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NEOLIBERAL VALUES AND DISABILITY: CRITICAL APPROACH TO INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Abstract

Neoliberalism is a global phenomenon which has various forms. It is an ideology, as well as a package of political actions. Although it is an economic concept, nowadays it is present in all areas of social life, including education. Explicitly, neoliberalism facilitates cooperation between diverse social factors. However, its implicit purposes are capital accumulation and economic growth, and thus in collision with civil rights such as free access to social resources. From the aspect of education, neoliberalism is a pillar of social practices based on one's own activity, i.e. participation. This means that an individual is responsible for own well-being, regardless of conditions he/she lives in. Since children with disabilities are socially marginalized, neoliberal principles of participation within mainstream settings and taking over responsibility for own action in current social conditions are questionable. Therefore, in this paper, the presence of neoliberal orientation in inclusive education will be scrutinized. In this way, a critical approach to contemporary interpretations of inclusive education is addressed.

Keywords: inclusive education, children with disabilities, special education, neoliberalism, participation

Introduction

During 1970s and 1980s, neoliberalism was perceived as political and economic practice focused on individual's well-being (Steger & Roy, 2010). Society's neoliberal orientation was characterized with entrepreneurship and personal hedonism as a mechanism of stimulation of economy and trade (Harvey, 2007). According to these ideas, government's responsibility was providing appropriate conditions for trade and capital circulation. However, in certain social areas, which are non-profitable (such as education, social care and nature preservation), governments made interventions for the emerging capital. Neoliberalism, according to Torres (2009), is supported by many international organizations which promote decentralization of education and its standardization (including outcomes), and introduction of new methods of teaching, with one purpose only – to increase its efficiency, i.e. competence of children. The fact that competencies are closely related to neoliberalism can be seen in the presence of educational recommendations and standards which are, basically, norms prescribed by certain interests groups (Barnes & Mercer, 2001). In relation to inclusive education, competencies are one of its major arguments, i.e. competencies acquisition is interpreted as pro inclusion argument. Closely observed, social regulation of competence acquisition (through educational institutions and their protocols) is argued as a prerequisite of autonomous and efficient adulthood. Thus, educational institutions are places for preparing future workers and tax payers. In other words, neoliberalism is driven by material well-being and profit accumulation, even in those areas which can't emerge

profit, such as social services, health care, and education. These areas exactly have a great importance for children with disabilities and their families.

In education, neoliberal values are smokescreened with cost benefit analyses, strategic plans, and educational outcomes (Steger & Roy, 2010). This is in collision with inclusive values such as individuality, personal growth, belonging, and togetherness because neoliberalism is about competitiveness, capital accumulation and consumption of material goods. I.e. neoliberal values and inclusion are mutually exclusive. Since institutions regulate social practices, and, subsequently, individual's behaviour (as much as it is possible), educational institutions have one big task to preform continuously and that's to maintain dominant social order (Foucault, 2003; Searle, 2010). Thus, the question is forming – can contemporary education, which is explicitly based on inclusive values (yet driven with neoliberal ones), truly contribute to child's well-being? Also, what is the teachers' role in the classrooms – should they nurture basic human values such as togetherness and mutual support, or should they be focused on competencies and productiveness? Some may argue that there is no need for dichotomy in analysis of inclusive education, which is dystopia. Moreover, critical views on contemporary educational concepts contribute to social dialogue, and exchange of personal experiences. At this point, inclusive education is rarely scrutinized. Thanks to its roots in human rights, scholars see this concept free from critical questioning. Critical approach is often attacked as researcher's anti-inclusive orientation, which resulted with rare philosophical underpinning of this field. However, if we acknowledge that epistemology and ontology are the pillars of education in general, than we can question its various forms, and repercussions on one's life, regardless of social imperatives and expectations. In that way science is proven to be autonomous and free from politics.

Vagueness of Inclusive Education

Inclusive education, interpreted as a child's presence in the mainstream settings, indicates that physical positioning of children with disabilities in mainstream classes is sufficient. However, close observation of educational practices showed that children with disabilities experience rejection if the environment isn't adequately prepared. Adequate preparation encompasses the presence of positive attitudes of preschool teachers, peers and parents towards children with disabilities, an individual program based on child's developing skills and abilities, and functional didactic materials (Buysse, Wesley & Keyes, 1998), and not just architectural design. Furthermore, inclusion interpreted solely as mainstreaming is based on a presumption that all children with disabilities can fully participate in mainstream classes on their own. This misconception is derived from its ideological foundation, and a close connection to human rights. Briefly, the right to an adequate education become a synonym for mainstreaming, which brings us to a reduction at a linguistic and semiotic level. Today, the term inclusion is used to describe various social and educational contexts, without clear criteria. According to Bishop and Trout (2005), terminology reduction is often present when it comes to socially marginalized groups. This happens due to science's moral issues of protecting the oppressed, i.e. scientists tend not to profound already present subordination of certain social groups. Another problem in inclusive education is that in a short amount of time it

became a widely accepted concept, with a vast of (more or less competent) practitioners interested in this issue. Nowadays, many individuals feel an urge to work with children and adults with disabilities, often without adequate education, especially in the field of philosophy. Arbitrary definitions, constructed upon one's own opinion, and not the scientific canon, result in confusion and inappropriate practices.

However, if we accept that inclusion is an active participation which presupposes a free access to social resources (including interpersonal relations) with an opportunity to make free choices, then inclusive education represents a possibility and not an obligation for a child with a disability and his/her family. This means that inclusive education and special education, as two organizational forms of education for children with disabilities, are not mutually exclusive. At the pragmatic level, inclusive education could embrace special education's resources, such as the canon of knowledge about disabilities and appropriate teaching strategies. This is possible from at least two reasons: firstly, an insight into pedagogical and philosophical literature from the last three decades (Gould, 1981; Shakespeare, 1996; Danforth & Rhodes, 1997; Thomas & Tarr, 1999; Norwich, 2008; Thomas & Loxley, 2001; Vehmas, 2004; Florian, 2006; Slee, 2006) reveals the presence of an initiative for deconstruction of terminology based solely on the normative approach, which is, according to these authors, the main reason for child's disabilities, not the impairment itself. In other words, disability is a result of social arrangements, not person's biological characteristics. Secondly, if the term special is referring to specific teaching strategies, and rehabilitation methods as well as therapeutic actions, then they can't be compared to those intended for so-called children without disabilities. This means that inclusive education distinguishes appropriate practices for children with disabilities from those intended for their peers. However, contemporary educational policies and agendas blurry address terms like inclusion, disability, and developmentally appropriateness, which results with conceptual equalization of inclusive education with mainstreaming. Moreover, inclusive education today is argued to be the only possible and only appropriate form of education for children with disabilities, which resulted with an extreme perspective on inclusion (Florian, 2006). Since the inclusive education is accepted as an indicator of quality of education at international level, it is important to question its implicit meaning and explicit interpretations, and subsequently, its repercussions on the quality of life of children with disabilities.

Further reasons of misinterpretations of inclusive education could be found in linguistics and semiotics. One of the major problems in linguistics is the presence of *nomenclaturism*, i.e. misconception that language is an inventory of names for objects, materials, phenomena etc. (DeSassure acc. to Joseph, 2004). I.e. inclusion isn't just a term that denominates the process of placing children with disabilities into so called mainstream settings. It is a multidimensional phenomenon consisted of social protocols and interpersonal relations. Besides, comprehension/ understanding of certain terms is a complex process based on neurolinguistic recognition and distinction of lexical elements. Whereas, almost every word could be used in various ways, according to the context, it is important to recognize its "generalized meaning", i.e. its "denotative function or the representative function and system of associations and generalizations which stands in its core" (Vygotsky

acc. to Luria, 1982, p. 182). This "polysemic nature of language indicates that understanding is related to different systems of generalization and an active process of choosing between its possible meanings" (Luria, 1982, p. 184). Today, in the highly competitive societies, the process of constructing terms related to education is influenced by neoliberalism because the outcomes are the most important aspect of education. Children are pushed to achieve prescribed outcomes, otherwise they will be identified as underachievers and problematic. It is obvious that this kind of approach to education is the least inclusive one. Moreover, this contributes to classroom marginalization of children from underprivileged backgrounds and children with disabilities. Therefore, inclusive education presupposes scrutinizing terms from various standpoints. In that way, the dialectic exchange between a child with disability and its surrounding is supported, and, subsequently, characteristics of inclusive education could be identified. Otherwise, we are tapping in the dark, just assuming what the inclusive education is all about.

Implicitness of Neoliberal Values in Inclusive Education

Neoliberalism, as we know it today, has been developing through several decades, yet one look in the past shows that its first wave was complement with inclusive values. In fact, first neoliberal wave was focused on achieving personal freedoms and right to work for own economic benefit, i.e. personal wealth (Torres, 2009). Access to the labour market is an important aspect of life for people with disabilities, because for ages, societies perceived them as a population unable to work and contribute to their own independence. However, the second wave of neoliberalism (from 1990 until 2000) was oriented on the societies' progress through individuals' achievements (Steger & Roy, 2010), i.e. society's well-fare had to be achieved through individual's efforts. Actually, these years were the time when inclusion emerged, as one (and today interpreted as the only) solution for society's competitiveness. This resulted in a social regulation of inclusive education where an accent was put on learning skills for independent living. From my point of view, the imposition of independent living is denying one's right to a social support. Also, switching responsibilities from society to person contributes to exclusion, poverty and a gap between the marginalized and their surroundings. According to Castel (2003, p. 12), every society has its so-called "dependent communities", i.e. "citizens who, due to their characteristics, need society's support", and fair societies recognize their presence and provide adequate support. Often, education is obligated to provide support on its own capacity, with minimum involvement of other institutions such as social welfare and health care. Some authors (Chomsky, 1999; Castel, 2003; Foucault, 2003; Torres, 2009) see the reason for this paradox of inclusive education see in society's sustainability, i.e. societies must control the realization of human rights because an omnipresent access to resources needed for one's rights, potentially leads to destabilization of government's stability. Although these claims are based on the philosophy of inclusion, and rarely addressed in media, pedagogical literature, and public discussions, Fuchs and Fuchs (1998) warn us that the absence of coordination between social systems and the lack of adequate social conditions potentially leads to failure of inclusive education. Fortunately, at this point, teachers are overarching this problem with their own enthusiasm, and personal acquaintances.

According to some authors, mainly anthropologists and philosophers (Chomsky, 1999; Bruner, 2000; Schönpflug, 2001; Searle, 2010) primary tasks of educational institutions are the regulation of social relations and individual's behaviour. In other words, education is a mechanism for the maintenance of a social order. Subsequently, teachers are burdened with implementational parallelism – in one hand they are expected to nourish human values and reciprocity in classrooms, while in the other hand, they have to equip children with prescribed competencies (especially those concerning independent living and productive adulthood) in highly competitive settings. Since neoliberalism is adjustable to diverse social contexts (Steger & Roy, 2010), it is important to identify the drivers of the inclusive education. Is inclusive education driven by the inside will of dominant population (so-called non-disabled people), or is inclusive education imposed from outside/ social authority, or maybe, is inclusive education somewhere in between these points? Nevertheless, it is important to scrutinize proclaimed values and possible benefits from different standpoints, individual's as well as the one of the society. In that process, science has an inevitable role, and scientists have a moral and ethical obligation to support diverse views. Specifically, scientist should provide support during social dialogue and construction of inclusive education, not just to stand by and observe what will happen next.

Conclusion

Appropriate scrutinization of inclusive education presupposes the philosophical underpinning, especially epistemology and ontology, which enables us to question its purpose – is inclusive education a social value, or is it a normative goal? Despite many interpretations and perspectives within our reach, inclusion is basically used without any critical questioning. This reduction in social practice wouldn't be problematic if societies were arranged in the way that supports individual's self-actualization, and if social resources were accessible to everyone, i.e. if socio-economic conditions would contribute to equality among all people. Although this sounds like utopia, it is the core process of divided responsibility, and, subsequently, democracy.

At this point, inclusive education is equalized with mainstreaming, which contributes to social oppression of children with disabilities, especially those with severe impairments. It is obvious that inclusive education conceals many social issues such as independence, profit accumulation and sustainable politics, which are, basically, neoliberal values. Despite certain interpretation that this kind of approach is anti-inclusive and discriminating, critical approach to inclusive education is needed. Knowing and understanding inclusion's weaknesses and benefits leads to its development and quality enhancement, which is one of the strongest argument for constructing a dialogue on this issue.

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