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‘...two decades of neoliberal policy have generated a cupboard-full of troubles’ (Ryan, 2012, p. 23). A response to this statement making reference to one or more of the following: the media portrayal of education; discipline in schools; assessment; mental health and pupil wellbeing; curriculum reform; progressive education; the status of teachers

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Michael Priestley
Durham University

Abstract

This paper discusses the problems, tensions and paradoxes inherent to the neoliberal philosophy of education. In particular, I highlight two moral objections, fairness and corruption, to English literature curricula and assessment reforms. I conclude with a recognition of the integral importance of discursive critique.

Paper

Neoliberal policy valorises the libertarian and utilitarian principles of Enlightenment liberalism as the ideal model for all service provision (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Public services are trusted to the ‘invisible hand’ (Smith, 1811, p.242) of the free-market to self-regulate the greatest good for all from free individual choices. This ‘economisation of social life’ (Ball, 2012) marks for Sandel (2012), a transition from a market economy to a market society. Ryan’s (2012) assessment offers a useful point of access for reflecting on the problems and tensions that are encountered once neoliberal policies extend economic reasoning to social forms with traditionally non-market norms such as education (Sandel, 2012). Having initially identified the neoliberal ideal and briefly traced its development in education policy, I will subsequently explore the impact on curriculum reforms in English Literature with particular reference to changes in methods of assessment¹.

Neoliberalism emerged against a backdrop of public disillusionment with the Keynesian model of centralised state intervention to cultivate social welfare (Harvey, 2005). Embodying a post-war suspicion of totalitarianism, Friedrich Hayek (1960) and Milton Friedman (1962) argued that the top-down management of Keynesianism dangerously empowered the bureaucracy with ‘a magnitude of power over men’s minds’ (Hayek, 1960, p.379) and ‘primary control’ (Friedman, 2002, p.95) in shaping society. Furthermore Buchanan’s (1978) public choice theory seemingly demonstrated the inevitable inefficiency and ineffectiveness of self-interested bureaucrats in accounting for the interests of the public. Placed within the climate of economic depression and union striking that culminated in the 1978 ‘winter of discontent’, the public’s perception of the unsustainable expense and power of the welfare state was affirmed (Harvey, 2005). Ultimately these concerns underpin the central tenets of

¹ Given spatial constraints, discussion is focused on mainstream U.K. state education. See Smith (2012) for an account of neoliberal policy in higher education. Note also that neoliberalism is ‘the dominant global ideology’ (Ryan, 2012, p.24) and ‘is affecting education in areas as diverse as Europe, the United States, South America and Australia’ (Llewellyn & Mendick, 2011, p.50) through different policies.

Citation

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neoliberal policy; the de-regulation of centralised control and the privatisation of public service provision (Ward, 2013). All state intervention is ultimately held to be detrimental to the self-regulating market (ibid). Margaret Thatcher utilised privatisation to stimulate free-market competition in order to self-regulate supply and demand of services according to public interest and so curb the power of bureaucratic control. Provided with the freedom of a choice of services, the individual rather than the state becomes responsible for welfare (Ward, 2014). Under these laissez faire conditions, ‘education is the best economic policy we have’ (Tony Blair in Barber, 1997, p.46) for regulating employment. It empowers the individual to make informed rational choices in order to maximise their own utility and acquire the skills and credentials to be competitive in the job market (Ward, 2013). In this way, education seemingly manifests the ideal of classical liberalism; individuals act to maximise their own self-interest within the competition for employment which through the ‘neighborhood effect’ (Friedman, 2002, p.86) creates skilled, quality services and drives up labour standards to attract transnational investment (Arestis & Sawyer, 2005, p.181) and create employment opportunities that ‘benefit all’ (Hayek, 1960, p.505). Education has consequently been the foci of much neoliberal policy.

In the absence of a conventional cash nexus however, mainstream state education remains a quasi-market (Gordon & Whitty, 1997). In theory, parents and students are empowered with a choice of services to meet their needs through the reliable information published in league-tables and OFSTED reports rather than simply the ability to pay (Bridges & Jonathon, 2003). Per-capita funding based on student enrolment replaces the needs-based funding once distributed by Local Education Authorities (Hill, 2007, p. 114). Subsequent competition for students drives up standards through, to use Gray’s (1984, p.31) analogy, a Darwinist process of natural selection where unfit systems are reflexively eliminated as underperforming institutions ‘go out of business’ (Gordon & Whitty, 1997, p.461). The de-regulation of centralised funding liberates schools to become atomised self-managed institutions with the autonomy to choose products and services from private corporations and implement a competitive service according to consumer demand (Anderson, 2009). This enables scope for a creative responsiveness to local market needs and allows schools to specialise services which ultimately provides a greater diversity and choice of provision to meet the needs of all. Schools are, in this way, ultimately pressured to become entrepreneurial market enterprises. To be successful they must develop additional sources of income entirely independent of state funding and so are encouraged to forge links with private business and industry (Gordon & Whitty, 1997).

Ryan’s (2012) comments highlight the troubles, inconsistencies and paradoxes inherent in the neoliberal ideal. Fundamentally, where classical liberalism prohibits all state intervention as restrictive of individual freedom and detrimental to social good, neoliberal policy constructs the free-market conditions in which individuals practice autonomous choice (Olssen & Peters, 2005). The result is that neoliberal decentralisation paradoxically depends on centralist interventionist policies (Ball, 1993). Institutional freedom, autonomy and diversity is constrained within a central system of homogenous targets and monitored accountability. This provides a means of ‘governing without governing’ (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p.319) where perceived ‘free’ choices are regulated to enforce complicit adherence to the neoliberal agenda (Ryan, 2012). Public accountability inherently involves accountability to state criteria. The necessity of commensurable information in league tables to enable consumers to compare provision and inform market choices demands standardised performance measures and tests. Content must be consistent across all schools and is determined by the state within the National Curriculum (Bridges & Jonathon, 2003). The central administrative power of neoliberalism in reality far exceeds that practiced by the Keynesian educational bureaucracies (Ryan, 2012).

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Although neoliberal policy is universal across all UK political ideologies (Ward, 2013), in education, the emphasis on regulating standards aligns itself particularly closely with neo-conservatism (Apple, 2004). Both share a hostility to progressivist child-centred educational approaches that is grounded in a mutual distrust of teacher autonomy held to be responsible for ‘a decline in national values, the erosion of national identity and a fall in national productivity’ (Ward & Connolly, 2008). These overlapping concerns unite most emphatically with regards to English Literature (Jones, 1992). English literature education was traditionally associated with the exclusivity and academic rigour of the Grammar school after Butler’s 1944 Education Act until comprehensivisation in the 1960s (Ward & Connolly, 2008). It is from within this context that the Cox Report (1979) was commissioned by Thatcher’s conservative government to investigate declining standards in English Literature education. The report ultimately recommended a nationally prescribed list of authors as a safeguard against further intellectual and socio-cultural decline (Ward & Connolly 2008). A National Curriculum for English Literature was implemented subsequent to the 1988 Education Reform Act (Richardson, 2001).

The appeal of a standardised literary canon combines the neo-conservative emphasis on tradition and British identity with the neoliberal aim to replicate free-market competition. It facilitates a common cultural heritage whilst creating a universal currency of ‘cultural capital’ (Gove, 2013a) as the basis for competition to drive up standards. Exemplifying this combined emphasis of the National Curriculum, Education Secretary Nicky Morgan (2015) asserts that ‘[n]o school should be exempt from promoting fundamental British values, just as no school should be exempt from promoting academic rigorous standards’. ‘British values’ are essential for ensuring that the self-interested choices of individuals retain a focus on collective citizenship and social stability within the boundaries of the market outlined by neoliberal policy. With every student required by the government to pass GCSE English (DfE in Gove, 2013b), the emphasis on Britishness and cultural capital assumes that the cultural knowledge and values acquired from certain classic literary texts are imperative to be competitive in the job market. ‘We all need cultural literacy’, economist-come-literary scholar E.D. Hirsch writes, ‘certain facts, ideas, literary works that we need to know in order to operate effectively as citizens of the country in which we live’ (in Abrams, 2012). The implication is that without them, one is at a social and economic disadvantage. In this way, literary knowledge and British values become a private market commodity in the global knowledge economy (Olssen & Peters, 2005). In theory, every individual has equal access providing they make rational choices to maximise their own utility. This elevates the educational importance of the ‘British values’ of individual responsibility and hard-work (M. Richardson, lecture, 2015). As Hirsch puts it, through literary ‘cultural capital’ ‘they [the under-privileged] should learn the value of hard-work, gain the knowledge that leads to understanding and master the traditional culture in order to master its rhetoric’ (in Gove, 2013a). English Literature is translated into a common language for Michael Oakshott’s (1959) ‘conversations of mankind’. Therefore, for ex-education Secretary Michael Gove (2013a), ‘[t]he accumulation of cultural capital – the acquisition of knowledge is key to social mobility’. However whilst the literary National Curriculum is idealised by neoliberal policy as the means to address cultural and social problems, it opens up a further ‘cupboard full of troubles’ (Ryan, 2012).

The trouble exists ultimately because, as Sandel (2012) writes, the neoliberal ideal is premised on the market rationale that the commodification of a social activity does not change the composition of the product or alter its value. Because education is a public good where value is increased when shared (Olssen and Peters, 2005) by re-orientating students as components in an economic rather than social system, marketisation alters the internal composition and value of education (Apple, 2004). That this change may be, as Sandel (2012) puts it, ‘worth caring about’ (p.17) is indicated by two persistent moral objections; ‘fairness and corruption’ (p.73). It is to these two objections that we now turn in

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relation to the two primary implications of the English literature National Curriculum; British tradition and ‘cultural capital’.

The discourse of the Cox Report presupposes that certain classic canonical texts provide universal moral improvement that cultivate citizenship and social unity (Ward & Connolly, 2008). The literary National Curriculum is therefore a central outlet for the government’s commitment that ‘[y]oung people should be learning fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, tolerance and respect – because these British values are fundamentally a good thing’ (Morgan, 2015). The literary National Curriculum is selected to ‘conform to those very simple, universal, liberal British values’ (Morgan, 2015) exclusively from texts ‘written in the British Isles’ (DfE in Kennedy, 2014). The discourse of the National Curriculum consequently naturalises cultural phenomena as an ‘a-historical, a-social, non-power laden category’ of knowledge (Kress, 1995, p.35) and over-simplifies the complex, contested and elusive nature of British identity. Rather, it constructs and empowers, in Foucaultian terms (1972), an exclusive national identity. The fairness objection is ultimately concerned that free-market competition based on classic British literature privileges the dominant white middle class (Culler, 1982) and so reproduces rather than challenges systemic cultural and socio-economic inequality (Ward & Connolly, 2008). Neoliberal policy sustains this inequality to replicate ‘the spirit of envy... that is a valuable spur to economic activity’ (Johnson, 2013). ‘It is [therefore] not the imperfections of the market that make it dangerous, but rather its potential to do damage where it works most effectively’ (Miliband, 1991, p.13). By foregrounding British values, the state is able to alleviate responsibility for addressing these social problems inherent in neoliberal policy (Ward, 2013) by constructing them as primarily cultural rather than economic (Ward & Connolly, 2008). The illusion of a free market transfers an unrealistic responsibility onto the individual (Whitty, 1997).

The preoccupation with British texts is symptomatic of a broader corruption to the value of English Literature education. For Sandel (2012), to ‘corrupt a good or social practice is to degrade it, to treat it according to a lower mode of valuation than is appropriate to it’ (p.46). ‘Cultural capital’ devalues literary education by ‘crowd[ing] out [the non-market norm of] the love of reading for its own sake’ (ibid, p.61) as an end in itself with an ‘almost exclusive emphasis on instrumental’ goals (Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995, p.174) valuable only as a ‘positional good’ (Hirsch, 1977, p.27) for market advantage, as a means to an end. For ‘cultural capital’ to be a universally accessible free-market, it must convert the value of the individual’s response to literature into a standardised currency of information, knowledge and facts based on authorial nationality. ‘Simply put, it’s impossible for young people to gain the skills and attributes that we all prize, without the knowledge base to put those skills into action’ (Gove, 2013a). For Gove (2013a), ‘children need to learn these facts in a highly organised, structured way – a sort of back to basics education’. Gove’s solution is indicative of a dual interest to promote a traditional, rigorous, socially desirable brand of education associated with the British public school to motivate competition (Ball, Bowe & Gewirtz, 1994) and a practical system that can be empirically measured and compared in league tables (Bridges & Jonathon, 2003).

The purpose of education is to enrich the individual self (Hart, 1978). The liberal humanist tradition of literature assumes that in responding to a text, the individual undergoes a process of self-actualisation (Culler, 2011). The transmission of universal cultural knowledge and standardised information for competition however does not affect or reflect the unique individual self. By treating literary education according to this lower means of valuation, neoliberal policy corrupts the purpose of education, the purpose of literature and by extension human selfhood, identity and existence (Hart, 1978). The emphasis on reliable assessment measured in this way eclipses the validity of what is being measured (Davies, 2001). Neoliberal education exemplifies Lyotard’s notion of ‘performativity’ (1984,

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p.15) where the performance indicator is conflated with the performance. English Literature must ultimately ‘be operational (that is commensurable) or disappear’ (Lyotard in Blake et al, 1998). Anything unique to the individual that cannot be empirically measured is devalued or eradicated entirely.

In this way therefore the ‘school mind’ (Illich, 1974, p.44) ultimately sacrifices self-understanding from literary education for a core ‘knowledge base’ (Gove, 2013) of information. Neoliberal literary education therefore exemplifies the Deweyian (1952) binary of, on the one hand, learning as the passive sum of knowledge and on the other the Vygotskian ideal of active, personal knowing. For Dewey (1952), it is not only educational but social evil that results from this estrangement because passive learning undermines student’s creative capacity to find solutions to current issues. As Smith (1998) puts it, it is in the government interest to limit creative literary responses capable of imagining a different world as this would empower autonomous citizens to challenge existing neoliberal policy. Rather, in promoting a deference to information the government is able to construct complicit, competitive consumer citizens and market a brand of Britishness in the global economy. The core paradox of the government’s emphasis on British values and traditional canonical texts in education therefore is that if individuals had not challenged social injustice or standard convention, we would have neither the values nor literature that we are told to uphold (R. Smith, Lecture, 2014).

Given the ‘cupboard full of troubles’ inherent in neoliberal policy, to market markets to the mass electorate involves a depoliticising strategy (Apple, 2004). Neoliberal discourse naturalises the market as an objective science ‘without value’ (Friedman, 2002, p.167). The neoliberal ideal of education becomes natural and neutral and those in opposition oppose effort and merit (Mentor, et.al, 1997). The discourse of neoliberal educational policy invariably evokes a rational, practical, ‘common-sense’ rhetoric (Smith, 2000). James Tooley (1998) for instance defends the neoliberal emphasis on empirical, measurable standards in education as imperative for ensuring efficient, effective pedagogical practice as, in the words of Tony Blair (1997, p.1), ‘what counts is what works’. As Smith (2012) implies, from a post-modern perspective, this official language employed by the government prescribes rather than describes the reality of literary education and British identity so it becomes impossible to think in alternative terms (Ward, 2014). Our only resistance is to insist on speaking a different language of education.

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