Society gets the education it deserves

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Abstract

Education has the potential to be influenced by society but can also be utilised as a mechanism to enable societal change. Considering the question ‘does society get the education it deserves’, I utilise Bauman’s concept of liquid modernity when exploring the impact of neoliberalist values on the UK education system. These values encourage a consumerist approach to be taken by those entering and within the system and drive competition between providers, which I argue is not conducive to an equality of opportunity for all in society. Without a greater societal response however this paper concludes that the education currently received is one that is deserved.

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Keywords: Society, Liquid Modernity, Education, Neoliberalism

Introduction

Whilst education could act as a force for re-connecting and developing society, the UK education system arguably absorbs the values prioritised by neoliberalist society and the politicians that govern it (MacFarlane, 2017). Zygmunt Bauman's concept of liquid modernity is used in this paper to illustrate how this absorption occurs. Bauman (2000) contends that we live in a time of constant change in which life takes on a fluid form and the reinvention of the individual becomes of paramount importance. This reinvention is a reflection of consumerist society and the rapidity with which change takes place (Bauman, 2000). Such fluidity, Bauman (2005) argues, is due to the disconnect between power and politics. This divergence of politics and power has resulted in uncertainty due to the lack of a locus of control and the liquefaction of the certainties of society, which has given rise to instrumental rationality as a basis for society; a basis which is immune to non-economic action (Revell & Bryan, 2018). Whilst individuals have more freedom to follow their desires despite potential social or cultural disadvantages, they have more decisions to make than ever. No longer can society's norms be relied on for direction or used to guide responses to daily dilemmas (Bauman, 2000). In this paper I will argue that society, as far as it can exist in liquid times, does get the education it deserves as education, and in particular schooling, reflect the society that we choose to live in and perhaps do not actively do enough to change.

Society

The pre-sociological meaning of 'society' is described by Bauman (2002, p.42) as having "explicitly or implicitly, conveyed images of closeness, proximity, togetherness, a degree of intimacy and mutual engagement". This definition is less applicable in liquid times as society becomes more individualised, resembling a loose network rather than a tightknit group (Bauman, 2005). This reduction in social cohesion following increased globalisation has given rise to discussions on both the meaning of society and how policy can challenge the lack of social solidarity (Green, Preston & Janmaat, 2008).

Education

Education, Jeffries states, “is nothing less than learning to live” (2011, p.xxi). This broadest of definitions is particularly well suited to liquid times. With knowledge developing so quickly and the contexts to which it can be applied unable to take on a solid form for reference, flexibility has become more important than the memorisation of facts from a set curriculum (Bauman, 2005). Learning to cope and adapt, essentially to live, may enable us to prosper rather than just survive this time of liquid modernity. Jeffries (2011, p.xii) believes that the issues education face mirror those of society as they are problems of human life, which Thomson (2017) argues are socially constructed. The logic of this is compelling and gives strength to the argument that society does get the education it deserves, as will become clear.

Consumerism and Competition

Neoliberalism is defined by Heywood as “an updated version of classical political economy that is dedicated to market individualism and minimal statism” (2012, p.87). This is evident in recent UK government education policy in areas such as academisation (Learning and Skills Act, 2000) and free schools (Academies Act 2010; Education Act 2011), the centralisation of local governmental powers (Education Act 2011) and the marketisation of higher education (Furedi, 2010). Neoliberals view schools as products for selection by parents and pupils (Apple, 2007). In 2010, the UK Government reaffirmed its policy of enabling parents to make meaningful choices relating to their child’s schooling (DfE, 2010). It could be claimed that this opportunity to influence school selection is positive as it allows some autonomy that may enable parents to exercise a preference based on faith or facilities, which may hold specific importance to them; as Apple (2007) reminds us, the positioning of schools as products for selection by parents and pupils is a neoliberal construct’.

Burgess et al (2011) state that the theoretical advantages of providing choice are clear whilst highlighting that competition for students arguably ensures schools raise academic standards. School selection however is still restricted by area with less choice in rural areas, and distances from schools often acting as a key factor in school admissions, especially in those oversubscribed (Burgess et al, 2011). This

suggests that only limited choice is available, especially in the primary phase. Though choice is limited to the stating of preference, this opportunity to influence selection is indicative of a liquid society. The risk is passed to the individual, or their parents, so the consequences of selection are theirs to bear (Bauman, 2005). For those offered their first preference (90.6% Primary, 80.9% Secondary (DfE, 2019)) or perhaps those offered any of their preferences, an argument can be made that the children receive the education, in this case schooling, that they deserve. This argument being based on the involvement of parents in the school allocation process and a subsequent outcome that may be deemed positive.

The responsibility of choice, in many circumstances, is often made more hazardous as it may not be fully informed. School preference is likely to be based on simple measures such as league tables and inspection reports, which, as representations of competition and measurement, encourage parents and pupils to make comparisons between the schools as products, further reflecting the commodification of schooling. League tables also fail to take into account or make clear the different situations schools face (MacFarlane, 2017). A further complication for parents and pupils is the question of their understanding of what they require from their education (Biesta, 2006). Consumers are often sure of what they want from standard commodities but Biesta (2006) argues that education, a more complex and interactional commodity, is far more compelling with selection leading to an increased level of potentially positive or negative consequences. In liquid times, Bauman (2007, p.28) contends, consumption has become ‘consumerism’, an ‘attribute of society’ rather than an individual trait. As education has become a commodity for consumption by a consumer society, it can be argued society gets the education it has created, seeks and therefore deserves.

While accepting there is clearly an argument to be made over the positives and negatives of choice, choices are not always realistic for all. Desires are relatively consistent irrespective of income but an ambition to achieve ones desires, which can drive competition that is stacked in favour of the wealthy, can have a potentially negative psychological impact if it is not achievable (Seabrook cited in Bauman, 2000). Competition is a defining characteristic of neoliberalism (Lazzarato, 2009) and is fundamental to free market economics (Davies, 2014). Whilst classical liberalism

promotes a belief in exchange (Ball & Olmedo, 2013), Neoliberalism posits markets regulate society to not only remove irrational and inconsistent political involvement but also reward that which is worthy (Apple, 2007). Competition in formal education can be encouraged in many ways including but not exclusively league tables, inspections and funding linked to recruitment. It can be argued that a 'healthy rivalry' can be extremely beneficial and that competition does not have to occur at the expense of co-operation (Prvulovich, 1982, p.78). MacFarlane (2017) however believes that market forces are too strong for society to expect schools to co-operate when in open competition. Prvulovich (1982) counters this by arguing that characteristics of each are present in the other and that no relationship will be entirely competitive or co-operative. Allen & Burgess (2010) believe it is possible for competition between schools to raise attainment levels but conclude that a number of conditions must be met, including the ease of identifying successful schools, parental choice making a meaningful impact on allocation and for high quality teaching and learning to be a leading indicator of school success. Bauman (2005) contends that the value placed on competition in our current society damages collaboration, which raises the question of whether the value this ideal brings is more valuable than the potential benefits of collaboration, which it displaces.

Whilst it could be argued that competition enables 'successful' schools to attract more students, allowing increasing numbers of students to access an 'outstanding' education, less 'successful' schools attract fewer pupils and therefore less income, making it more difficult to instigate improvements (Apple, 2007). Pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds often attend these less 'successful' schools and as such deeper social division is sown as access to higher standards of schooling becomes more difficult (Apple, 2007). In stark contrast those from advantaged backgrounds continue to access a higher level of schooling and enjoy the success of those schools (MacFarlane, 2017). Whitty (1997 referenced in Apple, 2007) contends that these evident social inequalities need to be addressed. Such inequality, a by-product of competition, is an essential element of neoliberalism, as Lazarratto (2009) argues, the possibility of losing becomes a motivational tool for compelling us to work harder. For this reason, Davies states neoliberals view inequality as "something to be actively generated, represented, tested, celebrated and enforced, as a mark of a dynamic and free society" (2014, p.37). This inequality can be generated through

government policy in many ways, including the current focus on a narrow range of subjects over the so called soft subjects, which ensures that those less suited to academic study receive fewer opportunities. The clear impact of educational policy suggests that Bauman's (2000) theory that power is removed from politics is not fully realised. Government policy has a profound impact on everyone within the education system, with those from a lower socio-economic background affected more negatively than those who are more privileged. Negative outcomes include the most disadvantaged pupils being more than two years of learning behind their non-disadvantaged peers (Andrews, Robinson and Hutchinson, 2017).MacFarlane (2017, p.35) argues that "we get the politicians we deserve, those whose greed reflects that of society". This statement suggests that policies that define our education system with its proven negative outcomes for those from poor backgrounds, are generated by politicians who reflect our society. The politicians are elected by the society they are bound to serve and thus we receive the education we deserve.

Performativity and Subjectification

Performativity, another example of governmental power, is according to Ball (2003), the liberal regulation of those working in the public sector. It seeks to align the public and private sectors through the impregnation of the former with the methods and language of the latter. The effectiveness of workers, measured through their productivity, places economic value on not only the teacher's duties but the development and learning of children (Ball, 2003). This changes the way that one looks at the role of the teacher and challenges their professional and pedagogical beliefs which are no longer seen as important (Ball, 2003). This pressure of performativity aims to subjectify teachers into becoming what Foucault terms *homo oeconomicus*, an individual that is an 'entrepreneur of oneself' (Lazzarato, 2009, p.111). This is clearly a reflection of today's liquid society. Making oneself an attractive commodity increases opportunities to be desired by others in society, which subsequently increases ones opportunity to fulfil some of their desires through benefits such as increased income and opportunities for promotion (Bauman, 2007, p.6). Bauman (2007) uses an example in academia of the application for a teaching post and believes that those who have been in this position will recognise themselves as a commodity that they themselves promote. Teachers are encouraged to believe that by increasing their productivity they become more

valuable and are therefore expected to replace their values with the value that is placed on productivity by neoliberalism (Bernstein, 2000). If neoliberalist policymakers can get the teacher to conform to this performative vision it will increase its effectiveness as a strategy (Ball & Olmedo, 2013). As increasing numbers in society subscribe to this vision it feeds the expectation and normalises the behaviour. It could also therefore be argued that this illustrates a mechanism through which society gets the education it deserves.

Whilst recognising the potential benefits of being one's own publicist it is important to highlight that performativity and its subjectification of teachers is driving them out of the profession due to the demoralisation and stress it causes (Ball, 2003; Ball & Olmedo, 2013; Kelchtermans, 2017; NAHT, 2017). It often has this impact as it not only looks to change the way teachers behave but who they are as people, and as they are only valued for their productivity levels their personal value is diminished (Ball & Olmedo, 2013). Teachers become concerned that the value of their work will not be acknowledged through the tools used for measuring productivity, which can not only unconsciously affect their practice but can make them extremely sensitive and aware of judgment (Ball, 2003). It could be argued that Ball and Olmedo's (2013) discussions on the struggle against subjectivity set an aim to embrace the freedoms of liquid modern times but reject the regulations that seek to undermine said freedom. This supports Bauman's (2008) own work as he highlights the feelings of those who do not feel that the freedom to redefine themselves is real power such are the extraneous pressures. It also appears to again undermine Bauman's (2000) claim that power has been divorced from politics due to the rebellion against this push for change. Biesta's (2009) thoughts on subjectification focus on the positive aspects of becoming an individual and standing out from the subject of the state. He does however acknowledge that much of our education may fail to develop subjectification. Governments appear to have the power through policy to hijack the ideologically positive process of subjectification, one of developing independence, into socialisation, a process that Biesta (2009, p.40) explains places 'newcomers' into the system as it stands. A case could therefore be made that unless a significant volume of society's members are willing to openly resist neoliberal socialisation, its appearance in education should be expected and thus deserved by society.

Conclusion

The observations of modern society made by Bauman (2000) are clearly reflected in the UK's education system although this thought piece has challenged the view that power has been fully divorced from politics. Whilst individual governments lack the power to force their agendas on a global stage, educational policy in the UK, as elsewhere, is still controlled by politicians. Bauman's (2000) characteristics of liquid modernity also reflect many of the features of neoliberalism, which promote competition, wealth accumulation and ultimately appear to increase socio-economic divisions in society. A society that appears to have broken down with a lack of social cohesion characterising the individualism that has seen the structure of society liquefy into a network of individuals with limited interconnections (Bauman, 2005).

Plato, founder of the Academy, the first Western higher learning institution, believed that the ideal society was required for the ideal education to flourish but also that such an education is needed to presuppose the ideal society (Jeffries, 2011). Jeffries (2011) and Apple (2007) support this circularity, positing that education is restricted by society but is also the only means of generating societal reform. Increased globalisation and the uncertainty this brings can decrease the power of political leaders. Perhaps then, liquid modernity provides a greater opportunity to challenge the neoliberal pressures placed on the increasing freedoms of individualisation. Ultimately however, in reference to the opening statement, the education system absorbs society's neoliberal values and society can therefore be described as deserving of the education it receives.

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