Markets, equality and democratic education: Confronting the neoliberal and libertarian reconceptualisations of education

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The global emergence of market liberalism marks an effort to decouple the link between citizenship and the welfare state and to rearticulate people's identity as homo economicus, as independent citizens having the right to property and the freedom to choose in the marketplace. Confronting this phenomenon, this paper reviews neoliberal and libertarian understandings of educational equality and democratic education and interrogates the rationale for the justification of markets in education. In the process, I criticise the notion of possessive individualism as a principle of democratic education on the grounds that such a notion explains human action only at the individual level, as a matter of free will, and not as a part of the cultural and political struggle for nondiscrimination. I also provide reasons why the claim to equal respect and recognition needs to be given more importance in education and argue for the social responsibility to secure not only students' educational opportunities, but also their opportunity to reflectively consider what counts as equal value.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, libertarianism, market-based education reform, democratic education

Introduction

Over the past decades, market liberalism has emerged globally as a key topic in educational discourse and reform. Market-inspired ideas, at the heart of this phenomenon, have contributed to the decline of the welfare state and underpinned the ideological rationale for the Thatcher and Reagan administrations' social and educational policies in the 1980s. Although the discussions in this paper center around literatures from Western countries, the phenomenon of neoliberal education reform is not limited to these countries, but extends to African and Asian ones. For example, Waghid (2008) argues that the corporate culture of educational institutions in South Africa has increased and there are concerns that neoliberal educational policies would exacerbate the reality of inequality in the hierarchy of the society. Similarly, in South Korea, the neoliberal model of school choice has resulted in the creation of more elite schools for students from mostly affluent families and the intensification of the long criticised test-driven culture (Sung, 2009). This phenomenon overlaps the recent Japanese educational reforms. Takayama (2007) argues that the Japanese government has adopted market-based educational reforms in response to demands from neo-liberal business sectors and neoconservative intellectuals and politicians.

Recent controversial educational reforms in many countries cannot be considered in isolation from neoliberal and libertarian political leadership (Olssen, 2009; Whitty, Power, & Halpin, 1998). For example, the most influential scholar of neoliberal and libertarian theory, Friedrich von Hayek, is called a "philosopher-economist" on the grounds that he contributes to the rejection of the welfarist vision, and at the same time accepts possessive individualism for moral and political leadership. Possessive individualism gains "hegemonic power" (Gramsci, 1971) to popularise the commonsensical notion that individuals are free to retain or dispose of goods and services without state interference. Hence, neoliberalism is not only

an economic term, but it is also a political stance used to alter the subject position and generate discourse around the idea of what constitutes a good society or responsible citizen (Apple, 2006).

This paper, then, reviews neoliberalism and libertarianism as political-economic terms and provides reasons why the claim to equal respect and recognition needs to be given more importance in education. In the process, the paper has two simple but crucial conceptual research questions:

- Do markets satisfy equality of education?
- Do markets protect democratic education?

In the past decades, market-based school reform efforts have called for the parental right of decision-making in the choice of schools. The ideological formation of parents' identities is linked with the individual freedom to make educational choices for their own children. In the next section, I review some of the major ethical arguments for individual freedom in libertarianism and neoliberalism that provide economic justifications for markets.

Market Rationale

In market liberalism, the nature of the human being is conceived of as rational and competitive. The moral characteristic of this human being is represented by the term *homo economicus*. Indeed, the neoliberal conceptualisation of human nature as *homo economicus* affects parents and educators in such a way as to produce a change in their view of schooling. This neoliberal perspective is embedded in the public proclamations of Chubb and Moe (1990), Tooley (2000), Friedman and Friedman (1980), and Hayek (1979). Their scholarship focuses on a market-inspired reform in which parental school choice - in connection with vouchers - is thought of as an effective means of holding public schools accountable. At the forefront of these proposals is a voucher plan that sees students as bearers of the particular amount spent on their education. Milton Friedman (1955, 1960) promoted the idea of unregulated school choice in which every child would be given a voucher of the same value, but affluent parents could add on extra dollars when the school of choice required it. In short, in an unregulated market proposal, the value of the voucher is the same for each child, but schools of parents' choice are permitted to charge additional tuition fees. In this stance, it is argued that the public schools are forced to compete for students with other schools, including for-profit charter schools or any possible educational service providers (Chubb & Moe, 1990). This is a very basic idea in market liberalism because it is believed that choice encourages competition and competition increases effectiveness.

However, education cannot be a real market. If a school is successful in the market, it cannot grow enough to accommodate the additional demand (Astin, 1992). An educational market is different from a real market that allows producers to expand their business to accommodate the increasing demand for their products and services. Compared to profit-making sectors, education would not satisfy the market assumption of supply-side elasticity. An "educational pseudo-market" (Whitty, Power & Halpin, 1998) would be selective, because this market solves the demand-side over-subscription by a selective process instead of by increasing supplies. Pro-market advocates, then, are in danger of overconfidence. Rational choice theory proffers the formula below:

$$\sum R_i = S$$

R_i: individual's rationality, S: structural change

Interpretation: The end result is that the sum total of parents' rational pursuit of self-interest ($\sum R_i$) raises the level of the structuration (S) of an effective education system as a whole.

Although I will explain more about the counter-evidence in the next section, the above equation is not necessarily true given the unintended sequences. Parents' choices of better schools can have parallel negative effects on the children left behind. For example, if selective schools are skimming off preferred students, those schools will leave the public schools with less funding to teach the rest, including poor

students, at-risk students and disabled students (McNeil, 2000; Sung, 2009). The following diagram is simple, but hopefully useful, in that it describes the location of the effort within the architecture of the overall debate around market-inspired education reforms.

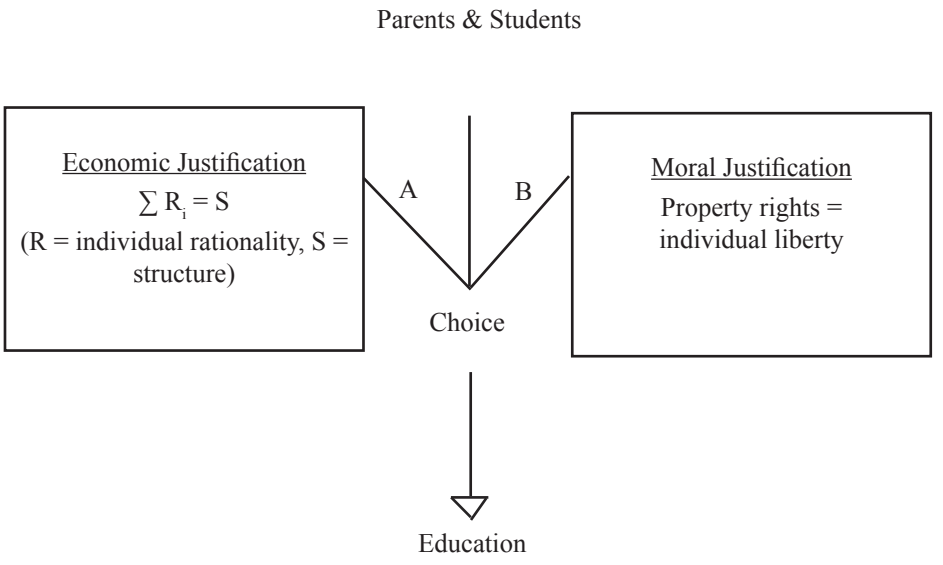

Figure 1: Conversion of the neoliberal and libertarian rationales

Consideration of both economic and moral justifications at the same time is a way to provide a complete and comprehensive explanation for recent developments in marketised perspectives of educational reform. Markets in education are supported not only on economic grounds (see arrow A in the above diagram), as discussed by Chubb and Moe (1990), but also on the moral ground (see arrow B) of individual liberty. In this regard, it would be almost impossible to neglect ethical grounds in the process of understanding market proponents' ideological support (Gewirtz, 2002). To satisfy the demand side of market conditions, it would seem to follow that parents function as economically rational individuals (*homo economicus*), who act out of self-interest. For market proponents, it is believed the sum total of all parents' rational choices is equated with the structuration of an effective education system as a market scenario would expect.

On the other hand, in the moral justification of markets, parents are basically seen as possessive individuals who can exercise their property rights in terms of their individual liberty, especially within educational institutions opened to markets (Chubb & Moe, 1990). For this reason, to better understand major shared themes between ascendant neoliberalist and libertarian ideas, it is worth reviewing libertarianism from the perspective of influential market advocates who favour property rights and minimal state intervention.

In framing market-based arguments, there are at least two prerequisites for protecting individual parental liberty, especially in terms of the moral justification of markets: property rights and the minimal state. Nozick's entitlement theory takes the position that the economic freedom to exercise property rights is a necessary condition for political freedom in a minimal state (Wolff, 1991). It is not surprising that Hayek (1944), another influential libertarian, was endorsed by Nozick (1974). Although Hayek places more emphasis on the free-market mechanism for protecting economic freedom (and, eventually, political freedom) than Nozick did in his justification of the individual's right to private property, they seem to have little disagreement in viewing state intervention as a violation of individual liberty; thus, if the more extensive state tries to tax a person's property in order to provide welfare, it becomes an apparent and significant constraint on property rights. Hayek (1944) maintains that the progressive preference of the

system of state intervention would lead to "the road to serfdom." According to Hayek, since the market has a spontaneous order and the absence of it brings about all sorts of undesirable consequences, the state should not take any responsibility for planning for the welfare of the people further than the competitive market system. In this regard, for Nozick and Hayek, personal morality is a private matter, because public morality undermines individual rights (Newman, 1984).

In the educational field, Chubb & Moe (1990) see the market-based choice policy as a self-contained reform having its own rationale and justification, and so they recommend it be adopted without other reforms. Milton Freedman, Hayek's student, also strongly believes the major reason for the failure of the quasi market application in education is that market reform has been incomplete in the absence of a price mechanism and sufficient competing suppliers. In line with Freedman (1960), Tooley (2000) argues that some school choice experiments fail because their most significant parental choice feature is regulated and mixes the market mechanism with other ideas of public control. In his view, in a genuine choice system, new suppliers would enter the market and create price mechanisms without state intervention. This system calls for a minimal state, large tax reductions and a price mechanism as the best way to privatise schools.

The pursuit of the neoliberal ideal of market-based education is made possible by major shifts in our common-sense understanding of citizenship (Olssen, 2009; Power, 2000). Parents and students have come to be seen as educational consumers. Hall (1986) calls this signifying practice; he offers a way of understanding politics as articulation, a way in which language is used to convey common sense principles based on human beliefs about a particular issue. This can be achieved through media, research institutes, foundations and state or federal legislation regarding parents' right to choose the kind of education they want for their children. Neoliberalism exercises cultural and institutional leadership by gaining people's consent instead of by coercing them (Gramsci, 1971) and by obtaining the hegemonic and managerial legitimacy of the market approach (Apple, 2006). In line with such a signifying practice, neoliberals and libertarians (Nozick, 1974; Hayek, 1960) confidently assert that market models work better to satisfy the equality of educational opportunity, and democratic education would not be undermined but rather better protected in a market system. In the rest of this paper, I will discuss unsuccessful efforts in neoliberal and libertarian thought to justify markets for equal and democratic education.

Do Markets Satisfy Equality of Education?

In challenging the idea that the market can produce maximum social welfare, Stone (1997) points out that if market mechanisms are a good way to organise social activity, society should set the rules about "who can sell, what can be sold, what constitutes a valid contract, and how valid contracts will be enforced" (p.79), because people who can control money and property often take advantage of the system. This tells us that power relations must be considered when a mode of organising social activity is being constructed, if a society is concerned with social justice.

In order to further assess the libertarian argument, we need to consider definitions of educational opportunity. Ennis (1978) provides a useful framework for clarifying the nature of this kind of debate. According to him, equality is a relationship between two things or persons (a dyadic relationship). He suggests an expression to indicate a clear dyadic relationship: if *x* and *y* are equal in terms of educational opportunity, then *x* and *y* have the same amount of opportunity for it. He further formulates that "*x*'s having an opportunity to do *z* consists of the presence of positive factors combined with the absence or insufficiency of negative factors" (p.176).

Putting Tooley (2000)'s argument for adequate minimum education into Ennis' dyadic relationship of educational opportunity, one can understand this dyadic relationship as the way in which schools serve *x* (a student having greater deterrents) with adequate minimum education, while *y* (another student having greater facilitators) has unlimited advantages. In this view, the state has no business to consider what the deterrents are to *x* and how to fix the situation in order to ensure the same amount of opportunity. This way of understanding educational opportunity is reminiscent of Rawls' (1971) criticism of "a callous meritocratic society" in which the utilitarian notion of equality of opportunity is utilised to leave the less fortunate behind. The belief that each person has the right to be treated as a holder of intrinsic human

dignity shares much in common with Rawls's argument that no one merits a more favourable starting place in society.

There is evidence that reality betrays the optimistic market ideal of *homo economicus*. The weakness in the rational choice theory embedded in neoliberalism, as it relates to issues of equality, comes from cultural capital theory. The pattern of parents' choice behaviours can be set as follows:

$$B=f(R/C)$$

B=behaviour, f=function, R=rationality, C=conditions (cultural and material)

The above formulation of a human being's behaviours can be interpreted as follows: an agent's behaviour, B, is a function of individual rational choice, under the given condition, C. But rational choice theory tends to take little account of C, thinking little of cultural and economic conditions. This is a primary reason why this theory has proved difficult to verify empirically. Many researchers show that, in its implementation, choice would not be the idealistic picture that many choice advocates paint (Fuller, 2000). People are not simply molded according to market assumptions, and they do not always act in an economically rational manner. A number of researchers (Ball, 2003; Lauder & Hughes, 1999) provide evidence that low-income minority parents struggle with limited information, resources, time and available transportation. More important is that the cultural condition (cultural "C" in the above formulation) partly functions as cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984); some will eagerly seek out higher performing schools, while others will not transfer to suburban schools because they have different goals or fear possible maladjustment in these higher status schools. Additionally, students of colour may feel they lack the cultural capital to keep up with white students (Ball, 2003; Olssen, 2009; Power, 2000).

Furthermore, these parents' material conditions (material "C" in the above formulation) may prevent their being able to afford to drive their children to school. While this example might seem simplistic, it serves as a rather straightforward exemplar of the actual matter of material conditions. Furthermore, the market mechanism cannot be fully understood without considering economic marginalisation and poverty in urban areas and the increasing unemployment of poor parents. This condition of growing insecurity and deprivation distracts parents in poverty from concentrating on children's education, not to mention school choice. It is often the case that the matter of choice is the matter of material conditions. At the same time, one should be careful not to exaggerate material conditions in school choice patterns. In many studies of parents' experiences with school choice, different patterns of processes and outcomes have been found according to parents' racial, social, and linguistic backgrounds (Wells, 1993). This resonates with Henig's (1994) criticism of market proponents; he argues that the rhetoric of educational "choice restricted choice in the name of choice" (p.191). Rational choice theory sees parents as active participants, but the school is not a passive receiver. The result of choice as experienced by schools is nothing like parents expect.

Do Markets Protect Democratic Education?

Like most of us, neoliberals and libertarians are concerned with what they believe to be a democratic education, but their way of ensuring it is quite different. They think the democratic ideal does not provide justification for state intervention. In this regard, Hayek complains that election politics bring about corruption and distortion and so result in the decline of the rule of law. Hayek believes that the Constitution was intended not to define the functions of government but to define "the limits of its coercive powers" (Hayek, 1979: 109) and to prevent the undermining of the norms of a spontaneous social order. Therefore, Hayek thinks a desirable function of legislation is to sustain a given social order as long as it is designed to guarantee spontaneous order (Newman, 1984; Vamberg, 1986).

Market liberalism has deeply engaged in efforts to decouple the link between citizenship and a caring society (Hall, 1986). Instead, they have tried to link the liberty of citizens with property rights. For example, Nozick's argument against exclusive property rights raises serious problems in directly linking private property rights with personal liberty. The ownership of citizens' rights is understood such that individuals hold property and benefit from it. Nozick does not address the issue of liberty in general but freedom to deal with individual property. However, the political philosophy of education needs to restore

human beings, exercising not only "freedom from" but also "freedom to" in terms of fulfilling the right to liberty. In his criticism of market-based educational reforms, Jonathan (1990) notes that parents' rights are used to secure more popular educational products (e.g., choice of most favourable schools) for their children, while at the same time exercising these rights possibly disadvantages other children. In this way, neoliberalism tends to change the identity of parents into individual decision-makers for their children with insufficient consideration of others. This is the libertarian problem of reducing democracy to selfish individualism. The Hayekian concept of rule of law is too unconvincing to fulfill this responsibility. Newman (1984) reminds us that the Hayekian term "rule of law" is a contestable phrase because the rules may be impartial in enforcement, but the rules themselves can be partial in their shape. Instead, it is of critical importance that democracy is much more complicated than establishing regularities in the rule of law. The way to bring democracy to life cannot be neutral and simply fixed; it requires ongoing debate in order to map its real meaning. Democratic education is more than simply trusting the rule of law, not because the rule of law is insufficient, but because it is not neutral or impartial.

The concept of democracy is closely linked to that of equality because the object of efforts for equality is not merely opportunity but also value, and this value cannot be obtained without a democratic struggle (Waghid, 2009). As Gutmann (1987) argues, if education is democratic, it should be used to avoid inequalities that deprive children of educational opportunities to participate in democratic political processes and other aspects of democratic life. Therefore, if we do not take value judgments into account in thinking about equality of education, we fail to address this issue. Kymlicka (1990) argues that liberalism should be amended to avoid the accusation that it lacks full concern for all the possible types of race, class, and gender inequality. Kymlicka posits a triadic structure of social levels that is useful, not only in pointing out the limitations of libertarians such as Hayek, Nozick and Friedman, but also in broadening our understanding of equal and democratic education in relation to freedom of choice. Kymlicka's formulation of the concept of this freedom is twofold: first, claims about freedom take the form that agent x is free from repressive condition y to do action z; second, x and y are situated at the triadic intersection of individual, group, and society levels. Compared with Kymlicka, neoliberalism is not sound in the sense that agent x is thought of only as an individual, which prevents full understanding of the way in which freedom to choose at the individual level is inevitably coupled with the other two broad levels in highly complicated and dynamic ways (Komba, 1998). Hence, some obvious limitations appear in the use of such libertarian approaches to defining freedom to choose, because competitive individualism treats the matter of this freedom merely as an individual matter.

The libertarian's defense of liberty is flawed because it neglects the notion of "equal liberty of equal value" (Plant, in Jonathan 1990: 130). It still remains unclear whether even liberal egalitarians can do a better job than Fraser (1997) in dealing with cultural injustice. Fraser (1997) argues that unfairly biased cultural norms against certain social groups are institutionalised and, at the same time, this institutionalised condition prevents these people from equally participating in the making of a fair culture. If she is correct, we might think even liberalism does not sufficiently emphasise a related point of equal importance, that is, the opportunity to claim "equal treatment" (Nieuwenhuis, 2004), because, in its understanding of social responsibility in equality of educational opportunity, liberalism deals only with affirmative redistributed remedies for class injustice.

Conclusion

In the paper, I proffered evidence against the expectation for markets, as there is a misinterpretation of the notion of equality and democratic education in influential libertarian arguments. In the process, I reviewed rational choice theory as an underlying assumption behind neoliberal ideas in recent educational reforms. This theory posits that if individuals make choices by approximating maximum benefits, this then leads to utility maximisation as a result of the aggregate effect of all these personal rational actions. Responding to this claim, I demonstrated that many market-oriented proposals and much literature (e.g., Chubb & Moe, 1990; Freedman & Friedman, 1980; Hayek, 1944; Nozick, 1974; Tooley, 2000) rests, in large part, on rational choice theory; however, this theory has proved difficult to verify empirically because it disregards

the fact that the playing field is not equal for everyone. Different people hold different amounts of cultural capital; parents make use of their cultural capital to enhance their children' status in the social field of power. More affluent families will no doubt be in a position to make the most of the educational market (Ball, 2003; Wells, 1993).

In the conceptualisation of markets, neoliberals and libertarians have struggled to change the way we think about and participate in our society. Neoliberalism developed as a reaction to the economic crisis that is often associated with the welfare state and it gained support from a significant portion of the working class (Hall, 1986). It is most significant for changing the very meaning of citizenship and, as a result, moving the concept citizenship from political to that of membership in a caring society in which consumer choices govern individual lives. I point out that neoliberal and libertarian arguments are not sound in the sense that parental decision-making is thought of only at the individual level. Political philosophers such as Gutmann (1987) and Fraser (1997) provide support for theoretical arguments that equality and democracy in education cannot be considered in isolation from participatory citizenship to claim equal value and respect as well as to transform discrimination and repression.

In the paper I raised two questions: I asked if market-based education reform can satisfy equality of education and if it protects democratic education. I pointed out that neoliberalism and possessive individualism have produced accumulated evidence of the inability to address the issue of cultural and political struggle. Drawing upon some social and political philosophers (Fraser, 1997; Gutmann, 1987), I maintain that concerns of educational opportunity cannot be divorced from issues of democratic citizenship to claim redistribution and recognition because, in essence, education is responsible not only for students' opportunity to access schooling but also their opportunity to carefully consider what counts as equal value. In the face of the growing influence of neoliberal forces in education and the decline of an ethical basis for equal and democratic education, a different direction is needed to turn away from *homo economicus* as calculating citizens changing education into a marketable commodity toward equal and democratic citizens restoring the missing link between the social responsibility of education and membership in a caring society. It is difficult to find evidence that neoliberal education reforms have been effective over the past decades in fulfilling the conditions for equal and democratic education. Equal and democratic education is not possible without ensuring active participation in the struggle for redistribution and recognition in order to interrupt the unjust status quo.

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