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Inclusion, Power and Participation: Critical Perspectives

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Abstract

Participation and inclusion in and through learning is a central idea in many current policy initiatives, e.g. the European Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme. In this trend, a long struggle for participatory democracy in formerly hierarchical organizations seems to be fulfilled. Participation and inclusion are seen as central to fostering citizenship, entrepreneurship and self-realization. In idealized form, the needs of the community are met through the self-realization and full participation of all. Some scholars from 'the Nietzschean left' have been less enthusiastic, however, claiming that the rhetoric of 'learning society' and 'inclusion' indicates a transformation from a 'social regime' of (in-)equality, redistribution and justice towards a governmental regime of 'human capital' and control. When inclusion and exclusion are cast in terms of learning, the focal point becomes the individual's opportunities to develop skills and competencies (i.e. human capital) in a 'learning environment'. As claimed by the philosophers of education, Maarten Simons and Jan Masschelein (2008), the 'state' in this governmental regime is no longer a 'welfare state,' where problems are framed politically – in terms of justice, fairness etc – but a 'managing state' focused on the individual's (lack of) resources to develop adequate learning strategies, entrepreneurship etc. This state "identifies problems as being related to a lack of adequate human and social capital and attributes this lack to learning problems" (Simons and Masschelein 2008, p. 406). Even though this critique tends to overlook the many empowering projects that are taking place under this regime, such concerns should still be taken seriously. This paper argues that it is necessary to be mindful of the "new language of learning" (Biesta, 2006) and its depoliticizing effects, and at the same time to keep in mind that 'genuine' democratic participation always implies power and agenda-setting; not just deliberation.

This paper seeks to elucidate a general trend in educational policy and theory where ideals such as inclusion, citizenship and participation attain an ambiguous status. The point I want to argue is that practitioners who work with inclusion, citizenship education etc. should be aware of the general *political* context in which they work and operate. For instance, changes in the vocabulary which is used to describe educational activities are not always harmless. Sometimes a loss of vocabulary means a loss of domain for critical and political reflections, which shows itself directly and indirectly.

For instance, many places of higher education in Europe are currently witnessing major changes in the valuation of *knowledge*. In the UK, an entire philosophy department is being closed down with the argument that philosophy does not make any "measurable"

contribution to the university.¹ In Denmark, philosophers of education were attempted fired, after efforts to abolish the philosophy of education as a subject had failed.² In Norway, a university dean states that journalism has no need for teachers whose subject-knowledge is not evidence-based, notably in journalism.³

In the battle for resources and hegemony, evidence-based research *trumps* formerly important educational aims such as critical interrogation and *Bildung*. In this tragic situation, the term ‘learning’ – and, by association, possibly ‘inclusion’ – plays a key role.

The focus of my analysis is a particular use of the notion of *learning*. There is a widespread tendency in policy initiatives, research programmes etc. to conceptualize various social phenomena in terms of learning (often set out as *knowledge, skills, and values*). The current predominance of learning over other educational concepts gives rise to certain concerns. At a theoretical level, the concept of learning tends to displace other pedagogical concepts, such as *Bildung* – perspectives which John Dewey (1997) called ‘education in a wide sense’. At the level of policy, ‘learning’ takes part in a regime of total management, instrumentalism and reductionism. Taken together, as I intend to show, these tendencies will limit the scope of education and pedagogy.

But the predominance of learning does not only concern education: ‘learning’ is also a widely used term in policy discourses on e.g. unemployment and qualifications, in theories of leadership and management, in organizational reforms and in matters of health. Learning is now a ‘natural’ and ‘inherent’ term in policy practices. It is able to gather general support without the need to provide reasons, justifications etc. Such words often play specific roles in social reproduction, the preservation and solidification of existing power structures.

As several scholars have demonstrated, ‘learning’ clearly plays such a role in Western societies today. I will briefly present two of these diagnoses: ‘*learning society*’ by Gert Biesta, and ‘*entrepreneurial society*’ by Paul Simon and Jan Masschelein.

The philosopher of education Gert Biesta’s critique concerns the wide spread use of learning programmes, and he is also critical against the concept of learning itself, based on what he calls the ‘new language of learning’ (Biesta 2004, 2006). The new language of learning implies the notion of buying and selling, where educators become providers in a market. While ‘learning’ has gained discursive terrain, education has lost out, he claims. This has severely affected the notion of teaching: “Teaching has, for example, become redefined as supporting or facilitating learning, just as education is now often

¹“The Dean explained that the decision to terminate recruitment and close the programmes was ‘simply financial’, and based on the fact that the University believes that it may be able to generate more revenue if it shifts its resources to other subjects – from ‘Band D’ to ‘Band C’ students.”

<http://thethirdestate.net/2010/04/middlesex-university-shamefully-cuts-philosophy-department/> At the time of writing, King’s College is also firing philosophers.

² Incidentally, both these philosophy departments are dominated by continental philosophy, critical theory, hermeneutics etc.

³ Aslaug Mikkelsen in the researcher union’s journal *Forskerforum*, 2010.

described as the provision of learning opportunities or learning experiences.” (Biesta 2004, 71).

According to Biesta, when education is turned into the quest for learning outcomes, it becomes a commodity, i.e. goods to be purchased either directly, or via the tax bill. If the product does not meet expectations of utility – or *employability*, as the Bologna process puts it – one should be able to complain. To Biesta, this is the basis for the culture of *accountability*, which saturates contemporary European policy reforms.

‘Value for money’ has become the main principle in many of the transactions between the state and its taxpayers. This way of thinking lies at the basis of the emergence of a culture of accountability in education and other public services, which has brought about ever-tighter systems of inspection and control, and ever-more prescriptive educational protocols (Biesta 2004, 73).

The recipient of education is posited as a certain kind of customer, called *the learner* – a term that is now replacing terms like ‘pupil’, ‘child’ etc. in inclusive education. In the new language of learning, education is set as something adaptable to the customer. The educational institutions and teachers become providers, adaptors in a market – the *market of learning*, and ‘education’ is reduced to technical concerns like efficiency, effect, provision, learning environment, etc. Deeper questions, like the aim and meaning of education, on the other hand, can hardly be raised in this framework. This, to Biesta, is both a democratic problem, and a problem for the professional judgment of the teacher.

We now turn to the larger picture in which learning has a key role; to look at the governmental regimes of advanced liberal capitalism. The philosophers of education Simons and Masschelein argue that ‘learning’ has become a matter of both government and self-government, characteristic of these regimes’ *governmentality* (Simons and Masschelein 2008, 391).⁴ The foremost asset of subjects or citizens in ‘learning society’ is their ability – and willingness – to learn, that is, *to take responsibility for their life and do something about it*. This willingness and individual responsibility defines a certain sociological type, which Simons and Masschelein call the ‘entrepreneurial citizen,’ or the ‘entrepreneur of the self’. Entrepreneurship is another key element in the new language of learning, and it figures increasingly in educational policy documents. To Simons and Masschelein, entrepreneurship is about “using resources and producing a commodity that meets needs and offers an income.”(Simons and Masschelein 2008, 406). But entrepreneurship is not only a technical matter, it involves certain attitudes: “... an ‘element of alertness’ – that is, a speculative, creative, or innovative attitude to see opportunities in a competitive environment.” (ibid).

[T]he entrepreneur of the self is aware that the self is the result of a calculated investment and that the ‘success’ of the self is not guaranteed as such but depends on whether it meets needs. These could be the needs of a particular environment (a calculated investment in human capital through education or self-organized and self-

⁴ The term *gouvernementalité* comes from Michel Foucault.

directed learning) or the needs of oneself as a consumer (a calculated investment in human capital to meet the need of self-realization) (Simons and Masschelein 2008, 407).

Following Foucault theorists of modernity like Habermas, Simons and Masschelein claim that, in the entrepreneurial regime, there is no ‘colonization’ of the social sphere (life world) by the economic sphere (system) because there is no purely economic sphere: *all is management*. Accordingly, education is no longer set within a ‘social regime of government,’ whose rationale is social norms, or in a welfare state where the economic sphere is conceived apart from the social sphere. In entrepreneurial government, the ‘governmental rationality’ is characterized by “the economization of the social.” Problems of governance are cast in terms of “investment in human capital and the presence of a ‘will to learn’,” that is, the “presence or absence of entrepreneurship.”(p. 408). The ‘strategic components’ in this regime are ‘inclusion,’ ‘capital’ and ‘learning.’ (p. 406).

The ongoing transformation from the social regime of modernity to entrepreneurial governance and ‘learning society’ also resonates with Zygmunt Bauman’s diagnosis of the ‘society of consumers,’ where

... no one can become a subject without first turning into a commodity, and no one can keep his or her subjectness secure without perpetually resuscitating, resurrecting and replenishing the capacities expected and required of a sellable commodity (Bauman 2007, 12).

While the regime of entrepreneurship denotes commoditization and economism, it is first and foremost a type of *total management*, where *control* saturates all of society’s instituted practices. In the entrepreneurial regime, this control is effectively carried out by the subjects themselves, who, according to Simons and Masschelein, are put before a ‘permanent economic tribunal,’ where, in the name of ‘personal freedom’ and ‘self-realization,’ they are submitted to government and governmental technologies which operate through ‘freedom.’ (Simons and Masschelein 2008).⁵

The entrepreneurial self experiences learning as the force to guarantee a momentary emancipation in environments through delivering useful competencies. Learning, therefore, is experienced as a force to deal with the ‘mancipium’ or the hold of the environment (such as limited resources or needs). Hence, for the entrepreneurial self, learning and living become indistinguishable (Simons and Masschelein 2008, 409).

The regime of learning is lifelong; like an *indefinite postponement*, as noted by Mark Fisher:

⁵ The influence of Foucault’s works on governmentality and biopolitics is clear. The authors also make good use of many other studies in the same tradition. This point can be elaborated further, e.g. by the claim by Mark Fisher that there is no way of knowing whether one may be able to fulfill the standards of the tribunal: “The difference between the old/heavy and new/light inspection system corresponds ... to Kafka’s distinction between ostensible acquittal and indefinite postponement [...]. Indefinite postponement [...] keeps your case at the lowest level of the court, but at the cost of an anxiety that never ends” (Fisher 2009, 51). The standards are unclear, and often the criteria need to be worked out by the subjects themselves. In European educational systems, this self-auditing now starts at a very early age.

Education as a lifelong process ... Training that persists for as long as your working life continues ... Work you take home with you ... Working from home, homing from work. [...] The carceral regime of discipline is being eroded by the technologies of control, with their systems of perpetual consumption and continuous development (Fisher 2009, 22--23).

As already mentioned, the use of the term 'learning' is not limited to the sphere of education, it is also used to denote and address problems like unemployment, poor health/mental health, social exclusion, etc. These formerly social problems are now conceptualized as the *inadequate management of learning resources*, that is, the subject's (deficient) willingness to adapt and learn. Similarly, at the political level, problems concerning social unrest, class interests etc. are recast as the need for 'citizenship education' – consisting in 'democratic knowledge, skills and competences' – or as the *lack of 'inclusion.'*

The 'entrepreneurial attitude' – where 'inclusion' is a form of permanent adjustment – has no need for radical interrogation of the larger social structures. This is why inclusion must also be set within a critical framework – inclusion to what, at what cost, for what?

Furthermore, inclusion and participation should also be about power – power to potentially change the instituted practices where we partake, which control or regulate our lives. For participation to be emancipatory, it must involve interrogation of the power structures, not just adaptation within the local environment. And this, in turn, implies agenda-setting – not just deliberation over ready-made themes. Real inclusion and participation is, in short, a political matter.

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