

Neoliberal Contexts and Education

Critical Intellectual work – an endangered tradition under neoliberal regimes

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The study attends to the influences on broad policies, conceptions and practices of education from the present neoliberal regimes of thought. The aim is to analyse these influences from a critical and global perspective by looking at how national situations are changing according to the neoliberal governmentalities. The study looks at the developments both in the Global-North and the Global-South through influential international powers like the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA-agenda) in the North and the Education for All (EFA-agenda) in the South. The study claims that schools and universities are being reconfigured to fulfil their role as producers of a new type of person called the neoliberal being with certain characteristics that fits the neoliberal ideas of surveillance and individualism. The EFA-agenda influences almost all countries in the Global-South through its close connection to external and international economic support and through a doublespeak that talks the language of human rights but is operative through neoliberal surveillance powers. There is a need to question this neoliberal global hegemony that is operating through false promises.

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Critical Intellectual work – an endangered tradition under neoliberal regimes

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To put it simply: Context matters! The recent changes at my own workplace triggered me off this time when I realised that the contextual changes that I have observed elsewhere is now also about to influence fundamentally my workplace with uncertainty as a result for me and my colleagues. I am talking about the new way to organise public institutions like universities along neoliberal lines and the consequences of this. Neoliberalist ideas and discourses have got a hegemonic position today and are changing the way we understand and interpret social and cultural events and processes. This hegemony is found almost everywhere at all social levels and at all social places across institutional and other physical borders, traditionally created by hierarchies in and between societies. We need to apply a contextual perspective, following the hegemonic forces wherever they appear to be able to identify and analyse the threads in this hegemonic network. Therefore, a contextual perspective will integrate what has been with the present to identify the cracks in the patterns from where alternatives for the future can gain a foothold and grow. A good starting point is my own situational background.

When I became a teacher I did not think that the academia had anything to offer, because it was the dynamics together with the students that created the wonders. However, I soon realised that a lot of power rested within the academy and that I had to get hold of that power if I wanted to make a difference beyond my own classroom. Then I experienced that the traditions of university cultures have many sides. The positive sides are usually related to the traditions of systematic and critical inquiries into social and physical conditions to find out ways to interpret processes, to probe into problematic situations, and to forward knowledge through open debates, i.e. the fundamentals of intellectual work and research. The negative sides of university cultures are often related to the hegemonic preferential right of interpretation that still persists amongst scholars who willingly overspread their expertise to areas outside their competence. This tradition is well known in my own area, i.e. teacher education and was probably the reason why I was originally sceptical to the advice given by academics. Here university lecturers often tell student teachers how they should act in the

classrooms, while the lecturers' expertise at best resides with *knowledge about the conditions for practice* rather than *knowledge of practice* in schools.

A short historical narrative of teacher education

I was trained as a teacher, when teacher education in Sweden was a matter of apprenticeship detached from the scholastic research rigour, which then created a different problem. Then it was a problem of bookish abstraction and stagnation, in the sense that teacher educators, as being formerly experienced teachers, turned examples from their previous and sometimes 'ancient' classroom experiences into abstract rules for practice in 'modern' times as an act of imitation of what they thought was good intellectual work and by that the practice of education ran the risk of stagnation, due to a retrospective hegemonic practice. And all along we found practices translated into magical formulas like 'MAKIS', following the Swedish for motivation, activity, concreteness, individualisation, and cooperation and more recently on the international arena the 'Five Pointed Star', representing the interpreted essence of student-centred education in Lao PDR translated to that teaching should be connected with activities, questions, teaching aids, group work, and real life, irrespective whether that is a possibility or not.

A new phase for teacher education started in Sweden towards the end of the 1970s when it was found feasible to move teacher education into the academic world, by incorporating teacher education into universities, a process that was administratively concluded this year (2008) with the merger of Stockholm Institute of Education into Stockholm University. The initial argument was that this move into the field of academia was a way to improve the status and professionalism of teachers. The common demand for academic work to 'be based on scientific grounds' has since become the rule of the day following in the footsteps of other university-based occupational fields hoping for a similar improved social status also amongst educators. The hope for such a development has faced a number of obstacles. One is related to the lack of an acknowledged occupationally based 'language of expertise' as compared to high-status occupations such as medical doctors, lawyers and psychologists. Another is the 'apprenticeship of observation' created amongst the populace by being students in schools and the attached creation of a common sense about how it is to be a teacher established from a sole student's perspective, with the effect that students entering teacher education

programmes already know what they need and ask for recipe books. A third obstacle is related to the climbing of a ladder – symbolising the attempt to reach a higher status – that is constantly sinking. (Karl-Georg Ahlström, 1988; Staf Callewaert, 1997)

The process to move teacher education into the realm of university logics is part of a more general paradox that Callewaert (1997:198) addressed thoroughly at a time when the effects of the new neoliberal regimes had started to show systematic changes in the operations of the universities when “more and more professions and occupations are taking on academic status, pretending to be scientific or based upon science, and being integrated into the university with courses based upon texts instead of practical exercises, academic examinations, and degrees”.

The new hegemony

The overwhelming influences of neoliberal governmentality on all kinds of intellectual and scholastic work have become part of a new common sense also at the universities. This neoliberal hegemony that Callewaert (2006:127) recently characterised as “the tragedy of our time, [includes amongst other reconfigurations] the radical change from education by educationalists to education by neo-liberal management” and has affected living and working conditions globally for all, including educators, being them teachers at schools or universities, through acts of surveillance, the establishment of league tables, introduction of different forms of privatisations, intensification of all types of educational work, and the general demand to follow market practices. The present neoliberal process in education and other publicly financed fields with historical roots in conceptions about a welfare state follows an enduring penetration and management of our minds, perceptions, beliefs and behaviours through a kind of doublespeak that we often do not detect, as it is also heavily supported and engineered by propagandist think tanks and other public relation entities in the multimillion spin industry. (William Dinan & David Miller, 2007)

It is through this process of neoliberal doublespeak that perceptions of human rights, solidarity, and social justice closely attached to the idea of the administrative welfare state are transformed and reduced to individualism, competition, and consumerism within a state managed by expectations, with clear effects on education. The human right to education is transformed to school choice, the communal and international collective solidarity actions are

transformed to a chance to win the lottery by giving a penny in the TV show for the poor, and social justice is transformed to everyone's individual option to purchase, provided you own the purchasing capital, any consumer item available on the globe, easily accessible on the web or in the supermarket stores around the world and produced by distanced and ill paid sweatshop workers under killing conditions. Now, when the neoliberal doublespeak also has penetrated the welfare state and its social institutions like public universities that are supposed to be the defenders of humanity and the human mind through open and critical debates, we can expect such voices to become silenced by the hegemonic and neoliberal doublespeak. The silencing of critical voices is part of the creation of the neoliberal human being, and where does that leave the role of universities and their scholars?

It is within the general transformation of the administrative welfare state, responsible for human well-being and the economy, into the neoliberal state that "gives power to global corporations and installs apparatuses and knowledges through which people are reconfigured as productive economic entrepreneurs of their own lives" that we will find answers to the question how this transformation and restructuring of possible fields of actions have taken place, according to Bronwyn Davies & Peter Bansel (2007:248). They further claim that schools and universities have been reconfigured to fulfil their role as the producers of the neoliberal being.

The neoliberal being

A tentative definition of the neoliberal being, based mainly on Bronwyn Davies' (2005) writings, is a person defined and locked into a notion of consumption, characterised as a person with own responsibility having a flexible mind that lives a life based on a notion of an individual entrepreneurial autonomy, whose busyness is a sign of 'being someone' within a system that creates intensified working conditions under a culture of surveillance and you might ask, what's wrong with that, and by that question you confirm the matrix we are locked into.

Davies (2005) asks whether we can refuse the neoliberal conditions for our survival as critical scholars by trying to disclose the fractures in the neoliberal discourses and to replace these spaces with new discourses and new positions? Further on, she also addresses the dangers of

asking the critical questions at the same time as being the embodied person through which the neoliberal shifts are played out, because we are all subjected to a regime that tells us that our survival depends on acceptance of the terms under which we find ourselves as an act of being conditioned to a social and mental matrix that “has entered our world by stealth, and has eroded our values” (op.cit, p. 4).

What is then neoliberalism doing to us? Davies refers to a warning by Toni Morrison (1993:2), who said in her Nobel Lecture after winning the Nobel Prize in literature, that “there will be more of the language of surveillance disguised as research... [and more of] arrogant pseudo-empirical language crafted to lock creative people into cages of inferiority and hopelessness”, and concludes that

It co-opts research to its own agendas, it silences those who ask questions, it whips up a small-minded moralism that rewards the attack of each small powerless person on the other, and it shuts down creativity. It draws on and exacerbates a fear of difference and rewards a rampant, consumerist, competitive individualism. It makes emotion, humour, poetry, song, a passion for a life of the intellect unthinkable. (Davies, 2005:7)

These worries are related to the possibilities to analyse our own positions, actions, and languages through which we manifest the neoliberal discourse, the discourse that we at the same time want to disclose and change, still being locked into its surveillance machinery and its economic and utilitarian common sense created by the hegemonic neoliberal preferential right of interpretation. The first possible step is to analyse how we are caught into this hegemonic and matrix-like system as neoliberal beings, remembering both George Orwell’s 1984 and Antonio Gramsci’s notion that hegemonies are not for ever, but created by humans and eventually changed by humans.

Under this matrix the neoliberal being is valued according to the consumption criteria by his/her income and power of consumption. As a consequence, the needs to earn money overrides any other need and job security has become a matter of being able to adapt to new situations, rather than an effect of successful labour union negotiations. This type of neoliberal individual responsibility removes the social aspects of life and the positive social relations of dependency and belonging are replaced by a disposal being totally dependent on

the ups and downs of the economy, which forces us to become competitive beings on our own, a situation that authors like Richard Sennett (1998) consider to be worse than the 'old' class-based system that was able to create solidarity within and sometimes even between social groups. Educational programmes are adapted to the consumption logics through the competition over the consumers (students) and certain strata of their parents, who are attracted by glossy public relation tricks promising all possible side benefits except for critical intellectual and dispositional knowledge. The competitive being fits well into the general neoliberal discourse where competition is the means through which quality is to be improved, while this doublespeak hides the real goal, which according to Callewaert (1997:183) is "the creation of legitimate elite institutions". The competitive message is: Being good is not good enough – you need to be excellent – and everyone should strive for it even though being excellent is only for the few!

The global surveillance machinery

Competition and surveillance are further emphasised by the comparative league tables that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) creates through the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) that more than 60 countries worldwide have bought into and which according to PISA's own brochure (OECD, 2007) cover 90% of the world economy, thus being a truly hegemonic enterprise in line with other global corporate powers. PISA evokes a lot of national concerns and is used as a tool to get support for change agendas along the neoliberal governmentality of surveillance policies. It also creates critical comments as demonstrated in a publication edited by Stefan Thomas Hopmann, Gertrude Brinek and Martin Retzl (2007) that includes analysis from seven countries in Europe. Such critical comments contain concerns about the narrow focus of PISA that is not on par with the broad official reactions to PISA's league tables; the fact that PISA is run by private enterprises that are looking for larger shares of a growing test market; and that PISA forwards through its emphasis and operations the neoliberal restructuring of public schooling and education, with the consequence of demands for national policy changes. Some of these conclusions are further problematized by Jan-Eric Gustafsson (2008) who claims that international comparative studies on student achievement have a deceptive appearance as they create an illusion of reliability through a reality bound appearance (tasks that imitate everyday schoolwork) while their purpose is to generalize educational outcomes, and that they also

create an illusion of research and intellectual reasoning through their multitude of data from different sources and through a large number of instruments, while the data are not collected, neither to test or develop theories, nor to create explanatory and analytical responses to educational constraints. International comparative studies have changed their profiles from being attempts to carry out research-based analysis by researchers in the post second world war period to being data collecting enterprises to create business and stock market like league tables of excellence by administrators and managers in the period following the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the rise of the global neoliberal capitalist hegemony.

The emphasis on education as both the problem and the cure to social illnesses, a discourse that is heightened through international programmes like PISA and national programmes like No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in the US (Linda Darling-Hammond, 2007; David Hursh, 2007), will actually draw away the public attention on the real issues of social inequalities that are manifested through other social realities related to the distribution of power, economic opportunities, and decent living and working conditions, nationally as well as globally.

The recent neoliberal trends are also transforming universities into business like enterprises that will lock intellectual work into the neoliberal matrix based on market discourses of competition and surveillance masked as evaluative research with the purpose to find excellence according to market values. The building up of intellectual institutional narratives will in this new milieu be reduced to vulnerable project identities whose survival will depend on their purchasing and market value measured according to market-related excellence. The new way to organise universities, e.g. as schools of excellences, will undermine the intellectual institutional narratives needed for the universities' long-term survival as creative and critical intellectual platforms and replace these platforms with academic shopping supermarkets where each item (institution or individual) will survive on its purchasing value and project employments similar to practices at other and more traditionally commercial marketplaces like the building and construction sector. The human insecurity that is created is not an unwanted side effect, but actually part of the whole enterprise called 'marketisation'. However, alternatives that respond to the need for institutional as well as human narratives for survival have been developed in the traditional market places by the rethinking of the role of labour unions by taking over some of the role of employment agencies and the creation of community outside the workplace by engaging in retirement and insurance schemes and certain social services like day-care centres, systems for job sharing, and more radical

alternatives like basic salaries for all citizens (Sennett, 2006). Will there be a need for similar alternatives that are able to reload critical intellectual work in universities for the survival of institutional and human narratives in the future?

In addition to the institutional and human need for narrative space and agency to be able to interpret what is happening, Sennett (2006) suggests two more cultural anchors for consideration as a revolt against the neoliberal superficiality. These are usefulness, defined as contributing something that matters for other people and craftsmanship, as the desire to do something well for its own sake. Usefulness needs to be seen beyond utilisation value and as work that is publicly good and craftsmanship is related to closure and commitment as the possibility to do something real rather than superficial. If these notions about narrative, usefulness, and craftsmanship are transferred to the field of education and critical intellectual work, we can find their equivalences in pedagogical work that considers the taken for granted problematic, poses questions about contextual relations, and develops social strategies for human engagement and tentative closures, none of which are heard of in the present concerns about market excellence because such work takes continuity and passion far from the rhetoric of the superficial league tables. A similar strategic move as the ones reported by Sennett is the so called Norwegian Method that demonstrates new alliances and working methods in the fight against neoliberalism amongst trade unionists. Asbjorn Wahl (2007:2), the national coordinator of the Campaign for the Welfare State in Norway, outlines the four main pillars of the successful strategy as

1. Focus on our own analyses – our comprehension of current developments.
2. The building of new, broad and untraditional alliances.
3. The development of concrete alternatives to privatisation and marketisation.
4. The development of trade unions as independent political actors.

This strategy has managed to stop and to reverse many neoliberal tendencies such as the privatisation of public schools and to vitalise bureaucratised public services without devolving upon neoliberal solutions. The Norwegian struggle to restore the welfare state has of course also met resistance from corporate interests and market forces, right wing populist quarters, ordinary supporters of neoliberal situations such as conservative parties as well as ‘conservative’ left wing political interests who still believe in Thatcher’s TINA device for neoliberalism and the present globalisation, i.e. ‘there is no alternative’.

National policy changes in education are also envisaged amongst the nations that belong to what can be called the Global-South and which are not part of the OECD-PISA hegemony. These nations are more or less willingly living under a different hegemony that since 1990 has gone under the official slogan 'Education for All' (EFA). However, it does not take much effort to discover that 'education for all' is another means to introduce a neoliberal governmentality amongst the already marginalised in the Global-South and by that to enforce the image that the human being in the future global village is a neoliberal being and what might remain of intellectual work is another market storeroom based on purchasing value and the destruction of culturally appropriate alternatives. (Richard Tabulawa, 2005)

The doublespeak of the EFA agenda

Global policy trends created by institutions like the United Nations, Unesco, and the World Bank have gone through a similar development as the international comparative studies reported above. Initially, the liberal humanist discourse of the UN or even more progressive ideas related to the human rights and liberation discourses had strong positions globally in the post-second world war period. These discourses were taken over by the business like human capital discourse forwarded by the World Bank and implemented through structural adjustment programmes in the Global-South.

The EFA agenda, which coincided with the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, was officially received as a new start for education in the Global-South with the effect that both national and international donor agencies were going to talk the same language of EFA. The EFA agenda adopted the student-centred approach as the overarching pedagogical concept that was going to make the difference for all nations in the Global-South. However, at the same time a parallel agenda started to show a demand for a different view through so called logical frameworks, i.e. a technical way to follow the impact on educational systems, and a change from small-scale project support to national sector support, which meant larger demands on imperative national policy frameworks. In other words, a move from a situation where educators met in cooperative situations to work out strategies for meeting the constrained realities of education and schooling, for the good or the bad depending on the involved individuals and their set ambitions, to a situation where the administrators of national policies met their international counterparts in the form of educational managers and co-opted

researchers, who created the groundwork for sector analysis in the name of research, to create the needs for national policy changes according to the western paradigm, as an alternative version of structural adjustments. (Samoff, 1999; Tabulawa, 2003)

So called sector support is also an example of coordinated exercised power and hegemony, as the donors join forces and their funding and by that the governments and administrations of the countries in the Global-South are put in situations that are close to blackmailing. The alternatives for economic support are diminished, leaving the vulnerable and weak states with no other option than to accept the terms for economic support under official partnership rhetoric. The terms and messages are always the same: become part of our global development by introducing parliamentary democracy of a Western type, and open up your country for foreign investments and for foreign markets! The links between education, neoliberal influences, and economy become over-explicit when promises of economic support are only made on certain stipulated conditions related to the EFA agenda, as demonstrated by many international scholars (Samoff 1999, Leon Tickly, 2001) here exemplified by the work of Laurence Tamatea (2005). Tamatea makes an analysis based on the second phase of EFA agenda, the Dakar framework from 2000, which is influencing national educational policies in the Global-South almost like a mantra. At this point, it needs to be said that UNESCO was from the beginning given the role as the official reporter and coordinator of the EFA agenda, even though the main sponsors are the G8, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Asia Development Bank, and the World Trade Organisation. It becomes clear already at this point that open national resistance to this agenda is almost unheard of, while examples of cunning informal and local ways of resistance are many (Ann-Louise Bäcktorp, 2007; Lars Dahlström & Brook Lemma, 2008). However, national governments in the Global-South, who are in dear need of international financial support, normally keep an open mind to the EFA agenda, and establish national measures following the neoliberal surveillance turn that at times also are in the interest of authoritarian government powers. Tamatea's analysis of the global neoliberal matrix is pointing to the doublespeak of the EFA agenda through its exploitation of the ambivalence in liberal humanism, which is the basis for the official EFA goals as expressed in the Dakar framework.

The Dakar framework, as many of the steering documents and annual monitoring reports under the EFA agenda, is a composition of a liberal humanism discourse related to the EFA goals, and a neoliberal discourse related to the way these goals are going to be managed,

administrated, and controlled. The EFA Dakar goals speak the language of human rights through the six general goals, which are

1. Expanding and improving comprehensive *early childhood care and education*, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.
2. Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete *free and compulsory primary education* of good quality.
3. Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and *life skills* programmes.
4. Achieving a 50% improvement in levels of *adult literacy* by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults.
5. Eliminating *gender disparities* in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving *gender equality* in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality.
6. Improving all aspects of the *quality of education* and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

(from UNESCO, 2003 p.27)

The neoliberal turn is discursively related to concepts that are as uncontroversial as the goals above. However, the controversy appears with their operational design, which according to Tamatea (2005) transforms educational concepts and gives them new meanings through the introduction of corporate managerial content and an objectification of educational social relations through reductions to mathematic symbols. *Quality* is a powerful concept in the neoliberal discourse of EFA that defines and evaluates quality through measurable learning outcomes mirroring the PISA and NCLB discourses. Another key concept is *transparency* that has entered the field of education from the neoliberal audit culture building on the notion of visibility. The third concept is *accountability*, which is tightly connected to the punitive measures of receiving and maintaining financial support. The quality-transparency-accountability triad forwards a different message than the humanistic EFA goals and the question remains: How are these two contradictive messages united in the EFA agenda without evoking their ambivalence? Tamatea (2005) offers some possible answers. First, the

ambivalence is transformed through the use of doublespeak, a vocabulary propaganda similar to concepts like 'free trade', as the surveillance power of neoliberalism is given a humane face through the use of quality as the set goal to reach. Secondly, the two discourses are actually not so different as they both emanate from the logic of modernity read as control and order over the 'Other' and upholding 'Our' view as universal, thus creating a logical sense to the seemingly contradictory unity of human liberalism and neoliberal surveillance. Thirdly, the EFA agenda can be seen as an extension of universalism and the capitalist production-line worldview of modernity today characterised as McDonaldisation in the footsteps of Taylorism with the message that one-size-fits-all. Thus, the ambivalence can be explained in many ways and turned into something taken for granted and accepted as the truth.

At a reflective crossroad

Being a person with one leg in the Western soil and the other in the Global-South, after close to 30 years of concerns about education for and together with marginalised people, it is rather frustrating to meet the present restructuring of education at both ends. Here in Sweden, I and my concerned colleagues have seen the dismantling of education as a public good through the mushrooming of private schooling financed by taxpayers' money that ends up in the pockets of profit makers, discursively accepted as a result of 'free choice' and with the consequence that even the remaining public schools are today forced to use their tight budgets to finance corporate-like spins. We are also experiencing the flood waves of PISA league tables and its competitiveness that are about to be taken for granted and will by that dehumanise education at an accelerating rate. At university level we experience attempts to introduce the same type of league tables (PO Ågren, 2008), a constant departmental and individual pressure from external surveillance disguised as evaluation research, and talks about excellence that will restructure universities into shopping markets diminishing opportunities for the human narratives, usefulness, and craftsmanship necessary for critical intellectual work. At the other end, in the Global-South, I and my colleagues have recently experienced the transformation of societies and education according to the neoliberal agenda in Laos, Ethiopia, and Namibia in different ways. The Lao experience is related to the implementation of the EFA agenda coupled to the national version of marketisation called New Economic Mechanism under a centralised communist regime as reported by Bäcktorp (2007). The EFA agenda in Ethiopia has developed into the most stunning example of a marriage between educational quality and

efficiency through the so called 'plasma teachers' replacing teachers with an uncommunicative TV picture in all secondary schools, while the promising post-independence teacher education reforms in Namibia after 1990 are today remodelled through World Bank reports into test-driven teacher education that creates flashbacks that resemble the pre-independence programmes (Dahlström & Lemma, 2008). However, what many of us believe are permanent changes due to the massive influences of neoliberal discourses substantiated by the deceptive think tanks and the spin industry, are actually constructed by humans and therefore also possible to deconstruct and reconstruct along different and more humane lines, which is also done at different levels as movements from below reported by Sennett (2006) and Wahl (2007). A process of learning from examples is possible through culturally sensitive transformations and transfers of good examples into other contextualised situations.

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