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A sociology of education policy: past, present and future

This account and interpretation of education policy will be concluded both by reiterating some general issues that have arisen and recurred in the text and relating these to more general policy and political issues and by signalling some current and possible future directions of travel for education policy.

Dissolutions and conservations

I have tried to emphasise throughout this text that in order to make sense of contemporary education policy it is necessary to attend both to what has changed and to what has stayed the same, both ‘dissolution’ and ‘conservation’. Some of the major dissolutions within recent education policy can be summed up in terms of what Tomlinson (2001) calls the shift from a ‘welfarist’ to a ‘post-welfarist’ or neoliberal education ‘settlement’ (see later). There are two major dimensions to this: one is substantive, that is, changes in the organisation and structure of schools, teaching and the curriculum; the other is regulatory, that is, changes in the form of governance of, and control and delivery of education. This latter dimension again has two aspects: one is changes in the form and modalities of the state; for example, Urry (2000) describes this as the shift of the role of the state from a gardener state to a gamekeeper state. That is, to use another metaphor, a move from rowing to steering; from direct to indirect forms of control; from prescription and direction to contracting out and performance management; although prescription is still very evident in some parts of policy. The other aspect of regulatory change is to

the organisational form of educational institutions themselves, from bureau-professionalism to entrepreneurial-managerialism, making schools less like public service institutions and more like businesses or business-like organisations. There are concomitant changes in the status, conditions and identities of educational workers.

These changes and dissolutions are driven by policy imperatives articulated in terms of innovation and adaptation – making schools more effective and more responsive to global economic necessities. On the other hand, at the same time, there is plenty of policy about maintaining or returning to the educational virtues of the past – whereby the proper ‘training of minds’, as Michael Gove, writing in *The Times*, put it, would be accomplished by ‘children sitting in rows, learning the kings and queens of England, the great works of literature, proper mental arithmetic, algebra by the age of 11 [and] modern foreign languages’.¹ Schools are being expected to be both innovative and conservative, to deliver both social mobility and social cohesion, to improve both cognitive and non-cognitive skills, to be both collaborative and entrepreneurial. In this sense, education policy as a whole is incoherent and impossible.

More generally, the recent plethora of education reform measures have contributed to the construction of what might be called a *neoliberal education system*: a system animated by personal rights rather than universal values, a system driven and justified by results/outputs rather than any moral principles, a system oriented to the unfolding of the fluid and probabilistic activities that constitute the global economy, a system that celebrates the possibilities of the personalisation and flexibilisation of learning offered by EdTech hardware and software. Even so, there are also ongoing attempts to celebrate a mythical past of imperial glories and the virtues and uniqueness of the national state, and to impose a highly traditional curriculum,² made up of *real* subjects, core knowledge, a teacher-centred pedagogy, strict discipline, uniforms, academic-vocational divisions, competitive sports and an emphasis on character education and virtue – or more generally non-cognitive outcomes – a form of *regressive modernisation*. Indeed, neoliberalism itself rests on references to a past in which

markets rather than the state were the ordering principle of social life (see later).

Another way in which policy supports continuity is in the conservation of multiple and overlapping inequalities. The educational apparatus of England is now a patchwork of geographically and socially uneven provision and performance, compounded and cross-cut with multiple divisions and exclusions. It is literally 'littered with history' and inundated by policy and shaped by its effects. To reiterate, this apparatus bears more than a passing resemblance to the system pre-1870, inasmuch that there are costs (direct and indirect)³ to parents, issues of uneven attendance (or exclusion), marked regional variations and a diversity of providers working within a system of 'payment by results'. There is a new patchwork of provision, full of gaps and with churches and philanthropists as major providers.

Thus, despite the enormous variety of very basic reforms over the past 35 years to the ways in which education is governed, structured and organised, it is clearly possible to see the contemporary traces, and re-emergence, of social patterns and organisational forms and political preoccupations within education policy that have been inherent in the English education system since its beginnings in the 19th century. In particular, as should be evident from previous chapters, the social differentiations and inequalities that were part of the basic building blocks of state education in the 19th century, especially those involving social class, but also race, gender and disability, continue as significant features of contemporary state education. Over and against the rhetorics of meritocracy and social mobility, selection and segregation are an insistent subtext of post-1988 education policies. This subtext is evident now in the increasing diversity of types of schools, in the re-establishing of separate vocational and non-school-based curriculum routes for some students post-14, in the defence and celebration of grammar schooling, in schemes for gifted and talented children, in setting by ability, in the continuing regional disparities in school performance and university entrance, and in the processes of classroom 'triage' which are brought into play by competitive performance requirements and benchmarking. At the

same time, the increased ‘fuzziness’ of the system as a whole creates new possibilities for *relational choosing* and *opportunity hoarding* for some social groups who are able to navigate the systems using their particular class capitals.

As in the 19th century, we can see many elements of current education policy having a dual focus. On the one hand, a concern for the management of ‘dangerous’ urban populations – the socially disadvantaged and feckless and radicalised – and, on the other hand, attention to uneven social patterns of test and examination performance. Further, running through all of this is an emphasis on a new form of individualism that draws at least in part on 19th-century liberal political philosophy in terms of ‘self-making’, responsibility, character, striving, choice, family values and entrepreneurship. Indeed, this individualism ‘in’ and ‘through’ policy is evident in the change in the language and tactics of policy, the move away from concern with structural inequalities to ‘social exclusion’ and ‘social mobility’, and a focus on the cultural rather than the economic bases of disadvantage. The language and concepts in play here construct the ‘problems’ of education in particular ways which policies then seek to solve – they form the objects about which they speak.

There is a further duality of dissolution and conservation embedded in recent policy – that is, processes of both devolution and centralisation. Despite the deregulation of provision and greater institutional freedoms granted to some schools, the national patchwork of schools is subject to targeted, systemic and partial, disparate and uncoordinated, and repetitive interventions from government. So, alongside competition and freedom and diversity and innovation, the educational apparatus is animated by a bewildering and reactive form of ‘policy hyperactivity’ – mostly aimed at raising performance – some of which is driven by ministerial enthusiasms and biases, international orthodoxies, and ad hoc and often ill-informed and ill-thought-out borrowings from other systems (Morris, 2012). In the midst of this hyperactivity, policy begets policy as new ‘solutions’ are generated to respond to the failures, inadequacies and inefficacies of previous fixes. Schools must make sense of, respond to and enact (or

not) a constant stream of initiatives, funding streams and regulations alongside continually changing measures, indicators, targets and benchmarks, all of which contribute to increasing workloads (Sellen, 2016).

What we end up with is a mix of de-concentration and intervention, which manifests ever more complex forms of educational segregation and inequality. This education is delivered to children who are increasingly stressed by the demands of performance, many of whom experience low levels of individual well-being,⁴ by teachers stressed by the demands of performance, many of whom similarly experience low levels of individual well-being – both second-order consequences of policy.

Nonetheless, despite the incessant heat and noise of policy talk about reform and the constant stream of announcements and initiatives, some of which come to little or nothing (like the National Teaching Service, the abolition of QTS, the academisation of all schools and so on), we need to be aware that the political rhetoric of reform may well exaggerate or misrepresent the effects or impact of change, that is, the extent of ‘real’ change in ‘real’ schools. Policy in practice is subject to complex institutional *recontextualisations* and reinterpretations related to local circumstances. Rhetorical claims are easy to make but the enactment of policy ‘at the chalk face’ is challenging and difficult, especially when policies are incoherent or contradictory. The conditions of change faced by different institutions make the enactment of policy more or less difficult, or possible, and more or less relevant (see Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012). In this sense, policy is *fantasmatic* (Clarke, 2012, p 179):

Fantasmatic logics are thus not so much about promoting illusions but more about backgrounding the contingent, fragmented, and incomplete nature of social reality in order to view the world as a well-structured, harmonious whole, thus blunting the latter’s political dimension and reducing the likelihood of subjects engaging in resistant political practices.

Neoliberal education

This is a system of education that at each level, from the national to the individual student, is modelled on *the firm*. An investment model that requires students, teachers and schools to make decisions about how they invest their time, resources and energy in relation to likely returns – as qualifications and labour market opportunities, as performance improvement, as social advantage. Individuals and families must take responsibility for their own performance and their own improvement and are ‘blamed’ if they do not. The state funds and manages the system, using performance measures and requirements to ‘steer at a distance’, as a kind of CEO of Education Plc, with a primary concern for global economic competitiveness. The state is a market maker and regulator, setting and monitoring the terms of trade, and at the same time allowing new providers to enter and compete, and creating new opportunities for profit from education services – several examples have been offered in this text. What is happening here, as noted, is a set of complexly related changes in the methods and form of the state, the methods and forms of education service delivery and, more generally, in the boundaries between the state, the market and civil society. The state is governing in new ways.

Generally speaking, neoliberal governing is characterised by a privileging of forms of knowledge such that the economy and its associated concepts become the lens through which all aspects of life are understood (Gerrard, 2015). In practice, this means an assertion of the value and prerogative of the market as regulator not just of economic activity but also of all forms of activity: an extension of the metaphor of the market (and market practices) to all areas of life, but a particular understanding of the market as a place of competition rather than simply exchange. This precipitates processes of commodification, commercialisation, *monetisation* and *instrumentalisation* of all activities, relations, responsibilities and practices, so that they become amenable to regulation by market principles (see Thomson, 2020). Market principles of competition therefore underpin our way of understanding the world, our relations with others and ourselves –

our mentality of government and self-government. We are made up as neoliberal subjects. Concomitantly, these new knowledges, practices and their advocates and experts produce a ‘political economy of hope’,⁵ which imperativises the optimisation of the self. At the same time, for workers like teachers, this regime of governance introduces direct relations between performance and pay, and greater diversity and precarity of employment.

An effect and mechanism of such reforms more generally has been the depoliticisation of education (in one sense); that is, the rendering of educational policy and decision-making into a set of technical issues, articulated by experts, businesses and other ‘solution-providers’, rather than a matter of values. This is what Wendy Brown calls ‘undoing the demos’ and ‘neoliberalism’s stealth revolution’, which is economising the political:

The demos disintegrates into bits of human capital; concerns with justice bow to the mandates of growth rates, credit ratings, and investment climates; liberty submits to the imperative of human capital appreciation; equality dissolves into market competition; and popular sovereignty grows incoherent. (Brown, 2015, book blurb)

This is what Peck and Tickell (2003, p 16) refer to as the ‘deep process’ of *neoliberalisation*, and they argue that ‘one of the more far-reaching effects of this deep process of neoliberalisation has been the attempt to sequester key economic policy issues beyond the reach of explicit politicisation’. That is, a politics of education that is beyond politics. In another sense, there is a re-politicisation of education. In the reworking of the arenas of education policy, there are now multiple opportunities for *worldmaking*, both in reworking of education as a business opportunity, and in the new possibilities for wealthy and influential individuals and organisations to assert their vision of education by, as Saltman (2010) puts it, ‘voting with dollars’ (see also Henig, Jacobsen and Reckhow, 2019).

Capitalising on crisis: COVID-19 and edu-business

Writing about COVID-19 and its relation to education policy at this point in time is difficult. The longer-term implications remain to be seen. During 2020–21 the virus became the main preoccupation of education policy activity in many countries, at least as regards the number of policy texts issued by governments, even though children were not at school for considerable periods of time. Generally speaking, education is currently functioning differently in many countries, but we do not know whether COVID-19 in the longer term, post-vaccine, will be regarded simply as a temporary disruption or as a major rupture. Three things are important to note. First, the response to children not being in school – by schools and by parents – has highlighted ‘new’ inequalities and exacerbated existing ones. Second, there are indications that the periods of lockdown may have effects on children’s mental health and well-being, and these effects are most evident among children from socially disadvantaged families (see *BMJ* editorial, 2021). Third, children not being in school has offered a major business opportunity to EdTech companies. Edu-businesses have acted swiftly to provide free education tools, ‘position[ing] educational technology as an integral component of education globally, bringing private sector and commercial organisations into the centre of essential education services’ (Williamson, 2020, p 1). Google and Microsoft, for example, in many countries, have offered the ‘G-Suite Education’ and ‘365 for Education’ platforms to school systems with no charge for a limited period, alongside an enormous variety of teaching and learning resources, as well as training on how to use their packages. Likewise, in the US, Blackboard has provided free access to products, resources and training designed to help schools and teachers to scale up their remote teaching and learning, including education packs, free data and analytics, while Coursera and FutureLearn have offered free-to-access training courses and entire modules. In England, all of this fits neatly into the English government’s EdTech Industrial Strategy (2019),⁶ which is aimed at ‘realising the potential of technology in education’, and is described as ‘a strategy for education providers and

the technology industry to help improve and increase the effective use of technology in education'.⁷ The plan was to 'take responsibility of providing clarity on the challenges that educators face so to catalyse business investment and drive demand' and stimulating the EdTech market by 'opening spaces for the market and education to meet through facilitating opportunities for buyers and sellers to meet' as well as 'to test products in the real world and building evidence-base effectiveness of EdTech products and services'. COVID-19 has speeded up all of this and has provided for a huge rise in the number of new account holders for the companies involved and opportunities to develop brand loyalty.

New governance

All of the above is related to and made possible by a set of more general changes in the way in which the education system is governed and education policy is 'done'. The spaces in which policy is thought and talked about have changed. The geographies of power within which education policy is constructed have shifted. The places that matter for policy are both more focused and more dispersed – focused in the powers held by the Secretary of State but also dispersed, locally, nationally and internationally, to different kinds of interested parties, like parent groups and academy chains, edu-businesses and EdTech companies, philanthropies, faith groups, contractors and consultants. Given the variety of participants in the policy process and the work of governance, it is increasingly difficult to know which voices count most, or where and how key decisions are arrived at. Think-tanks, special advisers and entrepreneurial actors are able to speak about and speak to policy through new policy networks that cross between public, private and voluntary and philanthropic spaces. Policy discourse flows through these new places, gathering pace and support and credibility as it moves. Boundary-spanning policy gurus, 'thought-leaders' and policy entrepreneurs move between national systems carrying with them policy solutions and stories of 'what works'; see, for example, Avelar and Ball (2018). However, it is important not to misrecognise

what is happening here. This is not a ‘hollowing out’ or displacement of the state; rather, it is a new modality of state power, agency and social action – a form of *metagovernance* (Jessop, 2002, p 242). Public services are increasingly delivered through a mix of ‘strategic alliances, joint working arrangements, networks, partnerships and many other forms of collaboration across sectoral and organizational boundaries’ (Falconer and McLaughlin, 2000, p 103), based upon relations involving mutuality and interdependence as opposed to hierarchy and independence. As noted in Chapter One, this constitutes a move towards a ‘polycentric state’ and a ‘bloated market state’ (Gray, 2010). These new actors *are* the state and are doing statework. What is going on here in terms of new *governance* cannot be reduced to a matter of party politics or ideology. These changes and moves are part of a generic global shift in public service policy discourses – in language, ideas, organisation, technologies, practices and experience. The education experience is remade as part of this shift.

Nonetheless, as COVID-19 has dramatically demonstrated, states continue to relate to and manage their populations through other more direct mechanisms of power, in particular in the form of what Foucault (2010) calls *biopolitics*. Biopolitics is marked by the exercise of corrective and coercive techniques for controlling populations and their mobility, and the penetration of power into every aspect of life – politics meddles with the bodies of citizens. But this takes place, not only in exceptional circumstances such those of COVID-19, but in ‘normal’ circumstances as well. There is a permanent concern which defines what Foucault calls the ‘*étatisation du biologique*’ – the ‘nationalisation of the biological’ – in which the school has its part to play. Even so, as Daniele Lorenzini points out, ‘biopolitics is always a politics of *differential vulnerability*’, of social inequality.⁸

We end then with a set of paradoxes and contradictions. That is, a modality of governing that is less centred on the state itself and yet more intrusive; a modality of governing that acts differently in relation to different sections of the population; a modality of governing in which schools are made ‘freer’ and yet given more civic responsibilities and made subject to greater direction. Education

policy itself is currently articulated through a rhetoric of equity, and yet many policies in play actually exacerbate inequalities. Education policy focuses on what schools and teachers can and must do to redress social inequality while poverty and the economic inequalities that underpin differences in educational outcomes are increasing and are ignored by policy. Education policy analysis must address itself to these paradoxes and contradictions and explore their operation, effects and consequences.

