

## Thirteen

# Affective Labour and Neoliberal Fantasies: The Gendered and Moral Economy of School Choice in England

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Andrew Wilkins

### INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1970s/early 80s political and public policy opinion in England has been saturated with claims to the perceived waste and inefficiency generated through government intervention over the control and delivery of public services. As a corrective to such top-down bureaucracy, neoliberal ideologues insist that citizens should be “empowered” to pursue their own self-interest as a condition of their rights (and obligations) as consumers of public resources. The expectation is that market-driven reform will produce direct incentives for welfare providers to improve their services through appealing to welfare users as rational economic actors (calculating and discriminating).

School choice, for example, represents the translation of these ideas in the realm of education policy and practice with mothers summoned in the role of active, engaged consumers. A duty and condition of this role is that mothers know the “right” school for their child and link up their child’s needs with suitable forms of education provision. This necessitates the performance of “af-

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fective labour”, including the utility of emotion and feeling for the purpose of maximizing familial advantage. In this discussion I highlight how some mothers articulate emotive discourse as a framing for their choice and in doing so seek to go against the grain of economical utility and maximization through calculation. To conceptualize emotive discourse as a form of resistance that exceeds the calculus of the market is problematic, however. It can also be viewed as productive of neoliberal gains in terms of generating self-governing subjects. To outline these issues I demonstrate how emotion and feeling operate as discursive resources which feed into, and which are products of, neoliberal governance.

#### REMAKING THE STATE

Although not formally introduced to British policy making until the 1980s (specifically, the 1988 Education Reform Act), the blueprint for school choice first surfaced in 1977 when Stuart Sexton, who later went on to become advisor to the Secretary of State in Thatcher’s Conservative government, advocated that parents should be granted freedom of school choice by application.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the historical and political forces that gave rise to school choice are so diverse that they need to be examined as expressions in the confluence of distinct economic and political rationalities, namely monetarism and neoconservatism. Taking these two trends into consideration, I will analyze the policy of school choice as corresponding to the formation of a set of “political configurations” and “philosophies” (Hall 15) geared towards the displacement of one political and economic settlement (Keynesianism) and culminating in the birth of another (neoliberalism).

If we turn to the historical period in which school choice was arguably first imagined—the mid-1970s—it is clear that a particular set of economic, political, and cultural formations furnished its configuration as a policy technology. After the Second World War, Britain enjoyed a relatively stable period of affluence marked by an “unprecedented harmony between Ministers, sponsoring departments, institutions and the public” (Middlemas 342). Yet by the 1970s, British liberal economists and political conservatives together with the support of the newly established right-wing

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think tank Centre for Policy Studies (established in 1974) unleashed a torrent of anti-statist rhetoric demanding that the traditional Keynesian method of using government intervention to improve the demand for output and employment be overturned.<sup>2</sup> The New Right replaced direct government intervention in the form of structural supports with the new state role of setting the moral-religious tone for society.<sup>3</sup> Through articulating and combining repertoires of “the people” and anti-collectivism (as against the state) together with traditional themes of family, nation, authority, standards, duty, and self-reliance,<sup>4</sup> the New Right offered up a rhetoric that paved the foundation for the Conservative Party’s landslide electoral victory in 1979. As Millar and Rose observe in *Governing the Present*, “These diverse skirmishes were rationalized within a relatively coherent mentality of government that came to be termed neo-liberalism” (Miller and Rose 211). In the 1990s Conservative leader and Prime Minister John Major introduced elements of managerialism and consumerism as mechanisms for guiding the delivery of public services.<sup>5</sup> This had the effect of fortifying a decisive break with Keynesian consensus policies and, in particular, the model of citizenship engendered through post-war social policy.<sup>6</sup>

### SUMMONING ACTIVE CITIZENS: NEOLIBERALISM AND THE ROLE OF AFFECTIVE LABOUR

Between 1944 and 1979 social policy in Britain was rationalized through a particular understanding of the relation between the state and citizen. This model of citizenship prescribed the entitlement that “citizens should enjoy a minimum level of rights (economic security, care, protection against various risks and so on)” (Johansson and Hvinden 106). From 1979 onwards, however, governments have ushered in a number of reforms that signal a shift away from these trends in welfare governance. Couched in the vocabulary of enterprise, marketization and self-responsibility, successive governments have sought to offset the perceived excesses attributed to state control over public sector organization through locating citizens and welfare providers in new modes of self-regulation—what can be concisely formulated as neoliberal or advanced liberal modes of governing.<sup>7</sup>

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In this expanding neoliberal imaginary, individuals come to be constituted as bearers of consumer rights and pursuers of their own self-interest. Feelings and desires are reified into objects of consumption. The fulfillment of consumer-based obligations, such as the capacity and willingness to exercise choice and self-care, is defined as a condition for receiving particular rewards. Effective citizenship works as a form of political governance linking entitlement to the behavior of welfare recipients: “Without any choice, they are far more like the passive recipient than the active citizen” (Ministers of State 3.4.3). In the context of school choice then, “affective labour”<sup>8</sup> refers to how mothers as enforced “choosers” of education provision are governed through their capacity and willingness to utilize affect to maximize familial advantage. Thus, unlike in the Keynesian model where access to resources was predicated upon entitled need, neoliberal subjectivity predicates access to resources upon “proper” performance.

#### THE INJUNCTION TO CHOOSE

In the case of education, school choice represents the translation of neoliberal ideas into the realm of policy making and political discourse. Prior to the introduction of the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA), local education authorities allocated each child a school place based on their geography and proximity to locally available schools. Subsequent to the introduction of the ERA, these powers were stripped away and parents were assigned obligations as active choosers (rather than passive recipients) of education services, “enabling” them to exit their local school system. While government documentation utilizes the gender-neutral term “parents”, it is invariably “mothers” who are made responsible for this elaborate process of “school choice.” Thus, such de-gendering through neutralized terms removes the increased labour required specifically by mothers that such an elaborate “choice” system necessitates.

The inability or “unwillingness” of mothers to choose a school for their child has not been overlooked by governments, however. To create “better-informed customers” (Ministers of State 3.4.3), the then Labour government set up local services in 2006-7 specifically designed to target and nudge those mothers who “find the

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system difficult to understand and therefore difficult to operate in the best interests of the child”, or who are simply “unable or unwilling to engage with the process” (DCSF 2). This process of naturalizing an image of the willing and deserving “parent” as someone who operates “in the best interests of the child” (ibid) serves also to privilege emotion and affect as preferred strategies for securing competitive familial advantage. The active consumer is one “who mobilizes affects and emotions and governs itself through them” (Isin 232).

As for those mothers recognized as “willing” subjects, government information and advice sets out in no uncertain terms the conditions for exercising “reasonable” and “responsible” choice: “Armed with information about the schools in their area many parents can navigate the system successfully” (DfES 3.11). The use of the military metaphor (going “armed”) is suggestive of the competitive educational space mothers are invited to survey and navigate in their role as consumers. In particular, it denotes a mode of engagement and relation to the self that is as much clinical and instrumental as it is social and cultural. To choose “responsibly”, for example, is to engage in practices of long-term preparation and planning together with the exercise of certain skills, knowledge and orientations, all of which presuppose a network of equally shared and equally available dialogical competencies and socially appropriated behaviors. “Choice”, therefore, is less an act of spontaneity than it is a behavioral adjustment to culturally acceptable values and politically mandated norms.

To refuse or “properly” engage with the logics of choice, therefore, is to run the risk of being relegated to the often demonized position of someone who is “passive” and “undeserving” (a particular offshoot of the government desire to constitute parents as “active”). This is because economical utility and instrumental calculation function as criteria for assessing the suitability of different schools. Refusal or inability to engage with the field of choice becomes synonymous with a perceived transgression of parental duties and responsibilities. Under neoliberalism, such duties and responsibilities increasingly take on the character of consumer-oriented dispositions with the economic *and* affective actor at its centre. This generates a “structure of feeling”<sup>9</sup> that is lived and negotiated (inhabited and performed) by mothers, often produc-

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ing moments of anxiety. Some commentators observe choice as an obsession of the middle class,<sup>10</sup> as something that inscribes and legitimates middle-class orientations and values.<sup>11</sup> This has implications for the ways in which mothers narrate and rationalize their experiences and enactments of choice.<sup>12</sup> However, rather than submitting to the economical utility prescribed by the dominant discourse of choice, mothers negotiate it in the context of interlocking and competing value systems and moral orders, often oscillating between antinomies of citizen and consumer, community and individual, and political and commercial.<sup>13</sup>

#### THE GENDERED ECONOMY OF SCHOOL CHOICE

In what follows I make explicit the dialogic struggle entered into as several mothers explain the meanings and representations expressed through their choice-making practices.<sup>14</sup> It is particularly salient that only mothers responded to the call to be interviewed. Indeed, as many British social policy analysts and sociologists of education observe, it is mothers who are expected to be responsible for linking together children's needs with agencies of service delivery.<sup>15</sup> By virtue of their ascribed role as primary caregiver of the child, it is therefore mothers who become the principle targets of neoliberal policies and practices of school choice. On this view it becomes possible to disentangle the generic language of school choice, with its appeals to consumer-based spectacles of need-satisfaction, from the concrete and embodied practices through which mothers experience and negotiate choice—what we might term the gendered economy of school choice. Indeed, the contradictions pertaining to some mothers' choice-making practices can be linked to the competing pressures they invariably confront as neoliberal subjects—economizing agents who also utilize affect to maximize familial advantage.

To demonstrate this I draw on a number of interviews I conducted with a group of London-based mothers (15 in total) during 2007. The purpose of this study was to better understand the different rationalities and values shaping school choices. To ensure confidentiality of all material, pseudonyms have been used to replace the real names of the mothers involved and any schools mentioned. I trace the contradictory discourses taken up as moth-

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ers negotiate framings of school choice on the basis of seemingly conflicting sets of demands, specifically the manipulation of clinical and affective responses.

School choice can be conceptualized in relational terms as straddling meanings and practices of neoliberal citizenship on the one hand (idea that citizens should behave as rational utility maximizers (consumers) who exercise choice between a given set of providers),<sup>16</sup> and behaviors and knowledge that necessitate the performance of affective labour. In this way it is important to be circumspect about the general applicability of Johansson and Hvinden's conceptualization of neoliberal citizenship as a stable and determinate reality. Instead, neoliberal citizenship might be better understood as lived and performed at the intersection of a range of competing rationalities and values, making it shifting and porous.

The point of the following analytical exercise is thus threefold. First, I suggest that the affective (the realm of private feelings and experientially driven values) is as important to the cultivation of neoliberal subjects as the utility of rational calculus. Moreover, I demonstrate the paradoxical situation confronted by many mothers whereby governments valorize expressions of affective labour while at the same time displacing it as trivial or secondary to the task of calculating risk through assessment. Second, I want to disrupt the narrow utilitarian notion of the chooser as primarily a "rational" agent through highlighting the emotional labouring underpinning choice, and I aim to do so without reducing emotion to something specifically unreflexive or corrupting of the rational senses (an idea which has gained scientific credibility in neurobiology studies and more recently influenced British government policy discourse).<sup>17</sup> Instead, I want to highlight how emotive discourse can be understood to both describe and construct social reality (a useful formulation of emotion made popular by social constructivist thinkers and discursive psychologists).<sup>18</sup> Finally, I examine how mothers are encouraged both to utilize and demonize their emotional investment in choosing a school for a child, leading to the creation of a particular set of gendered dilemmas and tensions.

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EMOTIVE DISCOURSE AND THE AFFECTIVE  
FRAMEWORK OF CHOOSING

As subjects of the parental “right to choose” (even though this “right” is mandated), parents are typically addressed through government, media, and popular discourses as potentially anxious and distressed subjects.<sup>19</sup> However, this is an issue that affects mothers specifically, and is thus a product of a particular set of gendered dynamics and sensibilities. In circumstances where mothers (and their children) have been denied a place at their preferred school and wish to appeal against the decision, “experts” recognize that mothers become “emotionally involved” (Rooney 60) when summoned to present their case to an independent admissions panel. To increase the probabilities of success, mothers are encouraged to abandon the use of “vague emotional arguments” when formulating their appeal<sup>20</sup> and instead “uncover the truth” through “asking the right questions” and ultimately “win a [school] place” (Rooney viii).

In this framing, emotion is thought to occlude the successful performance of a rational position, one that is commensurate with the figure of the active, deserving citizen. Thus, striving for a maximum position entails the suspension or moderation of emotion through “rational” detachment from feelings held to be personal to the individual. At the same time and in contradistinction to this, mothers are encouraged to mitigate any potential risk in their choice-making by knowing the “right” school for their child—a huge emotional investment that relies on utilizing affect to maximize advantage and drawing on knowledge that is experientially proven. The process of choosing a school reveals a similar set of fractures, tensions, and oppositional thinking.

Mothers observe the prism of calculation to be a typical feature of choice, whether for themselves or others. But rather than fully commit to a clinical gaze, some mothers engage in routine practices of subordinating consumerist logics to emotional sensibilities, and do so in a way that problematizes cognitive accounts of emotions as reflecting automated, unreflective bodily responses.<sup>21</sup> The following extract is taken from an interview with Caroline, a single mother with young boys. When asked to give details on how she elected to choose a school for her eldest



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son, Caroline explained:

Well it was an equal balance if you like between being quite cold and clinical and looking at the Ofsted reports<sup>22</sup> that was the research end of it, and there was the values end of it and actually how the children behaved, how they valued each other, the sort of values that they were given and whether there was a spiritual dimension to their teaching and their learning. (Caroline)

Caroline highlights the contradictory impulses embodied through her decision making and the conflicting values they give rise to. Caroline's desire to employ strategies that are "cold and clinical" can be closely approximated to a set of activities and orientations personified through the figure of the consumer. This might include the practice of pursuing technical means of estimating the quality of different goods and services through the utility of formalized reason. In this framing, intangible qualities such as feeling, emotion, and intuition are streamlined and rationalized to complement the de-humanizing core of a calculating framework of choosing. But rather than submit fully to the utility of one particular framework of choosing, Caroline indicates a preference for fusing seemingly disparate approaches, namely combining the practice of data crunching with what she describes as "the values end of it". The latter approach can be contrasted with a "cold and clinical" approach to the extent it mediates and redeems a sensualistic epistemology. In other words, it promotes understanding and knowledge based on experience, feeling, and affect. This is best captured through Caroline's concern with "whether there was a spiritual dimension to their teaching and their learning". In a similar vein, Pauline, a mother of three children, alludes to the de-humanizing aspects of a calculating framework of choosing:

I looked at league tables<sup>23</sup> (Interviewer: Did you find them useful at all?) No. I find them useful as in you could figure out the top sort of 10 per cent the next... My husband's a mathematician. Statistically the significance of one kid having a cold on one day in the top 100 schools can knock you ten places. It

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gave me an idea of where they sit in the world but it didn't really do much. I wouldn't change my child for five places or anything. (Interviewer: Was there anything missing from this information?) The nature of the school, the ethos, what kind of children go there because what we figured out was the older two schools seemed to recruit the kind of children and put personalities and certain personalities fit in best and I was actually looking for a match that would suit my son's work personality. (Pauline)

Pauline is hesitant about the utility of league tables as suitable criteria for judging whether a school is right for her child. She identifies their usefulness in terms of assigning school value based on "performance" and "quality" (e.g. the percentage of pupils gaining top marks) but attests to their contestability in terms of providing reliable and consistent measures of school "ethos". "Statistically the significance of one kid having a cold on one day in the top 100 schools can knock you ten places", Pauline remarks. A corollary of this is that Pauline relegates the cold and clinical approach to a reflex of maladjusted reasoning: "I wouldn't change my child for five places or anything". Important to Pauline are those intangible forms of distinction which have little expression in league table data. These include the school "ethos" and "what kind of children go there" (Pauline). By way of rendering intelligible these concepts, Pauline describes the affective labour performed through her actions, namely the emotional work of linking her son's needs with suitable forms of provision ("looking for a match", as she describes it). Kate, a mother of one child, relays a similar set of concerns and dilemmas:

I'm not really that fussed about league tables because I don't think they actually tell you what it's like for a child. So, for example, Moorgate Close [her son's primary school], which is always way down the league tables, but actually he is doing really well there. So it is more about him than it is about the school. (Kate)

Again, a cold and clinical approach is sidelined in favour of an emotional engagement with the perceived needs and personality

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of the child. These forms of engagement are typified through a child-centred discourse that serves to validate an image of the child as unique and special. The perceived needs of the child are constructed in psychosocial terms as isolated, incomparable and therefore beyond the estimations posited through a reductive (e.g. market-driven) model of choice-making. To compensate for this lack in the league table data, Kate highlights the importance of both understanding and knowing the needs of the child. “So it is more about him than it is about the school”, Kate reminds us. Similar to Caroline and Pauline, Kate can also be captured positioning an affective framework of choosing as beyond the reifying mechanisms of the market apparatus. “I don’t think they [league tables] actually tell you what it’s like for a child”, Kate explains.

Camilla, a mother of one child, draws on a similar set of discourses to explain her school choice:

The higher the results and the better the results is, the more suspicious I am. . . I met a really good person and she said, you know, ‘this school is about maintaining its reputation’, and yes they may help children who perhaps have some difficulty learning, but that’s not their emphasis. So that was quite truthful of her to say that and it made me think twice because it’s all well and good getting your son into the best school, but if it’s not meeting his needs. (Camilla)

The condition of successfully inhabiting and performing the role of the chooser and of the “responsible” mother is therefore powerfully shaped by the perceived individualized character of the child and his or her needs and personality. Choice is underpinned by the capacity to “know” the child and link their needs to suitable forms of provision through gainful knowledge and careful deliberation. Camilla, for example, echoes the desire to go against the grain of economical utility and maximization through calculation. She undermines the utility of projections based on “results” and “reputation” as insufficient or secondary to the task of finding the “right” school for her child. Camilla also demonstrates how gainful knowledge in a competitive educational marketplace is shifting and unstable. As mothers negotiate this difficult terrain

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of the personal and (utmost) impersonal, it is evident that knowledge and its utility are subject to conflicting forces and pressures. School choice can be seen as negotiated through the interplay of calculating and affective frameworks of choosing, each with their own set of rationalities, values, and social capital.

What is highlighted through each of the above extracts is the ways in which some mothers ascribe meaning and value to the practice of choosing a school for their child. They capture also among some mothers a pattern of uneasiness with the idea of using league table data to determine school choice. Instead, each mother articulates a preference for experience over expedience and the private world of feelings and values over the competitive world of risk-taking and calculating probabilities. Caroline contrasts a “cold and clinical” approach with the “values end of it,” while Pauline and Kate together with Camilla question the utility of league tables as criteria for judging whether a school is “right” for a child. For Pauline and Kate, league tables rely on forms of school evaluation and testing that are numerically assessed and thus fail to capture the particularities and personality of the child. The suggestion here is that the child (and his or her needs) cannot be adequately communicated through the reifying mechanisms of the anonymous market apparatus. To illustrate this, each mother descriptively builds up an image of their child as unique. In contrast, a calculating approach with its emphasis on measurable standards is constructed in perfunctory terms as decontextualized, replicable, inauthentic, and superficial.

When viewed as a rhetorical device for positioning and accounting for the self,<sup>24</sup> emotion here can be understood to function as a discourse much in the same way that formal rationality does—it makes available a set of familiar tropes to be used in the human activity of adjusting to or conversely resisting a given social reality, a way of validating particular representations of personal accountability. What emerges across each of the above extracts is a pattern of two perceived opposed realities: one mediated by the pressures and demands of the market, with its insistence on the calculation of probabilities, and the other linked with the concrete and lived practice of experientially knowing and engaging with the “needs” of the child. The discourse of emotion thus works on a practical and communicative level. It functions

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to individualize the child through a process of de-reification: the decoupling of the child from the phantom estimations posited through a formal rational model of choice supposedly devoid of content. Simultaneously, it works to undermine economic rationalizations of choice as abstract, generic, and alienating. The elevation of emotion in this way reflects a deliberate effort to index mothering practices through alternative forms of meaning-making not elicited through the clinical practice of economical utility.

With this in mind, we might want to rethink any dichotomy that engenders oppositional meanings of action and inaction, active and passive, the rational and the affective. The voices captured in this chapter highlight an often neglected feature of emotional labour—that emotion can be practical and practiced. At the same time, we should avoid reading these affective practices as transcending and therefore escaping the logic flowing from the market apparatus. Communicated through these emotive discourses and affective practices are meanings and representations that go against the grain of economical utility and thus can be considered in some sense oppositional. But they are also products of the power of the market. As Butler explains by way of Foucault, “the disciplinary apparatus produces subjects, but as a consequence of that production, it brings into discourse the conditions for subverting that apparatus itself” (100). The discourse of emotion can be usefully conceptualized in relational terms as inextricably linked with the discursive properties of the market apparatus—the child is anchored as unique *through* an appeal to the abstract and empty character of measurable standards. More specifically, the idea that each person is “special” feeds into, and is a product of, individualized neoliberal fantasies and dominant “good mother” imperatives that centralize the unique and demanding needs of the child.

### CONCLUSION: GOVERNING THROUGH AFFECTIVE LABOUR

Taking school choice as my primary focus, I have explored two seemingly conflicting discourses—the rational and the affective—and traced how mothers articulate and combine these socially circu-

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lating repertoires in their ascribed role as “choosers”. Mothers make use of a plurality of rationalities and frameworks when deciding on the “right” school for their child. Mothers are called upon to fulfill certain duties and responsibilities in their role as “consumers”. But to “choose” is to inhabit the presumed requisite skills and knowledge pertaining to its successful performance. Mothers are encouraged to operate in “the best interests of the child” (DCSF 2) and to engage with the process of choice as responsible, discriminating agents regardless of material circumstances and daily realities.

A condition of this role, therefore, concerns knowing the perceived needs of the child and matching those needs to suitable forms of education provision. The practice by which mothers utilize calculation and affect to maximize familial advantage can thus be considered a set of relations, exchanges, and performances through which subjects are perceived as self-regulating and autonomous. Consistent with any regulating discourse, mothers are assumed to comply with such behavioral expectations (assuming they wish to be successfully positioned by official discourse as “deserving” parents). Mothers thus confront a set of injunctions around behavior and orientation in which the presumed educational needs of the child are decontextualized from the daily material and emotional realities of the mothers’ and families’ lives. Moreover, mothers must navigate a contradictory domain of intersecting positions and blurred boundaries, inevitably giving rise to uncertainty and even self-doubt over what constitutes “responsible” choice.

The lived practice of negotiating school choice produces yet another domain through which mothers are constituted through a moral economy as self-responsible, self-disciplined subjects. Given the competitive neoliberal framework placing undue emphasis upon education as a means for class mobility and social/cultural capital, taking on the ascribed role of “responsible mother” becomes that much more complex. For those mothers unable (due to structural constraints not mentioned in the self-responsible discourse) or unwilling to fulfill such behavioral obligations, the burden and anxiety of mothering is only intensified, in effect adding to the weight of uncertainty and strain already experienced.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See Sexton

<sup>2</sup>See Hirschman

<sup>3</sup>See Brown

<sup>4</sup>See Hall

<sup>5</sup>See Pollitt

<sup>6</sup>See Lewis

<sup>7</sup>See Duggan; Harvey; and Larner

<sup>8</sup>See Hardt and Negri, and Lazzarato

<sup>9</sup>See Williams

<sup>10</sup>See Hattersley

<sup>11</sup>See Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz

<sup>12</sup>See Reay, Crozier and James

<sup>13</sup>See Wilkins “Citizens and/or Consumers”

<sup>14</sup>I use the term dialogic in a strictly Bakhtinian sense to refer to the interaction and interpenetration of opposites, the jostling or marrying of distinct rationalities and discourses—what Bakhtin terms “heteroglossia”.

<sup>15</sup>See Graham; and Ribbens

<sup>16</sup>See Johansson and Hvinden

<sup>17</sup>See Wilkins “Libertarian Paternalism: Policy and Everyday Translations of the Rational and the Affective.”

<sup>18</sup> See Harré and Wetherell

<sup>19</sup>See British Broadcasting Corporation

<sup>20</sup>Ex-chief school inspector Christopher Woodhead cited in Blinkhorn and Griffiths

<sup>21</sup>See Brafman and Brafman

<sup>22</sup>Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) carries out inspections of state-subsidized schools on behalf of the British government. The aim of these inspection reports (made available to parents and carers of children) is to maintain accountability and rationalize mechanisms of quality assurance in the field of education.

<sup>23</sup>League tables refer to a ranking system used in England to determine the performance of different schools through estimating the overall educational attainment levels for children attending primary and secondary schools. Schools are ranked on league

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tables according to the percentage of pupils gaining at least five A to C grades.

<sup>24</sup>See Wetherell

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