

The influence of the Global Education Reform Movement in official education policies in Ireland

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Research Questions

1. To what extent were policies relating to literacy and numeracy in Irish primary and post-primary education influenced by the Global Education Reform Movement from 2009 to 2019?
2. To what extent do policies relating to literacy and numeracy in Ireland depart from international understandings of the Movement and why?

The Global Education Reform Movement; a.k.a GERM

- GERM has been the way in which market-oriented ideologies such as managerialism and neoliberalism have influenced education
- Sahlberg (2007; 2012): the “symptoms” of GERM:
 1. Competition between schools
 2. Increased school choice
 3. Consequential accountability
 4. Focus on literacy and numeracy as core subjects
 5. Standardisation of education through outcomes- and standards-based reforms and policies

Policies selected

1. Effective literacy and numeracy practices in DEIS schools: Inspectorate Good Practice Guides (DES, 2009)
2. Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020 (DES, 2011)
3. Circular letter 0056/2011: Initial Steps in the Implementation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (DES, 2011)
4. Circular letter 0025/2012: Implementation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (DES, 2012)
5. Looking at Our School: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools (DES, 2016)
6. Looking at Our School: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools (DES, 2016)
7. National Strategy: Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011-2020 Interim Review 2011-2016 and New Targets 2017-2020 (DES, 2017)
8. Cumasú: Empowering through learning - Action Plan for Education 2019 (DES, 2019)

Findings

GERM-related themes

1. Literacy and numeracy as core subjects
2. Standardisation of education
3. Consequential accountability
4. Increased school choice
5. Competition between schools

Against the GERM grain

1. Partnership and collaboration
2. Inclusion and Wellbeing

Analysis

1. Partnership: Status Quo in Disguise

Powerful groups are more likely to protect their own interests, even under consensual procedures, by bargaining rather than pursuing a deliberative agreement. The results of bargaining typically reflect the unequal positions of the participants [...]. So **in unequal societies, consensual procedures protect privileged groups rather than vulnerable ones.** (Baker et al., 2004, p. 111)

Analysis

- Wellbeing, Resilience, and Lifelong Learning: Neoliberal Fallacies

Positive Psychology is [...] having an influence within policy, both with an emphasis on well-being [...] and [...] the cultivation of subjective qualities, values and character – confidence, agency and resilience [...]. **This might be viewed as a defining aspect of neoliberal government [...], with its focus on young people's relation to themselves.** (Ball, 2017, p. 216-217)

'Lifelong learning' has become a neoliberal notion in and of itself (with **individuals bearing responsibility for enhancing their learning currency** – keeping their knowledge and skill development up-to-date – to ensure their employability and productivity throughout life). (Starr, 2019, p. 8)

Analysis

- [...] neoliberal governing [...] means an assertion of the value and prerogative of the market as regulator not just of economic activity but also of all forms of activity [...]. **Market principles of competition therefore underpin our way of understanding the world, our relations with others and ourselves** – our mentality of government and self-government. **We are made up as neoliberal subjects.** These [...] practices and their advocates and experts produce a 'political economy of hope' [...] that **imperativises the optimisation of the self.** (Ball, 2017, p. 218)

Analysis

3. Inclusion: The Ethics of Motivation

When commenting on the first three National Development Plans (1994-2013), Gleeson (2010) states that they

include significant provision for initiatives aimed at education disadvantage. The underlying reasons for such investment are primarily economic and related expenditure has been **'justified insofar as it facilitates and improves access to the labour market'** (Kellaghan, 2003, p. 19). (p. 199)

Analysis

4. Accountability: A Mixed Bag

The [inspection] team also provides **guidance** and **advice** to practitioners to **ensure** that children have daily exposure to key early numeracy concepts, experiences and materials. (Revised Strategy, 2017, p. 28).

School-to-community accountability: democratic accountability (Biesta, 2010)

School-to-state accountability: closer to GERM; but not quite the same

Conclusions

[w]hile in principle governments could [...] have the common good or public interest at the forefront of their considerations, in practice we can see [...] that many **governments let their decisions about curricular policy be guided by economic concerns**, particularly in terms of a concern for competitiveness in the global economy. (Biesta & Priestley, 2013, p. 231)

Conclusions

Selective and pragmatic embrace of GERM



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graph TD; A[Selective and pragmatic embrace of GERM] --> B[Themes unrelated to GERM may also serve to spread GERM values, or at the very least they do not conflict with the GERM agenda]; B --> C[Adaptation of international education agendas to the Irish context to strike a balance between Irish culture and participation in the competitive global market];
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Themes unrelated to GERM may also serve to spread GERM values, or at the very least they do not conflict with the GERM agenda

Adaptation of international education agendas to the Irish context to strike a balance between Irish culture and participation in the competitive global market

Final reflection

[...] what matters [...] is the kind(s) of subjectivity [...] that are made possible as a result of particular educational arrangements and configurations (Biesta, 2010, p. 21).

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THANK YOU!

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