

CRITICAL ISSUES IN CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION: PROLEGOMENA

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Abstract: This paper summarizes the problematic aspects of a globalized neoliberal culture in education. Linking to the particular studies of this monothematic volume it discusses the consequences of the globalization of a testing culture in schools, the issues of developing civic literacy in the context of current education practice and the issues of forming a historic consciousness in present schools relating to the existing social discourse. Language teaching, currently dominated by the concept of language literacy or the concept of language education resulting from English language teaching seems to be significant. This paper reveals various ways in which the educational section is being contaminated by neoliberal transformations to point out their culturally devastating consequences in a critical way. The goal of this paper is to articulate the mechanism by which neoliberalism is infiltrating education in the form of discursive and physical “colonizing”.

Keywords: neoliberalism, school policy, testing, citizenship, teaching profession, language literacy

The theme for the present volume suggests that in the social events of the current world, education is given a strong integrating potential and that it belongs to those social phenomena which differently, but significantly are profitable for social and individual lives.

It is certain that perceptions of education potential are historically changeable and that views of its presumed profit are fundamentally related to the dominant values of a concrete historic period and its cultural value contexts. The current situation of school systems of particular countries, their school policies as well as recent surges in education reforms across the whole world quite obviously signal that the conception of social and individual profit from education is mostly related to globalized economic values and goals. Social profit is derived from the profit for national economies in terms of international economic competition and rivalry. Individual profit is presented against the background of individual success in the job market, professional career and personal benefits based on a professional career. Education policies of particular countries are universally united in their support of these economizing views on education, so the reality of current education is legitimately and rightly interpreted as part of the neoliberal administration of society (Bröckling et al. 2000; Peters et al. 2009).

It is not surprising that an academic and theoretical work reflecting the education sector creates a wide stream of critical analyses of the neoliberal turn in education policy and school practice and directs one's attention towards the key tools of this policy and towards their risky consequences (*Educational Philosophy and Theory* 2006). Either it is the introduction of a culture of managerial accountability into school administration (Suspitsyna 2010), a massive tendency to evaluate education output, based on high-stakes testing (Gunzenhauser 2006), or a nearly unprecedented boom in the reduction of goals and contents of education—these topics represent supporting evidence of current pedagogical discourse and are becoming a stable platform for critical pedagogy. Therefore the parameters of the theme for the present volume of HA were broadly defined and although the papers seem at first sight to be relatively wide ranging, they all share a fundamental interest in seeking to respond to common problems emerging from prevailing neoliberal approaches to education. The resonance of international testing, notable deficits of the contents of education, several questions related to language education, as well as the contents of social and humanistic (historic) studies in education presented in the papers indicate that academic theorizing is able to respond to challenges and limitations of, brought by pedagogical practice in an intensive and critical way.

Drawbacks of education programming

Issues relating to high-stakes testing and its impact at national and international levels are outlined and presented in three papers of this volume. They are introduced by Oľga Zápotočná, David Greger and Larry Hickman through specific topics. The first two papers discuss the impact of the internationally implemented evaluation project PISA (mainly in the European context), the third explores corroboration and the testing culture negative impact, which resulted from the educational reforms related to the authoritative school legislation *No child left behind*, on educational practice in the American continent. The papers point out not only the reality that high-stakes testing has become one of the most important factors of educational systems regulation, but this approach to evaluating educational effects has a restrictive impact on education. It leads to either reduced reading of overall testing outputs (mainly PISA outputs) on the part of school policy makers which are used as the basis for making decisions on changes in national educational systems or, what is more risky, a flattening of the mission of school education and teaching in the classes, focusing on preparing students to pass the tests. Moreover, the tests cover only chosen educational subjects (mostly reading and mathematical skills), and so education is gradually reduced to training in specific areas of performance as well as declared care for literacy of coming generation is being deformed. The introduction of a testing culture in reading and mathematical literacy reinforces the idea of education as literacy, and a skills notion of literacy at that which in only a very reduced scope reflects either the traditional concept of cultural literacy or education as funding a cultural capital comprise, and does not take into consideration the social background of performance abilities and educational capacities of students.

The article of Oľga Zápotočná as well as David Greger's point to the rational dimension for example, to the international testing PISA (particularly the identification

of a reader's literacy) and point out that the risk-based regulations of school systems are founded on mainly surface political interpretations of the results of this kind of evaluation. This superficiality prevents educational policy and praxis from engaging with the focal dimensions of education and literacy necessary for the stabile functioning of the current world. The papers of this volume focus on the formation of citizenship, namely citizenship in a democratic, complex as well as diversified cultural environment, so that in a culture which requires several literacies, citizenship literacy starts to be considered integrating and targeting. O. Zápotočná explicitly points out that the development of this cultural identity is included in this dimension of literacy and that its opposite is not illiteracy but cultural ignorance.

Factors of cultural ignorance

The increasing culture of accountability in schools setting, created besides the others by deduction of test performances of schools to education themselves, which directly fosters cultural ignorance, promotes this development. Several factors are in play here. The first one is based on the premise that in the international scene certain types of performances are preferred to others. This does not mean only that testing is related to some chosen subject material (mathematics, natural sciences and the specific notion of language) which indirectly stimulates schools to prefer these curriculum areas over others. The preference of a certain type of educational output over others, which is aimed at promoting competences taking into account the purpose and goals of education, is at stake. Either they are school policy documents of various levels (international or national), where the models of competences are explicitly determined as the current goals of education, or school educational programs which project these competences into everyday school praxis as well as the particular batteries of preferable testing instruments, which are directed towards the training of certain performances of their students by schools. The focus on utilitarian sets of skills is clearly hidden in these competences. The defence for utilitarianism is the applicability of education for "real life", which in the ideology of neoliberalism means mainly those sets of skills necessary for the current working market and for competition in the market, and which are recognised as "knowledge" (Olssen and Peters 2005). Uncertain and culturally indifferent identity of uprooted globalized working power, which is able to produce economic capital, is built through a model of education based on (tested) competences, instead of building it through cultural identity. In addition to this, universalization of business logic, gradually penetrating into the school system, and introducing the logic of customer market relationships into school in the role of an originally cultivating setting, is at stake. Furthermore, it makes exchangeable goods tailor-made for customers and submitted to their choices from the contents of education (Fitzsimons 2002).

Reduction of the contents of education gradually caused by the obsession with developing and testing key competences in school education means that the contents of education, which have a key significance in forming cultural identity and informed citizenship in a complex and diversified world, are forced out. In his study, Larry Hickman directly points to the fact that after the attack of the legislation *No child left behind* on the American school system nobody takes into account that humanistic and artistic education are a unique opportunity for

education towards global citizenship, which fundamentally pauperizes students to learn how to make qualified life decisions.

The evidence for school systems failures based on testing are various. For example, in the state of Oklahoma, the initiative for supporting artistic education in the elementary education curricula in the form of the design of so called A+ programs (i.e. *Art +*), on the basis of which the so called “A+ Schools Network” emerged between three states in the USA (Gunzenhauser 2006, 244). Since this initiative was not established with the goal of supporting the test scores of students and schools, it faces administrative obstacles, in particular because in Oklahoma the schools are classified on the basis of their results in testing expressed by a specific index API (*Academic Performance Index*). Graham and Neu (2004) discussed Canadian experiences referring to the educational project formulated by CBE (*Calgary Board of Education*) in the year 2000, which dealt with the inclusion of artistic subjects into the curriculum. The afore-mentioned projects did not manage to achieve school legitimacy because they did not guarantee the increase of testing score and tested abilities.

In our cultural context the significance of developing cultural identity and civic education through the concept “aesthetics and arts” is pointed out by Mistrík (1996). After all, the depth of the educational potential of historic education in the culturally diversified setting is depicted by Peter Carrier in this volume of HA. Using a clear specification of epistemological, political and intergenerational power of imparting a cultural memory by means of a historic education—through a sensitive example of teaching about the Holocaust—he points out how relativization of stable structures of these powers (through the concept of *engagement learning*) can destabilize the basic sense of teaching history and principles, which are the basis for respect and the ability of learning from history. The relativization of cultural memory or undermining historic education in favour of *engagement* approaches or pragmatic skills for working life decreases the potential of education in its basic cultural missions: individual-civic and social-integrative.

Strength versus weakness of teaching profession

Carrier introduces one fundamental issue, which has broader connections and impacts than the context of the Holocaust and historic consciousness. It is a question of fear and concern in education. Currently, a multicultural aspect of education poses the question of cultural (in)sensitivity of the curriculum contents of education, and a media image of social reality poses the question of a media image of a teacher, a school and children, while this image directly influences the identification processes of education providers under the patronage of political correctness. Consequently the statement can occur that teachers are afraid of several topics, they are frightened by students, parents and are confronted with the official school policy. And when this picture can be distorted, it points to a weakening autonomy of the teaching profession and a higher degree of its subordination to a socio-political imperative.

Maybe unintentionally the question of weakness or strength of a profession is an open one. In this way Carrier’s text is becoming imaginarily close to Hickman’s paper referring to the “demoralization” of teachers and accommodating of university training, since just

these system elements directly influence the goal of self-confidence, autonomy and power of the teaching profession. These are just neoliberal reforms interfering with the sector of in-service teacher training (Kaščák, Pupala, Petrová 2011), which make from this professional group culturally uncertain and experienced “practitioners” resigning to reproduction of cultural and historic consciousness. Thus a deep historic consciousness depends on general education, the significance of the teaching profession is increasing with its affiliation to general educational missions of universities. It is just the damage of this affiliation to a work-based approach in teacher training by means of the neoliberal shift, which empowers an uncertainty about performing their social mission and reproduction of the bases of education in the teaching profession.

In the context of the countries of post-communist Central Europe this mission was fundamentally interfered with in two main stages. The first stage of communism, which levelled out the historic role of the teaching profession, shifted the teaching profession under the official administration of the government and in an identical way it moved the teaching profession close to a civil servant sphere. The image of a teacher as an intellectual and bearer of social changes, a commentator of social events and a bearer of historic memory, typical of the Slovak context of the second half of the 19th century, when the teaching profession became an initiator of social and national-liberating revolutions, came to an end by means of the identification of teaching profession with the role of a political accomplice. Currently, the second stage is in progress related to the introduction of neoliberal educational policies, and this paradoxically finds its support and continuity in the previous identification practices. That is to say that the work-based orientation originates from the civil servant’s self-identification, from the unstinted commitment of the teaching profession against educational policy in nation-wide testing, and from the competency model of education and standardization of teaching profession, which is hold in check by the system of career development (Bloomfield 2008). It is a process of centrally controlled “decentralization” leading to the deprofessionalization of the teaching profession (Wong 2006). These movements resulted consequently in the inability of the teaching profession to keep a distance from the political sphere and a highly subordinated position of this professional group may be seen in an inability not only to induce social changes as in the past, but in the failure of the teaching profession to promote the interests of itself as a professional group. It is seen in the failure of the teaching profession to gain higher salaries in Slovakia, in the zero negotiation capital, in the inability to activate and coordinate to apply group pressure. The atmosphere of fear and care prevails.

This is a natural consequence of the loss of intellectual superiority, which gave generations of teachers social power and social access. Intellectual superiority resulted from general education achieved in the university. The loss of level of education goes hand in hand with the loss of social significance. Fear is then a natural consequence. The practical orientation of a teacher’s education transforms the teaching profession into a civil service. History, philosophy, literature or sociology are disciplines occurring on the black list of study units of university pedagogical programmes. And students following the neoliberal proclamation of work-based preparation (and on the contrary with the mission of university) require information literacy, financial literacy, media education and a foreign language, in most cases English.

A foreign language in political perspective

On the political background of language education in current culture, a study on the nature of language teaching in preschool institutions was written by Ondrej Kaščák, Branislav Pupala and Iveta Kovalčíková. Although their article represents rather an anthropological approach to institutional language learning at an early age (mostly the function of physical response in this process), their research was implemented by the project of bilateral intercultural education integrating relations between Slovakia and Austria. Teaching German at an early age was to be one of the tools of cultural integration and empowerment of a European civic identity through diversified language education for a multilingual Europe. The project aimed at teaching German in the kindergartens was implemented in the period when the questions posed after the new Slovak government changed the approach to language teaching and English became an obligatory foreign language in Slovak primary schools.

This decision negated previous language policy enabling the choice of European languages in obligatory education, and the turn towards a utilitarian neoliberal concept of education emerged. Instead of a philosophy of language education, which concentrates on an integrating cultural mission in education focusing on the language diversity of Europe and supporting diversity in language education, the philosophy considers language teaching (through the obligatory introduction of English) as an instrumental matter of a mobile working force for the global labour market and gained ground politically. Education as a route to culture, to cultural identity through European citizenship with cultural and language diversity in the field of language education stepped aside to make way for a globally driven educational trend for business in the sense of instrumental entrepreneurial culture (Peters 2001).

Two forms of pedagogical colonization

The contributions to this volume point to two key forms of pedagogical “colonization”, which are very often the subject of analyses in field of critical pedagogy, while the goal of the critical analyses is the following “decolonizing” of pedagogical reality (Tejeda, Espinoza, Gutierrez 2003). *The first form* is language colonization, which is occurring at the moment in the sense of neoliberal economic motives either at the level of educational policies or at the level of exact language education (Crookes 2010). Questions about the cultural (and not only economic) relevance of language skills and issues related to multilingualism are raised.

Currently, language colonization is concerned with a native language, whose acquisition and usage are becoming colonized by the concept of language literacy applied in its utilitarian form within the framework of international testing such as PISA testing. This concept excludes a literature education, which does not have economic incentives, but fundamentally moves towards founding a cultural development and historic consciousness as well. As stated in the papers of O. Zápotočná and D. Greger, this colonization has a political dimension and through the political vocabulary it occupies the sector of practical education and its reforms. The question remains as to whether this kind of colonization supports the concept of active citizenship or global citizenship, which is discussed in the article by L. A. Hickman. Critical pedagogic reading leads us to reply in the negative.

The symbolic power of language is presented in P. Carrier's paper, in which a specific discourse and political language (used in the governmental reports, press reports and chain emails) is a factor in the colonization of teachers' work, autonomy and an agitator for the phenomenon of fear in education. The powerful constellations applied to one educational area are unrestricted. This paper points to the dangers of a teacher's identification and emphasizes the mission of the teaching profession from the critical pedagogy viewpoint—teachers are to become “transformative intellectuals” (Giroux, McLaren 1996). This label involves their potential for inducing social changes and repeatedly reaching the intellectual position. The call for teachers to be transformative intellectuals is founded on the assumption that the dominant perception of teachers are those who are “high-level technicians carrying out dictates and objectives decided by experts far removed from the everyday realities of classroom life” (Giroux 1988, 121). They are considered passive recipients of social and political imperatives.

The second form is a physical colonization. O. Kaščák, B. Pupala and I. Kovalčíková point out that first language acquisition (either a native one or foreign one) effectively proceeds through various forms of incorporation. Although their paper might seem to be an analysis of foreign language methodology, their text is first of all reflecting the meaning of the body as an invariable of socialization and enculturation. Social power, both in the positive and negative meanings, is applied through a body and by means of a body. In the case of language education it is possible to form either monolingual or multilingual habitus. Enculturation significance of body has not escaped critical pedagogues' notice either. For example, according to McLaren (1988) the materiality of a body is an important factor of ideological incorporation, “I will refer to the body as a “body/subject”, that is, as a terrain of the flesh in which meaning is inscribed, constructed, and reconstituted. In this view, the body is conceived as the interface of the individual and society, as a site of embodied or “enfleshed” subjectivity which also reflects the ideological sedimentations of social structure inscribed into it” (*ibid.*, 57-58).

Stating the interconnection of both forms can make an analytical conclusion of this introduction into a monothematic volume. McLaren distinguished both of these forms as keys to critical analysis of education, while this statement can be considered emblematic, “The problem with schools is not that they ignore bodies, their pleasures and the suffering of the flesh (although admittedly this is part of the problem) but that they undervalue language and representation as constitutive factors in the shaping of the body as the bearer of meaning, history, race, and gender. We do not simply exist as bodies, but we also *have* bodies. We have bodies not just because we are born *into* bodies but because we *learn* our bodies, that is, we are taught how to think about our bodies and how to experience our bodies. And in a similar fashion our bodies invent us through the discourses they embody” (*ibid.*, 62).

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