
The Language of Neoliberal Education: Problems, Challenges and Opportunities

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For over two decades now, neoliberalism has been at the forefront of discussions not only in economy and finance but has gradually infiltrated our vocabulary in a number of areas as diverse as governance studies (Wacquant, 2009), criminology (Bell, 2011), health care (Glynos, 2014), jurisprudence (Grewal & Purdy, 2014), identity politics (Chun, 2016), education (Grek, 2009) etc. Its economic language associated with the promotion of effectiveness and efficiency combined with indicators and other empirical data claimed to have established a ‘culture of objectivity’ (Porter, 1995). As Christopher W. Chun emphasizes,

[n]eoliberal policies and practices have attempted to remake our everyday lives so that every aspect is minutely measured, assessed and evaluated as ‘outputs’, in accordance with manufacturing-based standards of production, and defined as ‘best practices’, which is another term adopted from corporate culture now widely used in education. (Chun, 2016: 558).

In fact, education has been at the very centre of the neoliberal public policy agenda as it allegedly represents one of the main indicators of future economic growth and individual well-being. Its – for many scholars dystopian – ‘vision’ of education as an investment is based on a [deterministic] assumption that ‘better educational outcomes are a strong predictor of economic growth’ (OECD, 2010: 3). Pupils’ achievements is said to represent an indicator of the ‘future talent pools’ (PISA, 2012: 26) and should therefore be a valid or sufficient indicator of the [economic] success in the future [assumption of the translatability of learning achievements

in economic performance]. This assumption – most visible in studies discussing international large-scale student assessments, e.g. PISA etc. – has brought to the forefront of both media and political attention the various aspects of teaching and learning. Large-scale assessments and quantitative data in general have thus become an important mechanism of the ‘neo-liberal toolkit’ associated with the process of ‘governing by numbers’ (Grek, 2007).

While the analysis of the neoliberal agenda in education is well documented (e.g. d’Agnese, 2017; Giroux, 2014; Olssen, 2010; Peters, 2011), the examination of the language of neoliberal education has been at the fringes of scholarly interest (Holborow, 2015). In particular, the expansion of the neoliberal vocabulary with egalitarian ideas such as fairness (Bøyum, 2014), justice and disadvantage (Gazeley, 2018), well-being etc. has received [at best] only limited attention. For example, one of the latest additions to the neoliberal vocabulary has been the idea of talent. For much of its history, the notion of talent has been associated with the idea of ‘careers open to talent’. Its emancipatory promise of upward social mobility has ultimately radically transformed the distribution of advantaged social positions and has had a lasting influence on the very idea of social status itself. Nevertheless, despite its emancipatory link with the equality of opportunity and social mobility itself, the notion of talent came to be affiliated also with some of the most pressing contemporary issues associated with (in)equality including the ‘ownership’ of talents (Goldman, 1987), desert (Sher, 2012), brain drain (Brock in Blake, 2015), ‘war for talent’ (Michaels, Handfield-Jones in Axelrod, 2001), talent management (Lewis i& Heckman, 2006), ‘taxation’ of talents (Hasen, 2006; Roemer, 1996 [ch. 6]; Zelenak, 2006) etc.

This shift of emphasis in the use and application of language and ideas firmly grounded in some of the well-known slogans (and other buzzwords) has had a transformative influence on our way of thinking about public policy in general. Yet, this shift of emphasis from concepts and ideas that are part of the ‘standard’ vocabulary of neoliberal education, e.g. effectiveness, efficiency, commodification, privatization, deregulation etc. to concepts and ideas that are part of a more egalitarian vocabulary, not only put large-scale assessments and quantitative data as its main product at the very centre of education policy-making but – perhaps equally important – has had a profound effect on education in general.

This journal special issue of *Šolsko polje* entitled ‘The Language of Neoliberal Education’ brings together both conceptual and empirical papers as well as an interview that addresses a wide range of problems and challenges associated with the language of neoliberalism in education

[with possible applications to other areas of public policy]. The introductory article by Vasco d'Agnesse discusses some of the linguistic choices as well as the [problematic] mixture of diverse communicative registers used by the OECD in its policy documents. In his article 'Neoliberalism and *Laissez-faire*: The Retreat from Naturalism', Mark Olssen examines some of the core features characterizing the neoliberal conception of governmentality as well as sets out the distinctive features that characterize neoliberalism (with a brief investigation of their consequences for education). Next, in his article 'Unpacking the Usage & Implications of Neoliberal Language in The Russell Group's Education Strategies', Rodolfo Levya examines the latest education strategy statements of said group's individual members to identify pedagogic and institutional trends and trajectories. As he emphasizes, the findings of his quantitative content analysis show that these statements are predominantly rife with neoliberal discursive inflections, which effectively and principally equate a university education with professional development and research with economic utility. At the same time, the findings make clear that the traditional role of universities is virtually absent. The concluding section of his article discusses what this indicates for teaching and learning in British universities. Michael Peters's essay is a discussion of neoliberalism as a form of political discourse – 'the political arithmetic of *Homo Oeconomicus*'. In the first half, the essay begins with a genealogy of political discourse with an etymology from late Middle English and Medieval Latin. The second half of the essay traces the emergence of the figure of *Homo Oeconomicus* and the rise of rational choice theory by focusing on its application to education as a commodity. Finally, as the author emphasizes, the paper turns to a discussion of Foucault's understanding of neoliberalism. Based on his decades long examination of neoliberalism and its educational agenda, Henry Giroux discusses in the interview form how the neoliberal ideology came to dominate some of the commanding institutions of contemporary societies. At the same time, he also discusses the centrality of education under neoliberal modes of governance as well as the role of large-scale assessments and quantitative data in educational research. In the central part of the interview Prof. Giroux examines neoliberalism's strategy of appropriating ideas and concepts that lie outside its gravitational orbit and its transformative influence on our way of thinking about education and public policy in general. In her article, Urška Štremfel addresses some of the questions about influence of educational (neoliberal) governance in the European Union (EU) on the development of national educational policies and practice. The theoretical dispositions, as she emphasizes, are demonstrated in the case study of Slovenia, which presents an interesting

case of studying the interference between traditional post-socialist values and the Western EU (neoliberal) model of education. In the concluding article of this journal special issue, Petar Jandrić and Sarah Hayes examine how the student-as-consumer approach in the UK HE policy has recently developed into a strong rhetoric emphasizing ‘the student experience’ as a package, including leisure, well-being, future employment and other ‘extras’.

As the articles published in this journal special issue of *Šolsko polje* testify, the neoliberal educational agenda best represented by an instrumental understanding of education, a zero-sum understanding of the relationship between freedom and equality, a distorted conception of fairness and a reductionist way of using quantitative data in educational policy has unequivocally influenced how educational problems are being tackled in both theory and practice. There is therefore ample room for further examination of these [and other] issues associated with the neoliberalism in education.

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