and privatized goods and services that were once regarded as public. It has also validated the foundational premises upon which the work of international organizations are based, enabling them to promote market ideologies more widely and confidently. Increasingly, it has also encouraged nominally socialist countries, such as China and Vietnam, to embrace many of the ideas and practices of the market.

Market ideologies have arguably become deeply embedded in our collective consciousness. This has led a number of theorists to assume that globalization is largely an economic phenomenon, which also involves a set of social processes that imply 'inexorable integration of markets, nation-states and technologies to a degree never witnessed before – in a way that is enabling

individuals, corporations and nation-states to reach round the world farther, faster, deeper and cheaper than ever before' (Friedman, 1999). The language of global integration has become ubiquitous. It suggests a world in which national boundaries are porous and should not constitute a barrier to globally stretched capital accumulation. Economic activity should be free of trade barriers and of nationally imposed bureaucratic impediments. Even as this sentiment no longer enjoys the popularity it once had, the idea of unfettered trade across national borders is still the foundational principle in terms of which many policy-makers think about the appropriate forms of global economic configurations. The concept of 'global economy' has now become ubiquitous in our lexicon, characterized as informational, knowledge-based, post-industrial and service oriented– and, of course, globally networked (Castells, 2000).

The idea of the global economy invites a new conception of governance, requiring a radically revised view of national governments' roles and responsibilities, minimizing the need for their policy intervention, and with greater reliance on the market. It suggests that the old centralized bureaucratic state structures are too slow, inefficient and 'out of sync' with the emergent needs of transnational capital; and that decentralized forms of governance are more compatible with the demands of the global economy. The popular discourses of global economy suggest that it has also changed the nature of employment, making it less secure, temporary and 'flexible', requiring a new set of skills and attitudes. The rigidities of Fordism, which emphasized standardization, mass production and predictable supply chains, have been replaced by a new Post-Fordist organizational ethos that involves vertically integrated forms of administration and just-in-time delivery systems to meet the needs of a highly differentiated global market. With production processes becoming increasingly global, it is suggested that it is now possible to work in transnational teams, taking advantage of time difference and global patterns of consumption linked to diverse cultural tastes and preferences.

This has created conditions for ever-increasing cultural interactions across national and ethnic communities. Not surprisingly, globalization is now associated with increasing levels of mobility– not only of capital, finance, goods and services but also people. People are moving across national boundaries, for a host of reasons including migration; as refugees; for trade and business; for employment opportunities; as tourists; to attend international conventions and conferences; and for education. The unprecedented levels of mobility is both a manifestation and an outcome of the ways in which global economic and political systems are working (Urry, 2007). They are heavily reliant on the creation of new cultural tastes and patterns of consumption, resulting in greater flows of money. Global mobility for work is now highly valued by global capital for its capacity to deliver greater economic productivity through the circulation of much needed skills and affordable human resources.

Around these ideas, practices and outcomes of globalization, a popular discourse exists– consisting of a range of loosely connected ideas concerning new forms of political-economic governance based on the extension of market relationships. Neoliberalism is associated with a preference for a minimalist state, concerned to promote the instrumental values of competition, economic efficiency and choice, to deregulate and privatize state functions. As Peck and Tickle (2002) maintain, neoliberalism promotes and, to an extent, normalizes a "growth-first approach" to policy, making social welfare concerns secondary. It rests on a pervasive naturalization of the logic of the market, often justified on the grounds of efficiency and even 'freedom', 'fairness' and 'equity'. It promotes an ideology of choice, and privileges 'lean' government, privatization, deregulation and competitive regimes of resource allocation. It preaches the principle of global 'free trade', applying it to both goods and services, including services such as health and education that were traditionally marked by their highly national character. Neoliberalism thus replaces an earlier notion that regarded the state provision of goods and services as necessary for ensuring the social well-being of a national population.

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NEOLIBERAL IMAGINARY

Neoliberalism implies an account of globalization that is staged in naturalistic terms, as a self-evident neutral description of contemporary realities. Yet this is far from the case, since such an account does not only *describe* certain shifts in the ways the world is organized, but also *prescribes* how it should be. It is offered as the only way of interpreting globalization, as involving a set of objective processes, giving an impression of their historical inevitability. This historical determinism thus encourages a particular understanding of recent changes in global economy and culture– a specific way of interpreting the 'facts' of global interconnectivity and interdependence. Its normative aspects are thus overlooked. It masks for example the highly ideological assumption that globalization is mostly about the liberalization and global integration of markets, and that it is

largely concerned about economic matters. It treats matters of politics and culture as secondary, to be derived from an assumed economic logic. It suggests moreover that globalization is an inevitable and irreversible historical force that benefits everyone equally. Its neutrality is further presumed in the fiction that no one is really in charge of the processes of globalization and that global markets have their own intrinsic logic.

These ideological assumptions thus portray global forces as lying outside the realm of human choice. However, as Steger (2003) points out, any critical examination of these assumptions shows them to be politically motivated, contributing towards the construction of a particular meaning of globalization. In this way, the neoliberal view of globalization is highly normative, and directs us towards a uniform consciousness of the world as a single space in which our problems are assumed to be interconnected; requiring a world-view that demands us to recognize our interdependence, albeit from a particular point of view. One of the main problems with this point of view however is that it treats globalization as “a pre-given thing, existing outside of thought” (Smith, 2001) with its own logic. It does not admit global processes to be ever-changing products of human practices, but sees them instead as expressions of the deeper logic of certain so-called economic imperatives.

Neoliberalism therefore presents various aspects of globalization as historically inevitable with which people, institutions and nations simply have to come to terms, and negotiate them as best as they can. Some are able to take advantage of its possibilities, while others are not. This view is thus based on certain taken-for-granted assumptions about the ways the global economy operates, and the manner in which power relations are filtered through its universal logic. It ‘ontologizes’ market logic, creating subjects who must view their life options through the conceptual prism constituted by its main precepts, including an emphasis on market principles, a minimalist role of the state, a deregulated labour market, and above all, individualism (Brown, 2014).

Bourdieu (2003) has shown how the allegedly descriptive accounts of globalization often slide into normative or performative prescriptions about an economics that must now encompass the whole globe. In so doing, the role of political choices is overlooked. In this way, Bourdieu sees the creation of a global economy framed by neoliberalism as a political project. Yet so dominant is this neoliberal mode of thinking about globalization that in recent decades it has become a social imaginary (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). It is no longer simply an ideology, but has acquired a taken-for-granted status, the only way in which economic, political and cultural relations can be envisaged. It has thus become a way of thinking shared by ordinary people, a kind of common understanding that makes everyday practices possible, giving it sense and legitimacy.

According to Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (2004) the idea of social imaginary involves a complex, unstructured and contingent mix of the empirical and the affective, not a “fully articulated understanding of our whole situation within which particular features of our world become evident” (p. 21)– but a powerful force in the world just the same. Its power lies in its assumed and implicit character: it is embedded in ideas and practices and events, and carries within it deeper normative notions and images. A social imaginary, according to Taylor (2004) is carried in images, myths, parables, stories, legends and other narratives and most significantly, in the contemporary era, in the mass media. It is through their shared social imaginary that relations and sociability among strangers within and across societies become possible. It is through social imaginaries that people are able to construct a sense of the future and what is needed to realize it.

Taylor maintains, however, that social imaginary is not only embedded in the everyday notions and images, but also in theories and policies. For Taylor, the distinction between social theory and social imaginary is significant. Theories are often in the possession of a relatively few people, while social imaginary is more broadly accepted, and makes possible a widely shared sense of legitimacy, without which people might not be able to work collectively towards common goals. Theories emerge out of an established social imaginary, even if they leave open the possibility of an alternative way of interpreting the world. Theories start as ideas held by a small group of people; but to become a social imaginary, they must infiltrate the wider community. It must evolve into a kind of common understanding that frames our everyday social practices. In this way, a social imaginary is both factual and normative, connecting a sense of the future with the realities of the present: “that is, we have a sense of how things usually go, but this is interwoven with an idea of how they ought to go, of what missteps would invalidate the practice” (Taylor, 2004, p. 24).

So how have various theoretical ideas about neoliberalism become a social imaginary through which the processes of globalization are now widely interpreted? There is nothing inevitable and natural about a neoliberal imaginary. Rather, it is a product of a great deal of ideological work. It has had to be ‘sold’ to the communities at large. Indeed, political and business leaders have had to struggle to persuade people about the virtues of economic globalization. Various media and educational outlets have performed this task. Business magazines and popular books have talked consistently about

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the opportunities associated with the global economy. Even the problems associated with globalization have been discussed within the neoliberal framework, as technical issues rather than matters that demand moral and political deliberations.

For more than two decades, Appadurai (1996) has written about the manner in which the neoliberal 'concatenations of images' circulate politically throughout the world. While it is of course possible for all kinds of ideas to circulate freely in global media spaces, public policies now converge towards a particular concatenation of neoliberal ideas. This concatenation is evident in the processes of policy borrowing, modelling, transfer, diffusion, appropriation and copying that occur across nation states. These processes are strengthened through the work of international organizations, whose policy deliberations and evaluation are generally couched in neoliberal terms. In high-income countries, the neoliberal imaginary is promoted vigorously by many international organizations, through their advocacy for the policies of deregulation and privatization based squarely on certain ideological beliefs about the role of the state, free trade and individual enterprise.

In low-income countries in the 1990s, the neoliberal imaginary of economic and social order was promoted through ideas of structural adjustment (Abouharb and Cingranelli, 2007) that defined, for various aid agencies, a set of conditions for loans and grants offered to developing countries, stipulating a set of beliefs that stressed not only the need for reform, but also prescribed its content. These conditions stressed the values of macro-economic discipline, trade openness and market-friendly micro-economic policies. In the field of education, this implied fiscal discipline about educational funding, a re-direction of public expenditure policies towards fields offering both high economic returns and the potential to improve income distribution, as well as privatization and deregulation. The investment decisions of transnational corporations continue to depend on a condition that educational systems are restructured and reformed in neoliberal terms.

What this suggests is that the neoliberal imaginary plays an important role in the formation of subjectivities within the globalizing context in which we now live— a context that is characterized by diffusion of social images, ideas and ideologies across communities around the world by a variety of means. Ironically, the processes of globalization themselves contribute to the global dissemination and promotion of the neoliberal imaginary, leading to a particular set of ideas about the purposes and governance of education to converge globally. Policy-makers in education often embrace these ideas either because they do not have a political choice or because they cannot imagine any feasible alternatives to the neoliberal imaginary into which they have been thoroughly socialized. Not surprisingly, therefore, recent reform efforts in education around the world are couched in neoliberal terms.

RETHINKING THE PURPOSES OF EDUCATION

So how has the neoliberal imaginary of globalization shaped the conceptualization of recent educational reforms? Perhaps most consequentially, it has spawned a demand for the purposes of education to be recast in largely economic terms. This has either sidelined the moral and cultural concerns of education entirely, or else rendered it secondary. It has suggested that education be directed at meeting the requirements of the global economy. Around the world, this instrumental view of education is now promoted vigorously by most international organizations and national governments alike, through means both formal and informal. As a result, over the past two decades, there has been an unmistakable trend toward a global policy convergence in dealing with the various pressures educational systems confront, through similar approaches to educational reform (Ball, 2008). These approaches are almost universally informed by a shift from social democratic to neoliberal assumptions. Accordingly, educational systems around the world are now under enormous pressure, not only to increase the amount of formal education young people receive, but also to align education to the requirements of the global economy.

Discussions around the purposes of education have progressively come to be informed by human capital theory, which postulates that expenditure on training and education is costly, but should be regarded as an investment. It not only increases personal incomes—since it can explain occupational wage differentials— but can also contribute to national productivity. The new human capital theory extends this claim to the global economy and to the competitive advantage of individuals, corporations and nations. While human capital theory is technically complex, in its popular form, it imagines all human behaviour to be based on the economic self-interest of individuals operating within competitive markets. It assumes economic growth and competitive advantage to be a direct outcome of the levels of investment in developing human capital. It suggests that in a global economy, performance is linked to people's knowledge stock, skill levels, learning capabilities and cultural adaptability. It therefore encourages policies that enhance labour flexibility, not only through the deregulation of the market, but also through reforms to systems of education and training, designed to align them to the changing nature of economic activity.

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The neoliberal imaginary suggests a close alignment between the advances in information and communication technologies and the changing nature of knowledge production and utilization, the organization of work and labour relations, modes of consumption and trade. It therefore suggests that education now needs to produce different kinds of subjectivities who are better able to work creatively with knowledge; who are flexible, adaptable and mobile; who are globally minded and inter-culturally confident; and who are lifelong learners. What this view implies is that learning for learning sake is no longer sufficient, and that education does not have any intrinsic ends as such, but must always be linked to the instrumental purposes of human capital development and economic self-maximization. This does not mean

that ethical and cultural concerns are no longer relevant to education, but that these concerns should be aligned to the broader framework of education's economic ends.

This perspective on educational purposes has led to an emphasis on the idea of the knowledge economy, based on a fundamentally altered nature of the relationship between the production of knowledge and its commercial application. It has been suggested that the emergence of knowledge-intensive activities and the production and diffusion of information technologies have led to the development of new models of work organization (Paul, 2002). In the knowledge economy, it is claimed, the new well-paid jobs will be in the high-technology industries such as telecommunications and financial services. This suggests the need to re-calibrate the relationship between economy and educational purposes, which systems of education around the world have struggled to define in practical policy terms. Not only OECD countries, but also fast developing economies such as Singapore and India, and countries such as China and Vietnam where the communist parties remain in control, have started defining the purposes of education in broadly similar neoliberal terms.

Around the world, it is now assumed that the knowledge economy will require a larger proportion of workers to be prepared for highly skilled jobs, workers who are competent in the use of the new technologies and who can adapt to rapid and continuous change— even if most of the new jobs are in low-paid service industries. In a rapidly changing world, the new competencies needed include such behavioural traits as adaptability, organizational loyalty and integrity, and the ability to work in culturally diverse contexts and provide leadership (OECD, 1996). This view of educational purposes involves a new approach to human capital development, grounded not so much in the amount of information students have but in the learning attributes they are able to develop, with which to deal effectively and creatively with unfamiliar and constantly changing conditions of work. It emphasizes the development of broad generic skills such as communication skills, problem solving, the ability to work independently and under pressure, take responsibility for decisions and quickly and efficiently obtain field-specific knowledge and spot its commercial potential (Foray and Lundvall, 1996).

The idea of lifelong learning is an important component in this neoliberal imaginary of the ways in which education must respond to the forces of globalization. The more general notion of lifelong learning is of course not new, and has long suggested the need to learn new knowledge and gain new skills on an on-going basis. However, this more recent concept of lifelong learning is also more specific, and is located within a neoliberal discourse of economic growth and competitiveness. As Field and Leicester (2000, p. XVII) point out, this discourse has arisen primarily from changes in the economy, including such developments as “the rapid diffusion of information and communication technologies, the constant application of science and technology, and the globalization in trade of goods and services”. This observation mirrors the OECD's contention (1996) that the “increased pace of globalization and technological change, the changing nature of work and the labour market, and the ageing of populations are among the forces emphasizing the need for continuing upgrading of work and life skills throughout life”. This shifts the focus of learning from ‘knowing that’ to ‘knowing how’, giving rise to new conceptions of the ways in which learning is defined, arranged, valued, utilized and promoted.

The renewed emphasis on the teaching of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects around the world displays a similar logic. The teaching of these subjects is encouraged not for its own sake or for better understanding of the natural world, but to take advantage of the new opportunities associated with the knowledge economy, and to contribute to the national productivity and innovation agendas. The importance of teaching technology skills is stressed not so much to enable people to have greater access to each other, but for facilitating educational growth and productivity. Consistent within the neoliberal imaginary is the importance attached to learning English: not because it is good to learn languages, but because it has become the language of global trade, and therefore useful in commercial exchange (Crystal, 1997).

Linked to this is another imperative for educational reform: the internationalization of education. Again, the idea of international education is not new. There has always been international mobility of students and researchers in search of new knowledge,

and training where this was not available locally. There has also always been an interest in intercultural knowledge, and in programmes of foreign languages and studies as a way of enhancing the level of international understanding and cooperation. The neoliberal imaginary has however added to these sentiments by highlighting the ways in which educational institutions need to engage with the emerging 'imperatives' of globalization. This discourse points to the commercial opportunities offered by the increasing movement of people, capital and ideas. It encourages a new kind of knowledge about international relations and programmes based on a particular interpretation of the changing nature of the global economy, which is assumed to be knowledge-based and requires an increased level of intercultural communication. In this way, international cooperation and the value of knowledge networks is couched in economic terms.

REFORMING GOVERNANCE

The neoliberal imaginary of globalization has not only directed educational systems towards re-thinking the purposes of education, but has also implied reforms to their governance. New requirements of governance have highlighted the corporatization, marketization and privatization of educational institutions. At the same time, greater and new demands for accountability, surveillance and increased bureaucratization of educational institutions have emerged, alongside an increasingly

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consumerist approach to education. As public expenditure for education has declined since the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis (OECD, 2013), there has been a growing emphasis on the role of the private sector in the provision of education. Yet, despite pressures on educational systems around the world to diversify –to meet the diverse needs of their clients and the global economy– educational systems have, somewhat paradoxically, tended to mimic each other, pursuing a common set of solutions to their fiscal and organizational problems. Indeed, they have even interpreted the requirements of reform in a broadly similar fashion.

Most of the arguments for the need to reform educational governance are now couched in economic terms. It is increasingly assumed that corporatization, marketization and privatization would lead to a higher degree of cost-effectiveness, enhancing the productivity of both individuals and institutions (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). The power of private property rights, market forces, and competition is now widely presumed to bring out the best in people, and that therefore privatized service delivery is considered more efficient. When educational organisations are thrust into market environments, it is argued, they become organizationally agile and innovative, with greater commitment to reform. The reforms are also regarded as necessary for economic growth, and the ability of individuals and nations to compete successfully in the global economy. Such arguments are based on a foundational idea that the 'welfare state' is a thing of the past and that it is no longer capable of meeting the requirements of both societies and individuals who are increasingly interested in managing their own affairs and who do not trust the state to look after them.

Increasingly, the notion of market-oriented efficiency has become a kind of meta-value within the framework of which other concerns of education, such as equality and social cohesion are interpreted. Efficiency generally refers to achieving the best possible outcomes with a given level of funding. Often this idea is articulated in a language that suggests 'doing more with less'. The related notion of effectiveness is usually conceived as achieving the allocated set of objectives within given time frames. In the context of declining public funds and a growing demand for education, the ideas on efficiency and effectiveness has given rise to a discourse of 'good governance', often used by international development agencies in particular, to steer lower-income countries towards organizational change that involve greater transparency of decision-making processes, forms of decentralization, the development of appropriate performance indicators, and a focus on mechanisms of quality assurance and rigorous accountability systems.

This focus on accountability has given rise to what has been referred to as an 'audit culture', based on the notion that while the market is intrinsically good, it nevertheless requires some degree of state management, especially when public funds are used to provide services. In education, influenced by theories of new public management, new systems of measuring outcomes and performance have proliferated, not only within nations but also globally.

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The ideas of international benchmark and comparison have become commonplace in systems of mutual accountability, where national systems of education open themselves to global scrutiny. It is this emphasis on global comparison that explains the growing importance that national systems of education attach to international student assessment programmes such as the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the IEA's Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). The rise of a quality assurance industry has also catalyzed the audit culture, making international comparisons seem inevitable and always beneficial.

PROBLEMS WITH THE NEOLIBERAL IMAGINARY

The global trend towards corporatization, marketization and privatization of educational institutions has become globally embedded in the ways reforms are imagined. The arguments in favour of these reforms are often presented as self-evident. Much of the discussion centres on technical aspects of how to realize corporatization, marketization and privatization, rather than to examine their virtues. It is in this way that these ideas for reform have become part of the neoliberal imaginary of globalization— increasingly regarded as the only way to interpret and respond to the challenges and opportunities associated with globalization. Largely overlooked is the fact that most of its claims cannot be substantiated with any hard data. So, for example, that private actors are more efficient and cost-effective in delivering services without compromising on quality is a contention that has repeatedly been shown to be both groundless and perhaps even unverifiable (Verger and Fontdevila, 2016), and yet this does not stop advocates of privatization from asserting it in a mantra-like manner.

The fact is that technical economic arguments cannot alone justify the ideologies and practices of corporatization, marketization and privatization. To try to do so is to grossly underestimate their inherently political nature, and also to misunderstand the role of ideology in promoting them. In the end, the political context in which privatization for instance is promoted is inherently ideological. It is based on an assumption that the private sector is inherently more productive than the public sector and that purposes of education can be adequately debated within the framework of market thinking. Furthermore, it assumes that determining whether educational systems are responsive can only be judged in terms of the extent to which they meet the perceived labour market needs of the global economy. In this way, the main purpose of education is assumed to be the role it must play in preparing students for a world of work in a changing globally interconnected and highly competitive world.

Such a view is based on a philosophical assumption that it is the self-maximizing individuals who constitute a society, which is more appropriately organized around market principles; and governments should at best play an oversight role. In its most radical version, public institutions are regarded as distant and unresponsive organs of governments that pose serious threats to individual property rights and freedom. While neoliberalism accepts that some control over markets may be necessary, it

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suggests that the welfare state exceeded its democratic authority, and is no longer relevant to contemporary economic and social life, especially under the conditions of globalization. So while social values such as freedom, justice, and efficiency retain their salience in a neoliberal imaginary of globalization, they are now also being re-articulated in its own self-image. These social democratic meaning traditions have been replaced by a new understanding informed by neoliberal assumptions. So, for example, within the neoliberal discourse, the idea of freedom has become tied to a negative view of freedom as “freedom from” as opposed to a positive view of freedom as “freedom to”, as articulated by Amartya Sen (1997)— who interprets freedom in terms of the capabilities that people have to exercise choices and live decent lives, free from poverty and exploitation.

Similarly, the idea of justice has been reduced to property rights rather than personal rights (Bowles and Gintis, 1987). A property right vests in individuals the power to enter into social relationships on the basis and extent of their property, while personal rights are based on simple membership in their social collectivity. Personal rights involve equal treatment of citizens, capacity to enjoy autonomy, equal access to participation in decision making in social institutions, and reciprocity in relations of power and authority. The neoliberal view of justice is, on the other hand, located in the processes of acquisition and production, rather than in the need to build community and social lives that are characterized by human dignity for all. Such a conception of justice necessarily privileges the global elites, who are able to access property rights within a system of asymmetrical power relations and labour exploitation.

The notion of efficiency is equally circumscribed. As noted, neoliberalism interprets it in narrow technical terms, without reference to the more fundamental moral and political criteria against which it might be measured. Nothing is efficient in its own right. We need to ask the more basic question, “efficiency in terms of what?” As the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) points out, there are strong grounds for rejecting the claim that efficiency is a morally neutral concept. Rather, it is “[...] inseparable from a mode of existence in which the contrivance of means is in central part the manipulation of human beings into compliant patterns of behaviour” (p. 71). In an organizational setting, efficiency is always achieved through control over people, involving either sanctions or hegemonic compliance. What this brief discussion shows then is that to embrace the interpretation of the concepts of freedom, justice, and efficiency in neoliberal terms is to accept a certain preferred mode of existence, and a narrow view of education that the neoliberal imaginary has so successfully promoted around the world.

The neoliberal imaginary of globalization has recast the discursive terms in which issues of educational purposes, linked to curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation, are now increasingly considered. It has also transformed the ways in which issues of educational governance are addressed. There is now a remarkable convergence around an education policy discourse proselytized by a range of international organizations. This discourse has been widely embraced by national systems in the Global North and South alike. However, the contradictions of this discourse of educational reforms informed by the neoliberal imaginary are also becoming evident. It is now increasingly recognized that neoliberalism has resulted in insecurities at all levels of society. Social inequalities across and within nations have intensified, and increased pace of life has, as Harvey (1989) pointed out more than two decades ago, had “disorienting and disruptive impact on political-economic practices, the balance of class power, as well as upon cultural and social life” (p. 171). Education’s morally and social ameliorative role has been compromised, as it is now largely viewed as an instrument of economic productivity and growth.

CONCLUSION: BEYOND NEOLIBERAL IMAGINARY

So how might we consider the requirements of educational reform under the conditions of global interconnectivity and interdependence, beyond the neoliberal imaginary? This is not an easy question to answer, because so embedded has the neoliberal imaginary become in collective consciousness that it is difficult to even consider what alternatives there might be. Perhaps the most destructive consequence of the neoliberal imaginary has been its role in sidelining moral and cultural debates around basic purposes of education. We seem to have lost the capacity to examine and discuss moral and cultural issues that had always been at the heart of education.

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An additional difficulty that we now face is that the discussions about educational purposes and governance were once held locally, with local or national governments expected to make policy decisions. These are now increasingly subject to the analyses and prescriptions provided by international agencies. The locus of educational policy-making appears to have shifted, raising the question of the extent to which national systems and local communities still retain their voice in determining their own priorities, in terms of their own distinctive cultural and historical traditions, and are not overwhelmed by policy dictates of the agencies operating across and beyond the nation-states. As international organizations, aid agencies and global educational corporations acquire a capacity to influence and sometimes constrain national policy options in the terms of neoliberal imaginary, a new politics of education policy development becomes relevant, demanding an understanding of the ways in which the global forces and local priorities relate to each other.

To realize that the neoliberal imaginary enjoys seemingly absolute dominance is not to deny the capacity that human communities have of imagining alternatives to forces that might appear immutable, irreversible and unchallengeable. Indeed it must be possible to imagine alternatives, especially in circumstances in which the gap between the ideological claims of neoliberalism and its ability to deliver collective human welfare is growing. In recent years, there has been an expanding realization that neoliberal globalization had both produced gross inequalities and is fundamentally undemocratic. In many parts of the world, this has ushered in a crisis, with dissenting opinions and voices of resistance mounting. However, these voices have been diverse and often conflicting, and have failed to come up with a viable alternative to the neoliberal understanding of globalization.

Some critics of the neoliberal understanding of globalization have sought to abandon the institutions of globalization altogether. They have blamed globalization for most of the ills afflicting their communities or nations. Fearing the loss of

national self-determination and the destruction of their cultures, they have pledged to protect their traditional ways of life, in which cultural diversity, resulting from the global mobility of people, is seen as the enemy of their ethno-nationalism. The popularity of this line of thinking has grown over the past decade, but the assumption that it is somehow possible to put a stop to the transnational mobility and networks that the new technologies have made inevitable, is both implausible and perhaps also politically dangerous. So indeed is the case with the alternatives to neoliberal globalization, which fundamentalist religious movements have sought to promote. The forms of cultural isolationism that some movements promote overlook the fact that human beings share a single planet that binds us together, not only environmentally but also socially. An assumption that major differences over religious and cultural values render impossible attempts to define global common goods is perhaps as mistaken as is the neoliberal imaginary. As the philosopher Appiah (2006) points out, while it may not be able to articulate common goods in universal terms we must not abandon attempts to develop ways of communicating and conversing across cultural and religious differences. Education should be accorded a major role in developing capacities for such conversations.

Another alternative to the neoliberal imaginary can be found among progressive movements committed to establishing a more equitable relationship across different communities. A growing number of non-government organizations, transnational networks and social movements now exist in support of what they regard as a set of universal human values, such as the protection of the environment, fair trade, labour and human rights and women's issues. These groups do not abandon globalization but seek instead to create a new world order based on global redistribution of wealth and power. In this way, they are critical of 'globalization from above' that neoliberalism espouses and call instead for 'globalization from below' favouring the marginalized and the poor. As laudable as these sentiments are, the problems with this alternative to neoliberalism are both practical and epistemic. Lacking resources and power, such social movements have not been able to sustain their efforts, often fragmenting into competing political groups. More seriously, their claim to the universality of values they espouse has not been established, and has therefore failed to be convincing across human differences and garner appeal across various groups pursuing conflicting political agendas.

The political agenda of global social movements has often been too ambitious. It is teleologically defined with a set of universal values that are assumed to apply equally to the whole world. Such values however do not take into account the culturally, politically and historically specific circumstances in which people live their daily lives, and prioritize their activities. They do not begin with contextually specific conditions in which people work and learn, but seek to define global common goods in universal terms. Such an approach works with a universal common sense about globalization, rather than seek to develop it in actual empirical conditions through processes that are both analytical and pedagogic. A productive approach might be to begin locally as a way of understanding and unmasking the actual practices and consequences of the neoliberal imaginary of globalization, and showing how its cognitive and symbolic representations are linked to various economic and political interests, and then to imagine the transformative possibilities in which common goods are defined in local terms, even as the local itself is relationally linked to the facts of global interconnectivity.

The notion of cosmopolitan learning (Rizvi, 2008) is helpful here. It begins with the assumption that under contemporary historical conditions, many of us already encounter forms of cosmopolitanism in the cultural diversity that exists in most communities. The nature of our conditions of living are rapidly changing, and giving rise to multiple possibilities of cosmopolitan encounters. However, these encounters are often banal, impregnated with various attractions of consumer culture that some are able to enjoy and others are excluded from. Cosmopolitan learning begins with the recognition of this unevenness and inequality, and seeks to make explicit the global forces that make these possible. It thus treats cosmopolitanism as ordinary and organic, but also opens up the possibilities of political intervention. It requires our conditions to be interpreted in historical, relational and reflexive ways. This demands making everyday cosmopolitan experiences –including its banal, consumerist and elitist forms– visible, open to scrutiny and competing interpretations, leading to conversations that are both factual and normative.

Once cosmopolitan experiences are made visible, the next step is to promote a critical and reflexive practice, avoiding binary thinking associated with an ethical good/bad approach, and getting deeper into the complexities of everyday decisions in which different values and the rights of different groups are in conflict or overlap, both within and across national borders. This exchange should take the form of open-ended collective conversations that provide an opportunity to discuss cosmopolitanism in relation to real lived experiences of the participants, reflecting about the complexities that are inherent to every decision, no matter how trivial or profound. In this way, it is possible to steer these experiences of ordinary existing cosmopolitanism towards a morally productive cosmopolitanism, where such moral is itself something that is negotiated rather than imposed from above as a form of technology. Instead of learning about cultures in an abstract manner, such an approach might involve exploring the crisscrossing of transnational circuits of communication, the flows of global capital and exchanges across local, transnational social practices, and their varying consequences for different people and communities. In this way, a pedagogically productive

cosmopolitan conversation need not be aimed at reaching consensus. On the contrary the value of having a profound discussion and listening to different positions with respect and an open mind should be promoted as a virtue in itself, as Appiah (2006) has suggested.

Such moral and cultural conversations are best held locally, where the concerns of the local communities are paramount, where it might be possible to consider how global hegemonic discourses of education purposes and governance should be interpreted, resisted and negotiated. Globalization has unleashed aspects of life that can no longer be overturned. There is no turning back from the new technologies; nor is it wise to reject the opportunities that they have opened up. Global mobility of people, ideas and media has brought great benefits to most communities, but clearly in ways that are uneven and unequal. In this way, globalization needs to be imagined in new ways that are not constrained by neoliberalism— in a manner that is underpinned by moral and intercultural concerns, and not shaped only by its economic possibilities; and this has to happen in every community, at each of the local, national and transnational levels.

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