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Enterprise and the Neo-Liberal Curriculum

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Background

This paper explores some neglected but important aspects of the changing landscape of education policy and governance in England. It sketches some particular features of the increasingly complex and 'congested' (Skelcher) terrain of the education state and traces some of the primary discourses that inform and drive education policy. Education policy, as other policy fields within government, is now thought, influenced and done in many sites and the education policy community is increasingly diverse and unstable. This is indicative of a new mode of governance which involves a 'catalyzing of all sectors - public, private and voluntary – into action to solve their community's problems' (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992), and which brings about changes to the 'boundary between state and civil society' (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003 p. 42) and between state and the economy. In general terms this is the move towards a 'polycentric state' and 'a shift in the centre of gravity around which policy cycles move' (Jessop, 1998 p. 32) which 'enlarge[s] the range of actors involved in shaping and delivering policy' (Newman, 2001 p. 125).

Research Questions

The paper draws on two ESRC funded research studies one focused on private participation in state education, the other on education policy and philanthropy. The projects explore the involvement of new actors in the policy process and the insertion of new discourses into policy. This paper combines a focus on discourse with private participation in the notion of a 'neo-liberal curriculum'.

Methods

This research involved 3 sets of activities; extensive and exhaustive internet searches around particular (corporate) philanthropies, philanthropists and philanthropically funded programmes; interviews with some key 'new' philanthropists and foundations interested and involved in education; and the use of these searches and interviews to construct 'policy networks'. A 'method' I term 'policy ethnography' – a mapping of the form and content of policy relations in a particular field.

Frame

The paper draws upon political science theory and particular concepts which relate to new forms of governance and 'network governance' as well as Shamir's (2008) theoretical work on neo-liberalism and the moral responsibilities of corporations.

Research findings

The paper deploys a classic definition of the curriculum, in relation to the notion of a neo-liberal curriculum, in three different but related ways.

First, somewhat metaphorically, I want to think about the neo-liberal curriculum of public sector reform. That is a content of change through which public sector workers (teachers, doctors, social workers, bureaucrats etc.) must 're-learn' their practice and values, and find themselves 'made up' as 'enterprising' subjects.

Second, I want to think about neo-liberalism 'in' the curriculum, particularly in the guise of 'enterprise education' as a means of disseminating, naturalizing and instilling a neo-liberal ontology. That is the making up of students (and teachers) as entrepreneurial subjects.

Third, in a different sense, I want to think about the curriculum as an opportunity for profit, as a new or at least newly invigorated frontier for capital.