



# Neoliberalism, Citizenship, and Education: A Policy Discourse Analysis

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## Abstract

In this chapter, I draw on various literatures and theories spanning different academic disciplines to explore some of the connections between neoliberalism, citizenship, and education. Not to be confused with studies of citizenship education, this chapter documents how users of education services, specifically parents, are invited, even compelled, to perform certain responsibilities and obligations as bearers of consumer rights and champions of their own self-interest. Building on literature which likens citizenship to a “governmentality” (Hindess, *Citizenship Stud* 6(2):127–143, 2002; Ong, *Neoliberalism as exception: mutations in citizenship and sovereignty*. Duke University Press, Durham, 2006), this chapter examines the ways in which parents are invited to manage themselves responsibly and rationally through the proliferation of ever-greater forms of choice making and calculated risk in their navigation of and access to education provision. To evidence the range and reach of these interventions, this chapter adopts elements of Foucauldian discourse analysis (Sharp and Richardson, *J Environ Policy Plan* 3(3):193–209, 2001) through a study of key education policy texts to show how

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parents are imagined and activated as consumers (or “citizen-consumers”) in the field of education.

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**Keywords**

Neoliberalism · Citizenship · Discourse analysis · Consumer · Education · Governmentality

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## Introduction

In this chapter, I draw on relevant theories and perspectives sourced from different academic literatures to trace the relationship between neoliberalism, citizenship, and education. A key focus of the chapter concerns the different ways in which users of education services, specifically parents, are constructed and imagined through key education policy texts. Through applying elements of Foucauldian discourse analysis (Sharp and Richardson 2001), this chapter examines the rhetorical and ideological significance of education policy texts to the promotion of distinct models of citizenship, namely “active citizenship” (Kivelä 2018) or “neoliberal citizenship” (Hindess 2002). The analysis includes a focus on the different kinds of oppositions and distinctions that are articulated through policy rhetoric to effect certain constructions of the citizen as desirable (active) and undesirable (passive).

Neoliberal citizenship is a useful concept for making explicit the relationship between neoliberalism and citizenship in the field of education. At the heart of neoliberal citizenship is a narrow rational, utilitarian view of citizens as consumers, namely citizens who exercise choice that is commensurate with consistent or predictable outcomes (i.e., outcomes that conform with a standard rationality presupposed by utility theory or public choice theory, see Finlayson 2003); citizens who are adept at navigating new responsibilities and their attendant calculations and risks; and citizens who are adaptable and responsive to change and their moral hazards, or what Chandler and Reid (2016: 53) call “resilient subjects.” In this chapter I adopt the concept of neoliberal citizenship to capture the discursive terrain of “ethico-politics” (Kivelä 2018: 160) through which citizens are trained and enjoined by way of structured incentives and ethical injunctions to fulfill certain obligations and responsibilities vis-à-vis their relationship to the state and to the market more generally.

In practice, however, neoliberal citizenship is a muddy concept. Neoliberal citizenship tends to be aligned with and grafted onto different models of citizenship, be it socio-liberal citizenship, libertarian citizenship, or republican citizenship (Johansson and Hvinden 2005). Moreover, neoliberal citizenship is mediated and inflected by “processes of assembly” (Higgins and Lerner 2017: 4) shaped by the activities, rationalities, and priorities of national governments and their regional authorities. While remaining attentive to these slippery dynamics, this chapter utilizes the concept of neoliberal citizenship as a first approximation to specifying a form of education governance (and “psychological governance,” see Jones et al. 2013) that is prevalent among mainly advanced liberal countries and their education systems.

## Contested Concepts and Approaches

Owing to the competing meanings attributed to neoliberalism, citizenship, and education, this chapter draws on diverse theoretical perspectives to help situate and refine the analysis. Theory “as a sort of moving self-reflexivity” (Gregory 1994: 86) is used here to trace the political-intellectual history of ideas and the struggle over power (or “hegemony,” the dominance and ascendancy of particular ideas) linking politics and everyday life. Theory is the critical investigation of the contested nature of language and thought and therefore is about making the familiar strange, principally through challenging the kinds of everyday assumptions claimed to be universal and acceptable or “truthful” (identical and indivisible to a reality “out there”). On this account, theory is a suitable lens through which to examine neoliberalism, citizenship, and education because these terms are better understood as overt political constructions – contingent, situated, and unstable – rather than anything that resembles static, universal concepts. What is the role of education? What does it mean to be a citizen? There are no simple answers to these questions. In fact, these questions typically give rise to more nuanced questions. How should we define the role and value of education – in relation to civic training, to self-development, to employment? What types of identifications are actively promoted or undermined through various definitions and practices of citizenship?

These questions remind us that neoliberalism, citizenship, and education are not only dense concepts but overt political constructions underpinned by various sets of interests, motives, and normative commitments. Citizenship is shaped by historically conditioned patterns of exclusion and belonging for example, making it an “essentially contested concept” (Lister 2003: 14). Similarly, neoliberalism fails to resemble a coherent, uniform ideological project owing to its “contradictory tendencies” (Apple 2017: 1) and co-option and translation by different national governments (Peck and Theodore 2015; Plehwe 2009). On this understanding, neoliberalism, citizenship, and education are better understood as compounds or assemblages of various concepts, perspectives, and processes shaped by distinct political philosophies, cultural traditions, and geo-politics. The contested nature of these terms means that context is integral to any meaningful analysis of the ways neoliberalism and citizenship are overlaid and aligned with national education systems and their “specific semiotic, social, institutional and spatiotemporal fixes” (Jessop and Sum 2016: 108).

In what follows I unpack some of the various meanings attributed to concepts of neoliberalism and citizenship in order to draw out their conceptual diffuseness. Following this I move from the general to the particular through an analysis of key education policy texts produced by successive governments in England between 1990 and 2010 (DCSF 2006, 2008; DES 1988, 1991; DfEE 2001, 2004; DfES 2005; HMSO 1991; OPSR 2002; SCPA 2005). While these policy trends are specific to England, they are expressive of a wider political and economic movement that has dominated education since the 1980s, namely neoliberalism (Wilkins 2016), and therefore the policy analysis presented here will resonate strongly with other countries around the globe with similar market imperatives governing their education

systems. The analysis is supplemented and strengthened by elements of Foucauldian discourse analysis (Sharp and Richardson 2001) with its emphasis on the fluidity and discontinuity of “truth” (Foucault 1981). Here policy texts can be viewed as dynamic, productive spaces that attempt to constitute rather than simply reflect reality and which seek to “authorize what can and cannot be said” (Britzman 2000: 36). The analysis relies on a textually oriented approach to discourse analysis through a focus on education policy texts and therefore fails to capture discourse in practice, namely the ways in which policy discourse is interpreted, translated, and implemented. As Clarke (2004: 2–3) argues,

Achieving and maintaining subjection, subordination or system reproduction requires work/practice – because control is imperfect and incomplete in the face of contradictory systems, contested positions and contentious subjects.

A textually oriented approach to discourse analysis is key to understanding how relations of domination are sustained and reproduced through policy texts that “seek to purport ‘truths’ about who we are or what we should be” (McKee 2009: 468). At the same time, relations of domination are not “monolithic, with state practices fitting seamlessly with practices of self-creation” (Bevir 2010: 425). A textually oriented approach to discourse analysis fails to capture these practices of self-creation since it is a study of the intended effects of policy discourse rather than a study of their actual effects. Therefore, what is missing from this analysis is a study of the embodiment or lived experience of discourse, namely the ways in which socially circulating discourses are contested, negotiated, and revised. I conclude the chapter by adopting a “governmentality” approach (Dean 1999) to help situate and refine some of the key observations and arguments presented in the analysis.

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## Neoliberalism and Citizenship

Neoliberalism (or “neoliberalization,” see Castree 2006) has emerged within academic jargon and common parlance as one of the most cited concepts used to describe and understand the impact of global forces on the formation of national economies and their welfare states. Over the past 30 years, the concept of neoliberalism has been indispensable to understanding the contradictory nature of welfare reform, especially in many Western, social democratic countries where typically governments design welfare programs with an emphasis on traditional welfarist principles, be it distribution and to a lesser extent recognition, while simultaneously and aggressively pursuing market principles of competition and private enterprise (Hall 2005; Newman 2001). More generally, neoliberalism describes a movement or “thought collective” (Mirowski 2009: 428) driven by specific economic and political goals. A key focus of these goals is the subordination of national economies to global patterns of deregulated, precarious labor, high levels of consumption and debt, repressive state fiscal practices (or austerity), and increased corporate monopoly of industry (Harvey 2005). More specifically, neoliberalism denotes a form of

government (or “governance,” see Rhodes 2007) focused on disaggregating state power to complement new forms of self-organization or “heterarchy” (Olmedo et al. 2013) characterized by public-private partnerships, diminished collective bargaining, and increased private sector takeover of public sector management.

More recently terms such as “postneoliberalism” (Springer 2015) and “after neoliberalism” (Rose 2017) have been introduced to signal the displacement of neoliberalism in some countries and the so-called “crisis of neoliberalism” (Beder 2009) that followed the global financial crisis in 2008. In Latin America, for example, many countries have recentralized certain public utilities and entities in order to bring them under state control (Lewkowicz 2015). However, global competition means that many of these countries are making large concessions to the market and to the circulation of private capital in order to survive economically, and therefore neoliberalism, or some adapted form of neoliberalism, continues to shape their political economies (Houtart 2016).

Key to understanding neoliberalism in these contexts is the disaggregation (or “roll back,” see Peck and Tickell 2002) of state power and the commissioning of new “intermediary associations” (Ranson et al. 2005: 359) including charities, social enterprises, and private companies who manage the development of welfare programs on behalf of the state, from health and social care to education and housing. Sometimes referred to as privatization management of public sector organization or “exogenous privatization” (Ball and Youdell 2007: 14), the neoliberalization of political economies is less straightforward than the wholesale transfer of public assets to the private sector since those assets sometimes remain publicly funded and publicly accountable while under the management of private organizations and actors. Unlike classical liberalism which held a strong belief in spontaneous order and the moral primacy of the autonomous subject (Jonathan 1997), and, therefore, opposed all species and configurations of state intervention in civil society and civil institutions, it is argued neoliberalism gives legitimacy to the state as “a market-maker, as initiator of opportunities, as remodeller and moderniser” (Ball 2007: 82). As Peck et al. (2009: 51) show,

While neoliberalism aspires to create a utopia of free markets, liberated from all forms of state interference, it has in practice entailed a dramatic intensification of coercive, disciplinary forms of state intervention in order to impose versions of market rule.

Neoliberalism therefore captures something unique about the political restructuring of the state and the transmutation of the state form, namely the shift away from government as the locus of power and the shift toward new modes of governing (or “governmentality,” see Dean 1999) characterized by new institutional forms and practices in which elements of state power are decoupled from the center and tightly or loosely coupled to nongovernment authorities and actors (Wilkins 2016). At the same time, the state is no less active in “setting rules and establishing an enforcement mechanism designed to control the operation of the system’s constituent institutions, instruments and markets” (Spotton 1999: 971; also see Levi-Faur 2005). Therefore, neoliberalism denotes a form of advanced liberalism in which state power is

dispersed outwards and downwards through networks, partnerships, and policy communities (namely businesses, social enterprises, and charities) who “consensually” work with stakeholders to overcome the restrictions that characterize traditional models of governing with their rule-bound hierarchies and bureaucracies. At the same time, power is recentralized as the state continues the work of setting priorities, formulating rules, and managing expectations. In England, for example, the development of a system of devolved management in which school leaders and governors manage schools free of local government interference is expected to supplant the “formal authority of government” (Rhodes 2007: 1247). Yet despite their independence from certain local bureaucratic and political structures, school leaders and governors continue to build legitimacy with central government and other regulatory bodies through making themselves answerable as high-reliability organizations or businesses (Wilkins 2016). Neoliberalism therefore entails strengthening the capacity of the state to intervene in holding others to account, albeit at a distance, principally through standardized testing regimes, data-driven audit cultures, and comparative-competitive frameworks.

From a governmentality perspective (Dean 1999), neoliberalism entails the political restructuring of the state and a redefinition of the role of government more generally. No longer provider and regulator of public services, the role of government under neoliberalism is to impose structured incentives and ethical injunctions on behavior that might compel among welfare users and welfare providers specific kinds of dispositions, rationalities, or “worldviews,” especially those that accommodate “the explicitness and transparency of quantitative, economic indicators, of which the market price system is the model” (Davies 2014: 4). On this account, the concept of neoliberalism does not sit comfortably within parceled discourses or certain literatures, as if its meaning can be extrapolated from a single perspective or canon of theory. Neoliberalism is a broad descriptor that can be operationalized using a variety of conceptual toolboxes borrowed from Foucault (Brown 2006; Chandler and Reid 2016; Dean 1999; Wilkins 2016), Marx (Bruff 2014; Duménil and Lévy 2004; Plehwe et al. 2006) and Gramsci (Apple 2017; Hall and O’Shea 2013). Neoliberalism registers multiple discursive meanings and practices (Clarke 2008). It is therefore more accurate to describe neoliberalism as framed by struggles over meaning owing to its articulation and translation through different theoretical abstractions, ideal types, analytical strategies, and normative descriptions and commitments.

Like neoliberalism, the concept of citizenship also suffers from promiscuity owing to the various meanings and practices attributed to it. Traditional statist approaches to citizenship emphasize the rights and duties of citizens within bounded sovereign communities (Marshall 1950). Here citizenship can be understood to refer to the civil rights of citizens to liberty and equality before law as well as the political and social rights of citizens to participate in deliberative and judicial activities that affect communities and government. These forms of citizen participation may include voting to appoint elected officials, participating in jury service, paying tax on earnings or purchases, serving as a governor on a school board, or responding to local government consultations on budget spending, urban planning, and community projects.

However, citizenship is contingent on geo-politics, for example. The rights and opportunities for citizen participation are more restricted in autocratic and oligarchic countries compared to democratic countries. Moreover, the term citizenship – meaning the position or status of being a “citizen” – is now typically preceded by and affixed to other words which give it new discursive meaning and political force. The meaning of citizenship now extends to the rights and obligations of citizens as consumers (or “consumer citizenship,” see Trentmann 2007); to the role of digital tools as meaning-making devices in the creation and support of civic culture (or “digital citizenship,” see Couldry et al. 2014); to the moral and ethical responsibility of citizens as planetary humanists (or “cosmopolitan citizenship,” see Linklater 1998); and to the rights of citizens to safe spaces and dignifying representation in which diverse lifestyles and identities are respected (or “cultural citizenship,” see Pakulski 1997).

In what follows I operationalize the concept of “neoliberal citizenship” (Hindess 2002) through a discourse analysis of key education policy texts in England as an illustrative case to show how meanings of neoliberalism and citizenship are combined to effect certain changes in the field of education, namely specific social arrangements, institutional orders, and dominant discourses. A focus of the analysis concerns how users of education services, specifically parents, are summoned and activated as “citizen-consumers,” that is, citizens who understand and manage themselves as consumers of public services.

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## Neoliberal Citizenship in Context: Education Policy Making in England

Since the 1980s education policy in England has been dominated by market principles of competition and choice. A significant turning point was the Black Papers of 1977 which called for parents to be granted freedom of school choice by application. Up until this time parents were granted a school place for their child by the local education authority (LEA, a government-run organization) who allocated school places to children on the basis of geography (children were permitted to attend schools within their “catchment” area or schools already attended by a sibling). It was not until the introduction of the 1980 and 1986 Education Acts and the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) (DES 1988) by the then Conservative government that school choice was underpinned by law. Yet the right to exercise choice was framed using the language of responsibility: “This is your charter. It will give new rights to you as an individual parent, and give you personally new responsibilities and choices” (DES 1991). School choice was contingent on parents inhabiting and performing a certain version of citizenship, namely “effective citizenship”:

Whilst some have suggested that becoming better informed about the range and quality of services available is a “research cost”, it is one that most people could consider a legitimate investment for effective citizenship (SCPA 2005).

Effective citizenship – or “active citizenship” (Kivelä 2018) – gained huge traction among right-wing neoconservatives during the late 1970s. Although not called effective citizenship at the time, the notion of shifting some of the responsibility for personal welfare, from health to education, on to citizens appealed to those on the right in favor of the liberty of individuals and a minimalist state. From this perspective, effective citizenship can be understood as a powerful vehicle for destabilizing elements of Keynesian-welfarist and social-collectivist institutions with their emphasis on the socialization of risk and security (namely the protection of individuals and groups against some of the unintended consequences of the capitalism) and the administration of “need” through rationalist social planning. During the 1980s, for example, LEAs were typically maligned by the then Conservative government as demoralizing, oppressive, and antithetical to the needs of consumers. The scaling back of LEA powers was considered necessary for a market-led education system, namely one dominated by choice, competition, school autonomy, and diversity of provision. The introduction of rate-capping on education provision, in which school budget levels were linked to student intake, was another significant policy intervention in this area. The result was that schools were forced to compete for students as well as adopt a business/managerial approach to school governance that included raising money from industry and charity to offset decreased government funding (Lowe 2005).

These reforms were complimented and strengthened by successive governments, from John Major’s Conservative government (1990–1997) to Tony Blair’s Labour government (1997–2007) and Brown’s Labour government (2007–2010), who continued the discursive-political work of summoning parents as consumers of education services, albeit using their own brand of rhetoric. In the 1990s, the Conservative government introduced *The Citizen’s Charter* (HMSO 1991) which explicitly addressed welfare users as consumers rather than citizens. Later in the 2000s, the Labour government introduced similar policy rhetoric that sought to strengthen a view of citizens as consumers and public services as providers. Central to New Labour policy discourse was a desire to “modernize” public services by changing their culture and bringing them in line with the expectations of a consumer society (Wilkins 2010). These changes to the culture of welfare can be traced back to the reforms introduced by Thatcher’s Conservative government (1979–1990). As Keat argues (1991: 1), “this programme has increasingly also come to be represented in ‘cultural’ terms, as concerned with the attitudes, values and forms of self-understanding embedded in both individual and institutional activities.” In education, these modernizing reforms were contingent on parents adopting the vocabulary of consumer choice and voice, for example. Moreover, it compelled schools to adopt similar vocabulary so that they might better understand and capture through their mission statements, visual iconography, and league table standing the “needs” of parents as consumers (Wilkins 2012).

At the heart of New Labour education policy was a rigid distinction between the “old” system of education and the “new” system of education which underpinned their proposals to modernize the education system. The old system of education was strongly linked to the “rationing culture which survived the war” and to a structure of



education that, “in treating everyone the same, often overlooked individuals’ different needs and aspirations” (OPSR 2002: 8). New Labour went on to argue that “our education system was too often built on a ‘one-size-fits-all’ model” (DfEE 2001: 15). In stark contrast to this old education system with its “focus on a basic and standard product for all” (DfES 2004: Foreword), the new system of education was aligned to the needs and desires of a “consumer culture” with its “expectations of greater choice, responsiveness, accessibility and flexibility” (OPSR 2002: 8). The introduction of policy levers of competition and choice were therefore rationalized on the basis that they compel schools to organize themselves as flexible, responsive organizations, with the result “that the system fits to the individual rather than the individual having to fit to the system” (DfES 2004: Foreword). Moreover, the policy of school choice was typically celebrated within an account of social change:

The affluent can buy choice either by moving house or by going outside the state system. We want to ensure that choice is more widely available to all and is not restricted to those who can pay for it (DfES 2005: 3.2).

But these reforms were not simply about redressing social inequalities in access to public provision, namely removing contexts in which access is dominated by the middle classes with their “louder voices, better contacts and sharper elbows” (Le Grand 2007: 33). In fact, research suggests that, far from mitigating social inequalities in access to public provision, choice in public services exacerbates those inequalities since it privileges users already adept at positioning themselves in the role of consumers (see Adler et al. 1989; Gewirtz et al. 1995; Willms and Echols 1992). Moreover, as Yemini and Maxwell (2018) indicate in this edited volume, the middle classes retain the special privilege of geographical mobility due to their financial and cultural capital and therefore can transcend the limitations of space and place to seek out educational opportunities wherever they exist. Crucially, these reforms were about accommodating a model of citizenship – “active citizenship” (Kivelä 2018) or “neoliberal citizenship” (Hindess 2002) – which enabled governments to call upon public service users to manage their own personal welfare as self-responsible, discriminating choosers: “Without any choice, they [welfare users] are far more like the passive recipient than the active citizen so often idealised by opponents of choice” (SCPA 2005).

Informed by neoclassical economics, rational choice theory, and public choice theory, school choice is predicated on the idea that people “always seek the biggest possible benefits and the least costs in their decisions” and “have sets of well-informed preferences which they can perceive, rank and compare easily” (Dunleavy 1991: 3). On this understanding, public service users are rational utility maximizers who are “basically egoistic, self-regarding and instrumental in their behaviour, choosing how to act on the basis of the consequences for their personal welfare” (ibid). A condition of rational choice, however, is that people possess “perfect knowledge” (Goldthorpe 1998: 170) of the options available to them. The creation of “better informed consumers” (DCSF 2008: 6) therefore necessitates the marketization of education in lots of ways, including the managerialism of school

organization and the use of comparative-competitive frameworks like league table data to distinguish between “poor,” “average,” and “good” or “excellent” education providers.

From a governmentality perspective (Dean 1999), these reforms can be described as techniques or strategies for producing ethical subjects who, in the absence of direct state intervention, take responsibility for their personal welfare as matter of moral obligation. At the same time, these reforms make it necessary for the state to intervene to ensure that citizens make a rational, informed choice and who possess the kind of information, advice, and guidance that enables them to become active citizens. In 2006, LEAs appointed “choice advisers” (DCSF 2006) to assist parents with the handling and preparation of their school choice application. These choice advisers were introduced to assist parents who “find the 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 2006: 2). From this perspective, neoliberal citizenship is “a political discourse about the nature of rule and a set of practices that facilitate the governing of individuals from a distance” (Larner 2000: 6).

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## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sourced perspectives and theories from various literatures to examine the complicated relationship between neoliberalism and citizenship in the field of education and the contradictions that flow from that relationship in practice. A key focus of the chapter concerns the political and pedagogic function of the state in terms of its relationship to, and construction of, citizens as bearers of consumer rights and responsibilities. Through applying the concept of neoliberal citizenship to an analysis of key education policy texts in England, this chapter demonstrates the significance of neoliberalism as a political and economic project shaping the development of the relationship between parents and schools through the introduction of structural incentives and ethical injunctions that compel certain orientations and dispositions.

A Foucauldian discourse analysis of key education policy texts produced by successive governments in England between 1990 and 2010 reveals the complicated history of these developments and their neoliberal appropriation. Specifically, the analysis documents the rhetorical spaces through which governments have sought to reorganize the balance between rights and responsibilities through a narrow rational, utilitarian framing of parents as consumers of education services. These rhetorical spaces – what Clarke (2008: 139) calls “the discursive and political work of articulation” – are more than just policy statements. Viewed from a Foucauldian discourse analytic perspective (Sharp and Richardson 2001), education policy reflects attempts by those in power to make certain positions intelligible (or unintelligible) according to prevailing ideology. As Foucault (1981: 52–53) argues, “discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle.” Reflected

in the language of education policy is a continuing, albeit revised, narrative designed to remake citizenship in the image of the market and its celebrated figure of “homo economicus,” namely the rational, calculating, self-maximizing actor.

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