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From 'flexibility' to 'agility' : probing developments in neoliberal governance

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Background

This paper examines the growing prevalence of the terms 'agile' and 'agility' in policy discourse. In the educational sphere this is most marked, thus far, within Higher Education where there is a growing insistence, from the OECD amongst others, that universities become 'agile' organizations and that individual staff members should also demonstrate 'agility'. The broader literature currently reflects these two approaches: both the organization and the individual are expected to be 'agile' and, without this, it is suggested that failure is possible or even likely. While the school sector has so far been less a target of this new imperative, it seems clear that the sort of individuals now expected to be developed by the school system will themselves be 'agile' : young people deemed capable of surviving in a rapidly-changing world - creative, innovative, self-managing, alert and responsive to opportunities, proactive, and multi-skilled.

Research Questions

The paper critiques the discourse to uncover the ways in which 'agility' is conceptualized, the governmental rationality which can be seen to underpin it, and the broader discursive links which can be detected to neoliberal governance.

In the examination, the following questions are raised and explored. Where has the concept of 'agility' come from, why has it emerged now, what are its ideological roots, what are its implications in relation to educational policy, and what dangers and opportunities does it represent in relation to Foucault's concept of power?

Methods

The paper combines two methodological approaches. The first of these is an exercise in critical discourse analysis whereby relevant texts are subjected to analysis to probe the ways in which the terms 'agile' and 'agility' are used and to uncover issues relating to power and domination. Textual sources include some seminal material from the world of manufacturing, information systems, and business management before closer study is undertaken of more significant, current instances of discursive appropriation whereby such terminology has been imported into the world of education policy discourse.

The second aspect of the paper is a conceptual study - from a Foucauldian perspective - by which the findings of the discourse analysis are subjected to consideration in relation to philosophical, political, and ideological issues. Here the broader governmental implications are examined in relation to such issues as neoliberalism, globalization, governance, economic rationalism, and the knowledge economy.

Frame

In probing this discourse, the paper makes particular use of two key terms from the work of Michel Foucault. The first of these is his concept of 'critique' (Foucault, 1984, 1997, 2002a) and the second of these is his concept of 'governmentality' (Foucault, 1991, 2008). The paper is founded on the principles of Foucauldian critique, seeking to probe and expose the assumptions on which the discourse of agility is based. In doing so, the paper also looks for the governmental rationality which gives rise to such concepts and by which their application is justified. Foucault's concept of governmentality is particularly appropriate here because the idea of agility is not just one applied in

the sense of domination (discipline) but is also promoted as a way in which the self, the subject, should shape him- or herself. In this way, both aspects of governmentality are employed: 'agility' is not just what is expected of institutions and organizations (the government of others) but is also the way in which individuals are expected to shape themselves (government of self).

Research findings

The paper makes several inter-related points, placing the concept of 'agility' at the heart of modern neoliberal governance. While it is related to the concept of flexibility, agility represents a shift in neoliberal thinking. The self is now to be understood not just as the flexible individual (the 'docile body' of the disciplinary society (Foucault, 1991)), but is now 'empowered' as actively entrepreneurial rather than passively flexible. The paper highlights that this is linked to the shift from government to governance, whereby policy aims to steer rather than to direct, and to economic rationalism and the concept of the knowledge economy as 'agility' becomes increasingly focused on the cognitive and the imaginative as opposed to the physical of the industrial economy.

The paper also suggests that while this agility is a symptom of 'liquid modernity' (Bauman, 2005), there are significant ethical gaps in its formulation and that immanent opportunities exist for those who wish to resist this mode of governance. The world of education is not only shaped by the discourse but also has a shaping role and the promotion of social democratic principles is one way by which this empty market-driven governmentality can be countered (Foucault, 2002b; Olssen, 2009).