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Editorial: marketization and commodification of adult education

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Introduction

Marketization of education is a global phenomenon (Ball, 2007; Burch, 2009) and has attracted increased research interest during the last decades, not least in terms of research on school choice and its consequences (Lundahl et al., 2014). Marketization connects back to the emergence of neo-liberalism in the 70s and 80s, an ideology which seeks to implement basic market economic principles in all areas of social life. Many scholars of education have analysed the ways neo-liberalism influences education policies and practices. This development goes hand in hand with the introduction of the New Public Management discourse, which includes the application of market mechanisms in the public sector. Neo-liberal marketization presumes a commodification of education and training provision, so that education can be directly organized as a market exchange and so that steering and funding can be related to the principles of supply and demand in the market economy.

Adult education systems look different in different countries (Käpplinger & Robak, 2014), and there are distinctly different political systems and views on the welfare state (see e.g. Esping-Andersen, 1990 regarding the welfare state). Thus, the extent to which, and the way market principles have been introduced, differ between countries. Further, processes of marketization include many issues, ranging from more macro-oriented ones to more micro-oriented ones.

When surveying the relevant literature on marketization and commodification of adult education we mostly find a range of conceptual contributions, as well as policy analyses, that raise concerns about how neoliberalism reshapes policies and practices in adult education (e.g. Barros, 2012; Fejes, 2006; Finnegan, 2008; Griffin, 1999; Martin, 2008; Milana, 2012; Rubenson, 2004). Some of these are empirical studies focusing in detail on policy changes, while others are more political, in terms of arguing for resistance and changes to the present state of being. However, when searching for empirical contributions on how marketization and commodification takes shape in specific geographical locations, or research that focuses on the consequences of marketization and commodification on practices of adult education, there is not much to

be found (at least in the English speaking literature). Most of the identified studies focus on higher education, and only a few on adult education (e.g. Fejes et al., 2016). This lack of studies on marketization and commodification of adult education is quite surprising, not only as there is quite much such research in relation to compulsory schooling and higher education. This indeed might raise the question how “successful” the neo-liberalist policy of marketization has been until now. Is the whole thing a political ambition, combined with a projective concern of adult educators and participants?

Hardly. Processes of marketization and commodification are in some countries quite distinct, something that is happening as we speak, and something that has direct consequences for a range of stakeholders. But it may be of importance that many areas of adult education have been based on free choice and self organized provision, so that the policy implemented commodifications that interfere with old mechanisms of free choice and voluntary work. This complexity, and the opposing trends, make the need for conceptual analysis and empirical studies even more needed. Thus, we believe that this is an important issue at stake for the education and learning of adults today in Europe and beyond, and therefore we invited contributions in connection to this theme.

Some notes on marketization and commodification

Obviously marketization has effects on provision and participation but it might not be the same in different contexts – and it might also have ambiguous effects in each case. In most cases marketization exposes established institutions to competition from alternative programmes and makes them (more) dependent on an articulated demand. In many cases this is combined with the withdrawal of subsidies and leaves activities to be funded by potential participants, their employers, or other agencies. But marketization may also mean the introduction of new services or well-known services to new users. Marketization raises especially two types of questions:

Firstly, how does the market-dependent production and distribution influence the very service (the education provision) itself? Does it lead to standardization and/or to differentiated services? Does it make use of new technologies and formats of provision? Does it support quality improvement and development of programmes? Does it introduce new power relations between school leaders and teachers/adult educators, teachers and students, as well as between teachers and teachers?

Secondly, another type of question is related to the access and availability of educational resources. Does it facilitate the access for new users, broader dissemination – e.g. international provision? Does it exclude minority groups or substantially reduce their access to education? Do the changes in funding restrict users from access, or introduce new power relations around participation, e.g. between employers and employees?

Critical conceptual research into the general trends may extract such general dimensions of marketization, but we think that the forms and effects are dependent on local/national institutions, education traditions, social and cultural organisations etc. (Salling Olesen, 2014). So we need empirical contributions as well. Researchers engaged in the field in different locations should be able to identify a range of practices where marketization and commodification takes hold with specific consequences. Does marketization have the same and/or different consequences in traditional social

democratic welfare states as, let's say e.g. traditional Christian democratic welfare states or liberal welfare states (cf. Esping-Andersen, 1990)?

Even though many consequences of the marketization for our daily lives and activities in the field, may be deemed negative or at least problematic, limiting the critique to conceptual papers and arguments does not provide a sufficient basis for a more elaborate and nuanced discussion on the topic. We believe that there is a need for more empirical research in this area.

The contributions

In this issue of RELA, we introduce five articles on the topic of marketization and commodification of adult education of which some are conceptual and some empirical. We also introduce one open article.

Thematic articles

In the first article, Borut Mikulec and Sabina Jelenc Krašovec focus on the Europeanisation of adult education policies in Slovenia, and how such processes foster marketization of adult education and commodifies valuable knowledge and desirable forms of neoliberal subjectivity. The authors make their point by exploring the parallelism between European policy and policy documents in Slovenian policy, claiming that this parallelism is due to an echoing in the national policy of the trends in the European agenda. This article, in a way, illustrates a concern that we have met broadly around Europe – seeing the soft steering implemented by the method of open coordination of EU as a vehicle for standardisation and neo-liberal policy (e.g. Fejes, 2008).

The second article, by Barry Hake, seems to have this general concern as a backdrop for a detailed historical account of the history of steering and the role of market mechanisms in adult education in the Netherlands. Hake's analysis is – for good reasons – based on document analysis, which of course always leaves a space for interpretation of the function of those documents in relation and their way of depicting and influencing political realities. However his account demonstrates how markets have, in the modernization process, for centuries been a dominant way of meeting educational needs – and in recent times with the neo-liberal policy agenda there has been a complicated interplay between the state and different social actors, in which market mechanisms have been delegated a substantial role in some phases, although a quite different one. We as editors are not able to evaluate the history of the Netherlands but we think the argument raises a similar question for Europe in general and for other countries in which there seems to be this connection between European (neo-liberal) policy agenda and national adult education reforms. For this reason we think that Hake's specific account forms a useful problematization of the whole perception of our theme.

Even though we have some reservations about the assumption that the reflection in national policy documents of European policy ideas also translates into a converging reality we still think that a study of discourses which are performed on different levels of policy and practice may be a productive way to discover the way in which marketization is operating. Cecilia Bjursell provides an analysis of meaning-making among school leaders in adult education in Sweden by focusing on their talk about their practice. Interviews were conducted within a larger study on quality work in adult

education. Drawing on theories of language as social action and metaphors as social frames, she identifies seven metaphors concerning adult education: education as administration, market, matching, democracy, policy work, integration and learning. She concludes that much of the meaning-making coincides with policy frameworks, where democratic concepts are downplayed on behalf of economic concepts. However, economic theories should not only be seen as linked to liberal ideology, but rather seen as shaping a different notion of the relation between adult education and democracy.

The fourth thematic article is conceptual. Tina Röbel analyses in what ways economic and pedagogical ideals interact in the workplace learning context. Drawing on three dimensions of ethics: applying economic theories to business ethics, integrative business ethics and analytical business ethics, she formulates an approach for empirical investigation. Based on this review, she reformulates her research question into: Which values are inherent in the decisions taken in the context of workplace learning? – arguing that business ethics should/can not be seen as something separate from decision making. In conclusion, she argues for this empirical approach to the study of ethics in the workplace in opposition to more normative studies on the topic. Without such empirical approaches, she argues, there is a risk that the research is of little value for practice.

In the fifth thematic paper, Jeffrey Zacharakis and Jessica Holloway elaborate on the marketization and commodification of adult education within universities in the US. Their example provides a thought-provoking alternative picture to European adult education. Although some of the concerns are similar – related to the authenticity and educational quality of adult education – the article also shows that some of the relations we in Europe may take for granted may look entirely different over there.

Open papers

In the last paper in this issue, Trish Hafford-Letchfield and Marvin Formosa focus on the potential for lifelong learning and learning interventions from which co-production with those using social care service in later life might be better facilitated. Drawing on research on social care and research on educational gerontology, the authors identify a number of issues that act as barriers in the process of achieving co-production. As a solution and way to bridge the gap, lifelong learning in its critical form is proposed. This could for example mean that by “utilising learning within the ways in which we interact and intervene in our everyday practice with older people and the decisions made together with social care users permits reflection on the real meaning of co-production”.

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