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Neoliberalism, pluralism and environmental education: The call for radical re-orientation



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ABSTRACT

Environmental education (EE) and education for sustainable development (ESD) researchers and practitioners offer a well-founded critique of authoritarian tendencies and the threat of student indoctrination into neoliberalist values. Neoliberalism advocates economic growth through open markets and tends to ignore sustainability imperatives. Some researchers are also wary of *any* type of advocacy in education for the fear of indoctrination, warning against using education as a tool for behavioral change, regulated according to predetermined guidelines. This article supports the critics' caution against neoliberalism, which privileges economic development and tends to ignore other concerns. This article addresses the question of how could educators create meaningful EE/ESD programs within or as an alternative to neoliberalism and discuss larger societal implications of transition to more progressive models. It is proposed that educational practice can be more effectively utilized in order to address unsustainable practices, by engaging with the most effective modes of sustainability and particularly important, critically reflecting upon realistic possibilities of decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation. It will be argued that we need a more focused EE/ESD that takes as its basis our common future on the planet of finite resources that necessarily need to engage more 'radical' perspectives.

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1. Introduction

Skeptical researchers and practitioners of environmental education (EE) and education for sustainable development (ESD) have warned their own academic community of the power hegemonies created by neoliberalism, within and outside of educational practice. In order to overcome these hegemonies, proposing a reversal of the dominant discourse through contestation arising from pluralist perspectives. This reversal involves exposing neoliberalism as only one “of the numerous axiological possibilities for ‘environmental-related education’” (Sauvé et al., 2005: 280). In my article titled ‘Neoliberalism, pluralism, environment and education for sustainability’, I have argued that EE and ESD researchers need to be wary not only of neoliberalist values that permeate much of political, public and indeed educational discourse, but also of a panacea, which is often proposed to counteract them, namely, pluralism (Kopnina, 2014a). While critique of neoliberalism in EE/ESD and indeed broader practice of sustainable development is well-established in literature, the advantages and disadvantages of pluralism, as it is commonly conceived in much of EE/ESD literature, are under-studied. This article will further build upon this critique and explicate how more productive ways forward can be found.

Neoliberal values include open markets, competition, profit, and economic growth (e.g. McGregor, 2009), as well as reliance on individual rationality which has led, as some critics observed, to the arrogance of humanity in relation to their environment (Ehrenfeld, 1988). Neoliberalism is not just about free trade and free markets, but also about corporate dominance through sweetheart deals and the governments’ dependency on subsidiary of a few firms, funneling taxpayers’ money through the powerful industrial lobbies (Allison and Harkins, 2014). ‘Big Brother Sustainable Development’ (Jickling and Wals, 2013: 79) sees social justice and economic equality as two features intimately intertwined with economic growth. Economic development rhetoric tends to keep environmental concerns in orbit with economics at the center (Rolston, 2015). This rhetoric, translated into educational practice, erects a potentially totalitarian curriculum in which economic development is presented as a great ‘good’, marginalizing alternative perspectives.

Neoliberalism links international political rhetoric to education. While neoliberalism is too broad to be summed up as a consistent term or practice, a number of characteristic features relevant to educational practice can be outlined. Neoliberal regimes such as those of Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and George W. Bush in the United States have sought to narrow the curriculum and aim it primarily at economically orientated training. In this context, neoliberal reforms ‘promote the imposition of market models onto educational provision’ (Saltmarsh, 2007: 336) and perpetuate themselves within and through educational practice (Sauvé et al., 2005). Simultaneously, within neoliberal discourse a plethora of ideas how sustainability can be achieved through the de-coupling of economic growth and environmental degradation has been articulated. Yet, how such decoupling is to be realistically achieved is rarely discussed (e.g. Washington, 2015).

The propagation of the firm connection between neoliberal reform and education through this ‘mysterious’ de-coupling finds its way at international political level. In order to guide the negotiations for the post-2015 development agenda, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has submitted The Road to Dignity by 2030 report in which he proposed to ‘decouple economic growth from environmental degradation’, and to ‘advance sustainable industrialization’ (UN, 2014: 23). Nowhere in the report is it mentioned how this decoupling can be realistically done. Instead the idea of ‘sustained and inclusive economic growth’ through education is promoted.¹

Neoliberalism encourages what superficially appears to be pluralism, which reifies individual opinions, diversity and choices. As neoliberalism seeks to pose itself as open to all choices is valorized. Neoliberalism promotes pluralism only within the structure of markets and governs these markets to serve their own interests (Wacquant, 2010; Polanyi, 1957).

¹ See UN (2014:4) report: ‘We have witnessed stunning technological progress, millions upon millions lifted from poverty, millions more empowered, diseases defeated, life expectancies on the rise, colonialism dismantled, new nations born, apartheid conquered, democratic practices take deeper roots, and vibrant, economies built in all regions’.

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