

102 All that glitters is not gold: The depoliticization of social inequality in European education policy on 'microcredentials'

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Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

In a time of crises threatening the neoliberal hegemony, it is important to scrutinize in what ways tensions between intensifying demands for sustainability and social inclusion on the one hand, and objectives adhering to the competitive order on the other, are managed within education policy. In this presentation, we discuss results from a critical discourse analysis of a recent EU council recommendation on 'microcredentials' – credits for short courses primarily oriented towards skills-development. We demonstrate how the policy appropriates and recontextualizes discourses of social inclusion to advance a market-oriented agenda. The concept 'bling' is used as an explanatory metaphor for this discursive depoliticization, making *invisible* an underlying neoliberal rationality and *hypervisible* an apolitical and consensus-oriented surface. This prevents disagreements over aspects of education that are fundamentally political and paves the way for an educational market that utilizes microcredentials as tokens of exchange-value to further subjugate institutions and students to capital interests.

Full paper

Introduction

The neoliberal rationality and its gradual economization of society has had a large impact on higher education (HE) on a global scale, and resulted in heightened competition, an increased focus on excellence and efficiency, as well as a stronger emphasis on employability and skills in the curriculum. While, in the present conjuncture, economic, ecological, political and social emergencies may have created a 'crisis of hegemony' for neoliberalism (Fraser 2019), at the same time, its ability to adapt and adjust to competing ideologies has allowed it to overcome serious global challenges for decades, despite many declarations of its death. It is thus important to observe in what ways potential tensions between calls for sustainability and social inclusion on the one hand, and objectives adhering to the competitive order on the other, are managed within education policy. With this study we aim to highlight the importance for critical scholars of paying particular attention to the 'subtleties of neoliberal reasoning' (Plehwé, Slobodian, & Mirowski, 2020, p. 7) when studying the governance of HE. The close scrutiny and exposure of such reasoning is crucial for enabling critical discussion around its material consequences.

Research questions

We will present results from an analysis of a recent (2022) EU council recommendation on 'microcredentials' – credits for short courses primarily oriented towards the attainment of skills. Previous research has demonstrated a linkage between microcredentials and neoliberal visions (Pollard & Vincent, 2022; Ralston, 2021; Reynoldson, 2022; Wheelahan & Moodie, 2021, 2022). At the same time, the analyzed policy text is embedded within an EU policy landscape which – in contrast to the openly competition-focused agenda of the early 2000s – puts a strong emphasis on social goals and social inclusion (Laalo, Kinnari, & Silvennoinen, 2019; Zeitlin & Vanhercke, 2018), objectives that may potentially clash with agendas promoting economic growth. Against this background, our research questions were:

- How does the EU council's recommendation on microcredentials construct the role of education in relation to economic and social objectives?
- What tensions and contradictions can be identified in such constructions?
- How are these tensions and contradictions discursively managed?

Methodology

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was used to analyze the Council recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability (Council of the European Union, 2022), following the methodology suggested by Fairclough (2010). Guided by Phelan's (2007) analytical distinction between ideologically 'transparent' and ideologically 'euphemized' neoliberal discourses, particular attention was paid to segments of the text where expressions distinguished as promoting a progressive, social agenda occurred within an economically informed discourse.

Results

Through our analysis, we demonstrate that the policy text illustrates both transparent and euphemized neoliberal discourses. We identify a set of discursive techniques used to depoliticize issues of social inequality and protect a neoliberal agenda from being challenged. By appropriating a social justice vocabulary, by embedding ambiguous 'trans-ideological' (Fox, 2010) concepts in a context of self-improvement and responsabilization, and by drawing from a discourse of saviorism, market objectives can be legitimized, potential contestation over the commodification of the oppressed can be obscured, and inequality in relation to education possibilities and life trajectories can be preserved. The techniques allow for the construction of microcredentials as a means for addressing social injustice and enabling a fairer society at the same time as they unify these objectives with a discourse reproducing a neoliberal subjectivity.

Discussion

We draw on political theorists such as Gramsci (1971) and Mouffe (2009) in order to explain the implications of the depoliticization of social inequalities that we have identified in this policy. Using the concept of 'bling' (Thompson 2009) as a metaphor for this depoliticization, we conclude that the expressions used in the operationalization of the identified techniques have the capacity to "bling" the argumentation for microcredentials – making *invisible* an underlying neoliberal rationality and *hypervisible* an apolitical and consensus-oriented surface, thereby preventing disagreements over aspects of education that are fundamentally political. This strategy is particularly troublesome as the policy paves the way for an educational market that utilizes microcredentials as tokens of exchange-value to further subjugate institutions and students to capital interests. We argue, thus, that the policy text represents an attempt, in the face of the present crises, to both discursively and materially protect, sustain, and reinforce a "common sense" (Gramsci 1971) which is conducive to neoliberal objectives for HE.

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