



Neoliberal Education: Problems and Alternatives

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the influence of neoliberalism and New Public Management (NPM) on contemporary education, particularly in the context of India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The paper argues that neoliberal principles, disguised as NPM, are transforming educational institutions into factory models focused on efficiency and economic gain at the expense of critical thinking, social justice, and intellectual inquiry.

This leads us to think about the alternative offered by Paulo Freire. However, this alternative cannot happen on its own. It needs unrelenting efforts on the part of faculty, students and policy makers.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, New Public Management, Education Policy, Commodification, Standardization, Paulo Freire, Banking Model of Education, Problem-Posing Education

Introduction

The education sector is undergoing a significant transformation shaped by the pervasive influence of neoliberalism and its associated management strategies. This paper examines how these forces, often disguised under the umbrella of New Public Management (NPM), are reshaping educational landscapes globally. By analyzing the case of India's NEP 2020, the paper demonstrates how neoliberal principles are infiltrating education policy, leading to disconcerting trends such as commodification, privatisation and standardisation, which create a factory model of education that prioritizes short-term economic gains over long-term social and intellectual development.

Neoliberalism and Economism

Neoliberalism is a theory of political economic practices that proposes human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade (Harvey, 2005). Harvey argues that neoliberalism involves the deregulation of economies, privatization of state assets, and a shift in governance toward market-based principles. However, the flip side is that neoliberalism serves to consolidate class power and restore conditions for capital accumulation, often resulting in increased social inequality and economic instability (Harvey, 2005; Harvey, 2007)

Economism is the invocation of basic neoliberal text book lessons in economics to explain all complex social phenomenon. As Ha-Joon Chang laments in his *Economics: A users Guide* (2014), economics has perverted itself by venturing to explain all life phenomenon without resolving the issues that comes under its core domain. The subject matter of economics is life itself and the dominant methodology of analysis is neoclassical.

Economism when applied to education prepares the ground for capital to flow into the sector with minimum hindrance in the name of "liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms".

Economism is the importation of the norms of economic activity into areas of lives where they are inappropriate-the polity, the family, the school etc. Encapsulating economism about education is the frequent use of the 'consumer metaphor' in education-the metaphor that sees the student as consumer, the teacher as producer, respectively, of the commodity education. Economism can be seen in policy making when it tries to determine how much measurable 'value added' teacher is imparting to our raw materials, the students, in the

processing of them. Again, economism emerges in the (mainstream) economist's picture of the individual buying education as an accumulator of 'human', as opposed to physical, capital. (Quinn, Browne 1998). This economism is embodied in multiple pathways of commodification, privatisation and standardisation in almost all aspects related to education.

Commodification implies that education be made a tradable good just like any other commodity bought and sold in the market. In fact, tradability is the essence of any commodity. Educational institutions are the sellers and students are the buyers and the commodity, i.e., education must be responsive to consumer(student) preferences and seller profits. Such an impetus for commodification is ingrained in the prevailing paradigm of capitalism wherein knowledge is treated as a commodity whose exchange value is determined by comparing the cost of acquiring a degree with the financial earning such a degree entail. Universities and institutions who do not stick to this norm considered as profligate agencies squandering public money. Tuchman (2009) calls this an "audit culture," a mechanical fulfilment of checklists and criteria without more fundamental reflection on how knowledge and degrees contribute to the social and intellectual enrichment of the students.

Privatisation is advocated on ground of making any enterprise more efficient. That efficiency is achieved when any property is developed within the confines of private hands is an urban myth with no evidence. The problematic aspects of privatisation when education as a fundamental human right is subjected to it is not addressed by the efficiency enthusiasts. Privatization of education turns it into a commodity where the buyer's preference must necessarily enter to determine the nature of the commodity produced. There is a basic difference between education that satisfies the preference of the buyer and education that is undertaken in the interests of the people. And if education is to be undertaken in the interests of the people, to defend their interests, then it must be publicly financed (Patnaik, 2007).

Standardisation refers to implementation of uniform indicators for levels, paces, paths and outputs of education. In education, standards articulate what should be included in the curricula as well as how instruction is to be designed, implemented, controlled and accounted for. This also include which qualifications, skills, knowledge and dispositions students are supposed to have acquired in terms of outcomes. Standardisation is a leveraging force for economisation, commodification and privatisation of education.

Standardization is and represents a powerful neoliberal governing device in education; it is a machine for the subjectivation of teachers and a key technology for the dominance and homogenization of education practices." (Rasco A, 2020)

When all these conditions are established in an educational landscape, that landscape can rightly be called as modelled along an industry. Industrial principles are not without merits. But when such principles are applied in the domain of education, education becomes a commodity like any other.

However, these principles are disguised so as not to be readily recognisable and understood. One such mask under which such principles are purveyed is called New Public Management.

New Public Management

New Public Management (NPM) encompasses a series of managerial reforms aimed at enhancing the public sector by adopting strategies typical of the private sector. This approach seeks to increase efficiency and effectiveness through several key strategies:

Performance Management: Establishing clear targets, measuring outcomes, and ensuring accountability in agencies.

Decentralization: Transferring decision-making and operational responsibilities to lower levels within organizations.

Market Mechanisms: Introducing competition and choice between public and private service providers.

Private Sector Techniques: Implementing business strategies like cost accounting, contracting, and outsourcing (Lane, 2000).

NPM thus seeks a convergence of public sector ideals with neoliberalism in the name of efficiency and better management, sharing a belief in market supremacy and individual rationality, leading the resulting policy to emphasize competition, choice, and privatization. It serves as a convergence point of the trends of commodification, privatisation and standardisation in education. But the key point is the reduction of public expenditure as a result of this convergence which has many implications on the social side subverting the very reason for the existence of public sector as such. The working of NPM can be seen in the framework of India's National Education Policy 2020 leading to the following implications.

1. Under NPM, administrative and managerial roles gain prominence, aiming to achieve set targets within specified timeframes, as exemplified by the New Education Policy 2020. This shift alters the roles of administrators, teachers, and professors, linking financial rewards to performance indicators like graduation rates and academic output (Boer and Jongbloed, 2012). The need for extensive data collection increases, and the administrative burden on faculty members grows (Peters, 2004). Despite neoliberalism's goal of reducing the state's role, in practice, the state tightens control by establishing competition and performance norms, thereby regulating market mechanisms intended to enhance efficiency.
2. The NEP 2020's primary goal is to achieve the targeted Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) through any means, including promoting online education. Technology is seen as a solution to rising education costs. However, MOOCs, while encouraged, risk creating a two-tier system that disadvantages those unable to afford

traditional university education. Evidence suggests high dropout rates for MOOCs, particularly among those least suited for this mode of learning (Mohan, Upadhyaya, 2020).

3. The NEP 2020 places emphasis on publication quantity over quality, pressuring researchers to meet publication quotas. This focus on numerical metrics devalues impactful research and encourages fragmentation of research projects. Citation counts, though flawed, are commonly used to assess research impact, with biases favoring English-language journals from the USA (Paasi, 2005). Books are undervalued in humanities and social sciences, while journals dominate in science and engineering. The Journal Impact Factor influences research evaluations, leading to increased submission rates and conservative editorial decisions. Competitive grants involve high transaction costs and complex bureaucracies, with low success rates leading to wasted time and resources.
4. The pressure to perform leads to increased academic fraud, including plagiarism, data fabrication, and duplicate publications (Steen, 2010). Publishers exploit the system for profit, requiring authors to surrender rights and charging high fees for access.
5. Industry-academia collaborations often lead to conflicts of interest, with funding tied to favorable research outcomes for corporate sponsors. This creates a group of scholars who advocate specific positions to advance their personal or institutional goals.
6. Expanding Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) impacts scholarly research by creating proprietary barriers, slowing knowledge dissemination, and shifting the focus from public to private gain. Faculty are incentivized to produce patentable inventions over engaging in teaching and public engagement (Lynch, 2009).
7. Neoliberalism views public engagement as unnecessary, prioritizing private services. This shift redefines the university's role, focusing on fact-learning over creativity and intellectual inquiry. Research is evaluated based on market demand, discouraging high-risk and innovative research.
8. Universities are increasingly seen as drivers of economic growth, focusing on generating proprietary knowledge for economic development rather than public good. This approach leads to weakened institutions more concerned with immediate issues rather than long-term, historical problems.

NEP 2020 and NPM are closely intertwined, with NPM theory rooted in a neoliberal paradigm. In higher education, neoliberalism and NPM have resulted in increased bureaucracies, constraints on teaching and research, and a short-term focus on immediate problems rather than innovative solutions to long-standing issues.

The outcome of this unholy marriage of NPM into higher education is the conversion into a factory model of education. This creates centralised and formalised organisational structures together with a transactional rather than organic environment in the higher education. This growing shift into a transactional approach in higher education is concurrent with the banking concept of education put forward by Paulo Freire.

An Alternative

There is an urgent need to find an alternative to this neoliberal paradigm centred on commodifying and standardising education in the name of efficiency to serve the capital. An education centred on the needs of students is what is always required. The needs of the student may not always reflect in the preferences that the student displays. The neoliberal game of reducing the needs of the students to that of only their preferences is socially regressive. A critique of the neoliberal education together with a workable alternative was proposed by Paulo Freire.

Freire's (1970) critique of traditional education centres on the concept of the "banking model," where teachers deposit knowledge into passive students (similar to a bank depositing money). This method, according to Freire, severs the connection between education and students' lived realities, rendering them incapable of critical thought. Students become mere receptacles for information, lacking the agency to analyze or challenge it (Freire, 1970).

Freire proposes "problem-posing education" as an alternative. This approach aims to liberate individuals from oppression by recognizing them as conscious beings capable of critical engagement with the world. Central to problem-posing education is dialogue, which dismantles the hierarchical structure of the banking model. Through dialogue, the roles of teacher and student become fluid, fostering a collaborative learning environment where all participants are both teachers and learners. This "teacher-student" or "student-teacher" relationship emphasizes co-creation of knowledge rather than one-way transmission (Freire, 1970).

Critical thinking, Freire argues, is also essential for authentic dialogue. A critical thinker, unlike a naive thinker who passively accepts the status quo, actively seeks to transform reality (Freire, [1970]). Dialogue, in turn, fosters critical thinking (Freire, 1970).

In contrast, the banking model, by promoting passivity, benefits the dominant elite by maintaining the marginalization of the oppressed. Freire's vision of education, centered on dialogue and critical thinking, offers a powerful alternative for promoting social justice and empowering individuals.

However, it is nearly impossible to realise the system advocated by Freire in the current political and economic dispensation. This is due to following reasons:

Focus on Skills vs. Critical Thinking: Freire's method emphasizes critical thinking and social awareness, which can challenge the status quo. The current system often prioritizes job training and skills development to fill specific roles in the workforce. This focus on immediate skills might be seen as less valuable than fostering critical thinkers who question power structures.

Standardized Testing and Accountability: Freire's approach is dialogical and student-centered. Current systems often rely on standardized tests and metrics to measure educational success. These metrics might not capture the development of critical consciousness that Freire values.

Power and Social Change: Freire's pedagogy aims to empower people to transform their societies. However, the current political economy often benefits from maintaining a certain social order. There might be resistance to an educational system that encourages questioning authority and working towards social change.

Funding and Resources: Freire's ideal classrooms involve dialogue and smaller class sizes. However, funding for education is often tied to standardized testing and achievement. Schools that prioritize Freirean methods might struggle to secure resources.

Conclusion:

The alternative offered by Paulo Freire is a difficult one in the current political economy which favours the capital rather than the society. Despite potential resistance from groups invested in the current educational paradigm, Paulo Freire's pedagogy of liberation can be implemented through a multi-pronged approach. Firstly, building a critical mass of educators familiar with Freirean methods is crucial. Workshops, teacher training programs, and collaborative learning communities can equip educators with the tools and theoretical framework to navigate a student-centered, dialogical classroom. Secondly, fostering partnerships with community organizations can provide real-world contexts for student inquiry. Local businesses, NGOs, and social justice groups can offer opportunities for students to grapple with Freire's core tenets – problem-posing education and social transformation – within their immediate environment. Finally, advocating for policy changes that prioritize qualitative assessment and smaller class sizes can create a more fertile ground for Freirean methods to flourish. While vested interests might resist such reforms, highlighting the long-term benefits for fostering active citizens and a more just society can garner support for a gradual transformation of the educational system.

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