

Introduction

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The Current Business and Economics Driven Discourse and Education: Perspectives from Around the World

Abstract

This paper sets the tone for the 2017 BCES Conference in that it confronts the educators and educationists assembled at the opening ceremony with some of the manifestations of the current business and economics driven orientation to life in general and to education in particular. It demonstrates how and to what extent the neoliberal life-view or orientation has so far colonized the minds of educators and educationists and affected their occupational environment. The paper concludes with a brief critical discussion of neoliberal tenets and their effects on education based on professional pedagogical insight into the human being, societal relationships and education.

Keywords: neoliberalism, education, school, university, academia, business, economics

Introduction

We are assembled at this Conference mainly as educators (teachers) and educationists (academics) attached to institutions of learning such as schools, colleges and universities. In this capacity, many of us have been confronted with phenomena such as the following in our work environment:

- Many of us have witnessed the commercialisation and corporization of our institutions of (higher) learning. Most of our modern institutions of learning have been morphed into businesses offering knowledge packaged and branded in the form of teaching programs for sale to interested clients. In a sense, our modern institutions of teaching and learning have become part of the knowledge industry (Conradie, 2011, pp. 424-432). Many of them see themselves as business corporations and hence have blatantly adopted business value systems, such as making profit in some sense (Rustin, 2016, pp. 150-156). According to Welch (1998, p. 157), such institutions have adopted the doctrines of economism.
- Many institutions of (higher) learning resultantly have succumbed to the demands of a consumerist culture and ethos (Conradie, 2011, p. 432, p. 439) and have become market-led and subjected to an individualistic rationality (Marois & Pradello, 2015, p. 1).
- Knowledge has been commodified and packaged in accordance with the wishes of the “clients”, the students. Lecturers are seen as “service

consultants and providers” (Conradie, 2011, p. 427). In sum, academics are seen – in typical utilitarian spirit – as social and human capital (Fevre, 1997, p. 3) who, together with their students are expected to constantly tend to their own present and future value in the market (Brown in Shenk, 2015). Learning is rendered as a “cost-effective policy outcome” (Ball, 2003, p. 218).

- Education (teaching and learning) is seen as a sorting and grading process; only those with the most “value in the market” can effectively enter the market (Rustin, 2016, p. 148). Like all other commodities, individuals have economic value; their value depends on the level of their skills and training, and the extent to which they might contribute to the economic growth of the country (Welch, 1998, p. 158). This neoliberal approach motivates students to be more interested in grades, qualifications and credentials than in holistic education in the sense of forming, guiding and equipping (Sparkes, 2007, p. 521). The common understanding that education and the economy are inextricably connected is reinterpreted as “education for economic growth, for purposes of the economy” (Maistry, 2014, p. 60).
- This view of education leads to the application of mechanistic and instrumental modes of instruction (Welch, 1998, p. 162; Maistry, 2014, p. 63) and a narrowed-down curriculum that is deemed to be more practical and hence in accordance with market demands (Welch, 1998, p. 163).
- Institutions of (higher) learning tend to measure their value (worth) in terms of their ratings in the national and international arena (Welch, 1998, p. 167).
- Neoliberalism furthermore has given impetus to the rise of economically “useful” occupations (Rustin, 2016, p. 157), and institutions of (higher) education have obliged by introducing “occupational curricula” (Rosenzweig, 1994, p. 13). This in turn has led to the neglect and even loss of many human and social science disciplines (Conradie, 2011, p. 427). This vocationalising of the curriculum in response to the economic “law” of supply and demand has led to a narrowing-down of the curriculum (Welch, 1998, p. 157). It has led, among others, to an overemphasis of Mathematics and Science at the expense of the “softer sciences” (the humanities) that quality of life and democracy depend on (Maistry, 2014, p. 68).
- Neoliberalism in our institutions of (higher) learning has meant greater emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness in line with corporate interests (Conradie, 2011, p. 427) and with higher production values (Rustin, 2016, p. 158). In the process, managers pay the human beings involved what they are deemed worth in terms of their productivity (Palley, 2004), which is in accordance with the cost-benefit factor (Adams, 2006, p. 8) and the supply and demand “law” (Welch, 1998, p. 157). All of this leads to emphasis on performativity and to an audit culture, in many cases based on inaccurate and inappropriate quantitative performance and productivity indicators (Welch, 1998, p. 160; Ball, 2003, p. 216, p. 219; Sparkes, 2007, p. 532, p. 541). Productivity is for instance measured in terms of the number of applications, student registrations and passes (input over throughput) and income generated (Conradie, 2011, p. 425).
- Many states’ policies regarding education have created openings for the play of market forces in (higher) education, in the process creating conditions for

corporate managerialism (Conradie, 2011, p. 426; Jansen, 2009, p. 144 ff.; Rustin, 2016, p. 157; Adams, 2006, pp. 7-8; Sparkes, 2007, p. 528).

- Important for us in this room, neoliberalism sees education as an investment (Tan, 2014, p. 412, p. 437). The state and institutions of (higher) learning view students as investing in their own futures (Rustin, 2016, p. 155, p. 158). This inevitably leads to a narrowing-down of the purpose of education: education is seen as essentially to provide the workforce needed by the economy (Rustin, 2016, p. 148).

All of these conditions and challenges have been brought about by the phenomenon referred to in literature as neoliberalism. An examination of the literature on the subject reveals that it is notoriously difficult to define neoliberalism and its central tenets. What is clear, however, is that it is a mental (and affective, cf. Anderson, 2016, p. 743) attitude in terms of which all walks of life are assumed to conform to the laws of economics and business, even those normally supposedly falling outside of the ambit of economics, trade, industry and business, as Foucault (2008, p. 132) has argued. Neoliberalism could be described as a worldwide drive to be more effective, efficient and productive in whatever is undertaken, even to the extent that non-commercial activities such as education are being subjected to norms normally associated with business corporations.

Before I go on to a critical discussion of these phenomena, I must point out that I have, for purposes of this paper, concentrated on those aspects of neoliberalism that seem to affect us directly as educators and academics. I have therefore not attempted to derive a precise definition of neoliberalism, which as Anderson (2015, p. 735) correctly remarked, is a very complex phenomenon. It is not a singular, coherent entity (ideology / ideological viewpoint / discourse – Anderson, 2015, p. 737) with a simple origin point. Neither have I touched on matters such as globalisation and internationalisation, important as they might be. The mere fact that we are all gathered in this room attests to the effects of globalisation and internationalisation. Many of us have become world citizens and travelers, and users of the technology that helps us transcend all knowledge and other boundaries. We have all been subjected to international rates of exchange, international competition, and to the dangers of political and technological terrorism (fake news, click bait and so on), mass migration, water and food shortages, and even to the threat of weapons of mass destruction, earth warming, and the depletion of species, oil and gas. We leave these manifestations of a neoliberal view of life by the wayside and concentrate on those that affect us directly as educators and educationists.

Facing the challenges of neoliberalism in educational context

Each of the neoliberal perspectives enumerated above embodies a challenge to us as educationists and educators. How should we respond to each of them and all of them as a combined challenge? As far as I can see now, there are three ways of doing so. The first, which I will demonstrate in the rest of this paper, is to criticize some of the basic tenets of neoliberalism and its approach to education based on our professional insight into what human beings, society and education actually are and should be. I will follow the second approach in my paper tomorrow, where I shall discuss how and to what extent there has been a worldwide backlash against neoliberalism and its approach to education, a development that has assumed such

proportions that some observers have referred to it as a “movement”. I shall argue that this “movement” is not based on any specific life-view or philosophical principles regarding being human, our societal relationships or education but rather on dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the current neoliberal orientation to life in general, including with our social institutions and education. I intend presenting a more principled (and more philosophical) response to neoliberalism at the *Education and New Developments* Conference in Lisbon, Portugal next week (cf. Van der Walt, 2017).

The following are a number of objections to the neoliberal orientation to life, our social institutions and education, based on our professional insight into the essence of being human, the roles of our institutions of (higher) learning and of education.

A first objection to the neoliberal orientation, and in this I agree with Conradie (2011, p. 425), is that its portrayal of our institutions of (higher) learning is reductionist. It subjects all of life, and particularly education to the norms of economics, commerce, industry and trade, and tends to regard institutions of learning as business corporations which have to operate in line with business norms, and hence have to be managed as such. Neoliberalism, as Foucault (2008, p. 132, p. 145, pp. 243-244, p. 268) has observed, is an encroachment onto previously non-economic and non-business domains such as education to create market conditions and a regulation of society by the market.

Second, the utilitarianism, the monetarist economic thought (Anderson, 2015, p. 734) and commercialisation of societal relationships or collectives that are all so characteristic of neoliberalism prevent us from appreciating the true value of education (Fevre, 1997, abstract). Our society has to value education for its own sake, and not because of what we can attain from it in terms of qualifications or credentials as a tradeable commodity. We have to return to a view of education as formative rather than as functionalist, technicist, mechanistic and instrumentalist; learners should be educated in the true sense of the word; they should be formed rather than drilled (Welch, 1998, p. 161, p. 170). It must be understood that learning and scholarship possess intrinsic value in themselves but at the same time can be a contributor to our national economies. We have to appreciate the essence of education, for its own sake but also for the sake of our lives in general, including for our economy, trade and industry (Rustin, 2016, pp. 165-166).

In the process, as Rustin (2016, p. 160, pp. 165-166) has reminded us, we have in the third place to rekindle our appreciation of a more humanistic (even classical) approach to education. In essence, education has to do with the growth and formation of body and mind and of spiritual values (Welch, 1998, p. 169). A proper education creates spaces for freedom of mind in the form of creative thinking (Maistry, 2014, p. 69).

In the fourth place, while we understand that the economy, trade and finance play an important role in our personal and institutional lives (Welch, 1998, p. 158) and that economics and education are intrinsically connected (Maistry, 2014, p. 60), we have to keep in mind that economics, trade, finance and industry all form but one facet of human existence (Diedericks, 2016, p. 5). I agree with Brown (in Shenk, 2015) when she insists that we have to resist the domination of our lives by capital, as well as the commercialisation of things that should be protected against market

forces such as education, scholarship, teaching and learning. We should not subject education to economic and political interests that have very little to do with the intrinsic value of education. We have to be wary of the commodification of teaching and learning and of knowledge (Welch, 1998, p. 160). Education should not be reduced to an ‘auditable commodity’ (Ball, 2003, p. 225). Our lives should not be dictated or shaped by market conduct (Brown in Shenk, 2015). To allow it to be determined by these forces would lead to the impoverishment of education (Welch, 1998, p. 165), in other words, to a reductionist view of education.

In the fifth place we should promote an egalitarian sharing of our public goods (such as university education). Education is not only for the wealthy and the politically powerful.

Sixth, we have to restore the status of the human being from that of *homo oeconomicus*, in other words from a view of the human being as “financialised human and social capital”, to a view that people are complete human beings educated and called to conduct a full and meaningful life. Our status, also as educationists and educators, should be restored from that of market creatures and value-enhancing human capital to that of responsible and accountable persons functioning in civic, familial, political, religious and ethical life. The time has come, according to Maistry (2014, p. 70), to re-centre the human subject and to engage in alternative (i.e. anti- or non-neoliberal) discourses on the purpose of education.

Seventh, efficiency and effectiveness are indeed important to us as educators and educationists. However, as Welch (1998, p. 157) has rightly argued, efficiency should be humane and honourable, characterised by felicity, loyalty, participation and right conduct (ethical). We have to guard against a tendency to promote efficiency by discounting the less quantifiable aspects of education or assigning (arbitrary) economic values to them (Welch, 1998, p. 158). We should not employ questionable and arbitrary quantitative measures to determine our value and efficiency as university staff or those of our students (Sparkes, 2007, p. 541).

In the eighth place, we have to resist managerialist tendencies in institutions of (higher) learning. As academics, we have to reclaim our autonomy as professionals, as academic departments, schools, faculties and institutions and take charge of our own work as tutors, mentors and researchers. Put differently, we have to take charge of the core functions of our work as academics (Jansen, 2009, p. 145). Institutions of (higher) learning in general also should be able to organise their own affairs without interference from either the state or business (Adams, 2006, p. 4).

In the ninth place, we have to resist the commercialisation, vocationalisation and narrowing of the curriculum by imposing business-style principles on it. We also have to resist the economisation of the curriculum due to subjecting it to the law of supply and demand (Welch, 1998, p. 157). In this process, we have to guard against the introduction of functional and utilitarian disciplines at the expense of the “softer sciences”, the humanities. A democracy also needs the humanities to function well (Maistry, 2014, pp. 67-68). I agree with Conradie (2011, p. 430) when he claims that when we carry the tenets of neoliberalism to the extreme, it would undermine the quality of our lives as educators and also those of our students.

Finally, we have to keep in mind that neoliberalism is a stealthy influence that has slowly but surely colonised our minds and habitus. It has become for many people, as Anderson (2015, p. 738) recently concluded, a form of common sense

that “feels coherent” and therefore intuitive. We have to be aware of this and resist its influence wherever possible but especially in the pedagogical sphere. It is not merely that performativity tends to get in the way of our “real academic work”; it has already changed who and what we are, our humanity. It leaves very little space for our academic autonomous individual or collective ethical self to function (Ball, 2003, p. 226).

Conclusion

In this paper, I focused on the challenges that have in recent years emerged from a business and commercialized view of the human being, institutions of learning and education. This orientation to life in general and education in particular has so colonised our minds that many of us are hardly aware of its influence on how we approach education. In recent years, however, there has been a three-fold backlash: (a) many critics of neoliberalism has recently become quite vocal in their criticism of neoliberalism based on their professional understanding of the essences and roles of the human being, societal relationships and education; (b) others have spontaneously begun a worldwide resistance movement against neoliberalism in general and its impact on education in particular (cf. my paper tomorrow); and (c) still others offer criticism based on specific life-view and/or philosophical principles (cf. Van der Walt, 2017).

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I conclude by thanking the organising committee of the Annual International Conference of the *Bulgarian Comparative Education Society* for inviting me to prepare and give this address. I sincerely hope that it will give impetus to our discussions during the Conference.

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