

IIER: Loosening the straps on the neoliberal straitjacket subjugating educational research

An invited guest editorial

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Over the past six years, submissions to IIER have seen a marked increase in the number of academics expressing concern about social, economic and political issues. This may seem surprising for a journal ostensibly preoccupied with research in education. So, why has there been a shift of focus for some educational researchers, beyond the field of their discipline? Without researching this matter ourselves, we can only report this change in behaviour and speculate on the likely cause, or causes.

After consideration, we think there are at least three possible causes:

- increased social and political tensions in specific countries, as well as globally;
- national governments' use of education as a political weapon; and
- top-down micro-management of academics and the predisposition towards managerialism.

One characteristic of many countries in the 21st century appears to be the disintegration of social consensus across national populations. Following the Second World War many Western countries experienced a period of growth in social welfare provision and the narrowing of the wealth gap. However, conservative governments, in particular, have voraciously adopted neoliberal economic and political policies. The IIER article by Sims et al. (2022) is an international study that revealed how the choices made by governments during the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 exposed the impact of neoliberal ideologies on the early childhood education sector as governments enacted inequitable policy decisions.

The economic theory of neoliberalism emanated from the Mount Pelerin Society, so named because it held its first meeting in 1947 in the small Swiss mountain town of Mount Pelerin. Key architects of the economic theory, Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, were instigators of the 1947 meeting. The Society has influenced thinking across a world-wide network of right-leaning think tanks. The first realisation of neoliberalism as a political force occurred under the Thatcher-Reagan axis, which saw Britain and the USA enact the tenets of the theory: small government, freedom of the market, cuts in public welfare and collective provision, and maximising shareholder wealth, premised on the fallacy of 'trickle-down' economics. Social, political and economic inequality are givens in the theory that purports such things to be due to 'natural causes', which is perhaps an implicit 'nod' to eugenics: a pseudo-scientific theory which gained traction in the 1930s in the USA, Germany and elements of the elite in Britain.

Forty years later, the theory has seeped into every social institution, including academia. In her damning indictment of managerialism and neoliberalism, Margaret Sims (2020), who has written several times for *IIER*, discussed how, in the post-truth era, universities have become toxic institutions in which the values and 'world view' of the privileged frame the hegemonic discourse (Gramsci, 2024) which stifles critical thought and shapes "... a compliant neoliberal citizenship...". Across the education sector more generally, neoliberal education is manifest in one-size fits all, standardised, test-data driven, micro-managed accountability systems, which are 'legitimated' via increasingly prescriptive national curricula for state schools and the initial teacher education sector. Cognitive psychology is privileged over all other "regimes of truth" (Foucault, 1991) and "... science of ..." imaginaries are promoted to the status of orthodoxy. Critical thought is anathema in the lexicon of neoliberal epistemology. Hence, critical 'race' theory, feminist and queer theory, sociology and the whole panoply of the arts and humanities are derided and dismissed in a single debate deadening word - 'woke'. In *IIER* 29(3) Schubert & Giles (2019) discussed how, in the Australian educational context, neoliberal 'political-economic' theory was promoted as "... a natural and pragmatic progression" (p. 924), with individual choice within private markets socialised as normative behaviour. However, their study of teachers' conversations reveals how dominant ideologies that do not 'fit' the experienced teacher's professional 'being' are challenged and resisted, if not subverted, as teachers position their work in relation to the well-being of others (Schubert & Giles, 2019).

Neoliberalism has also created the conditions where an increasing number of people have become disenchanted with 'democracy', regarding elections as mechanisms that return elitist politicians who show little care for their needs. In the ensuing political 'mess', enhanced by the systematic dissemination of mis and disinformation, sections of national populations are turning to populist politicians to 'save' the nation. Both the 2016 US election and Brexit in Britain divided the respective populations in half, causing increased social and political tension. Perhaps the irony of seeing populists elected as national leaders, who are themselves wealthy or educated at elite schools, as in the cases of Donald Trump and Boris Johnson, is not lost on academics, who see themselves no longer working in academies, but in neoliberal organisations that put profit before education and research.

It might be argued that these institutions mirror society as a whole, that senior executives implement a taxonomy of privilege in which educational research is always relegated to the base. Educational researchers have become an academic underclass, always searching for 'scraps of money', or undertaking small-scale research in their own time. Right-wing 'think tanks' have hoodwinked governments with the mantra of 'evidence-based practice' accompanied by the implementation of fast-paced power-point induced didactic pedagogy in which we are told 'knowledge' and skills are moved from the short to the long-term memory. Privileging whole class pursuits of procedural knowledge have displaced the importance of cognitive challenge within the child's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Explicit direct instruction (EDI) has become a 'closed-shop' in Western Australia and beyond, as other evidence-based practices and teacher's professional pedagogic knowledge are marginalised, along with the prospect of children developing

neural pathways beyond the uni-linear dimension of behaviourist conceptualisations of memory.

Reaction to neoliberalism may account for some of the reasons why educational researchers have become increasingly concerned about national and global political matters, but it may not be the only reason. Like their Western counterparts who see the inequities of the socio-political state seeping into their institutions, it is possible that academics in other parts of the world are experiencing similarly repressive forces impacting their work. An alternative perspective is that educational researchers are moving closer to fellow academics in other parts of the humanities and social sciences, as commentators of society at large. Whatever the exact causes, it is apparent that educational researchers are witnessing the increasing impacts on their work and the foci of their investigations of reactionary governments and non-governmental organisations.

In the past, it may be that many educationalists considered education to be apolitical, with the exception of Michael Apple, Stephen Ball and other critical theorists. However, concurrent to the ascendancy of neoliberalism, more educationalists appear to have become increasingly conscientised - that is, they are developing increased awareness of educational inequities caused by neoliberalism and the infiltration of the market place into the classroom by means of edu-businesses and the consultant 'guru' who has replaced the professional advisor. Neoliberalism has forced us to work under post-truth era 'bullshit' diktat (Sims, 2020), which positions educationalists who espouse such things as social-constructivist learning theory, language as social practice and dialogic teaching, as out-of-touch, misguided and even radical.

As the journal of Australian institutes of educational research, run by a voluntary team of academics, both practising and retired, IIER is independent of commercialism and is a welcome 'home' for 'renegade' researchers and counter discourses premised on rigorous, systematic investigations that stand in contradistinction to 'normative' pervasive discourses that seek to constrain 'knowledge' by tightening the straps on the straitjacket of homogenous orthodoxy.

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Please cite as: Gardner, P. (2024). IIER: Loosening the straps on the neoliberal straitjacket subjugating educational research. *Issues in Educational Research*, 34(1), invited guest editorial xi-xiv. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier34/gardner.html>