

Eugenics and personalisation in educational services

Helen M Gunter

Abstract

In 2008 Michael Fielding published an article 'Personalisation, Education and the Market' where he identified that New Labour (1997-2010) had adopted a neoliberal form of personalised education that generated both concerns and a new agenda for revitalising the public realm through personhood. In this article I present an appreciative reconsideration of Fielding's analysis where I argue that his ten concerns remain valid but need to be developed through an understanding of the resilience of eugenicist ideology. New Labour took office in 1997 where their policies were enacted in a segregated education system that was and still is structured according to embedded beliefs about bodies. By the time they left office in 2010 they had not only designed policy that accepted eugenicist assumptions but, as a result, they also emboldened eugenicists who built on legacy of 'needs', 'diversity', 'choice' and the vitality of the private based on who does and does not deserve an education.

Keywords: New Labour; personalisation; eugenics

Introduction

Personalisation was adopted by New Labour (1997-2010) as a major policy strategy for the reform of public services education. The conceptualisation and enactment of personalisation through neo-liberal practices was problematised by Fielding (2008) in his article 'Personalisation, Education and the Market'. He argued: 'New Labour capitulated to the blandishments of the market, and abandoned traditional democratic forms of life' (p57), and then identified ten reasons for concern. Notably, Fielding makes the case that personalisation is: 'ahistorical, superficial, insular, technicist, conservative, individualistic, hyperbolic, episodic, calibrated and dishonestly vacant' (p58). Such an analysis also spoke to the continued hollowing-out of public services by successive Conservative-led governments' policy strategy of mercantilism and austerity from 2010. In this appreciative re-engagement with Fielding's analysis, I re-examine personalisation by locating it in a segregated system that is shaped by eugenics as an ideological approach to the worth of human beings and their educability.

Ten sceptical reasons

New Labour focused on personalisation 'to deliver tailor-made services' (Miliband,

2006, p23) and so professionals had to organise teaching and learning things differently. Fielding (2008) presented ten reasons for appropriate sceptical concern regarding personalisation because it is:

Ahistorical: not interested in knowing the past.

Superficial: shallow and lacks an account of how children become persons.

Insular: overdependent on blinkered 'good practice' in the UK and USA.

Technicist: a 'what works' issue rather than focused on the purposes of education.

Conservative: based on a history that silences the achievements of the common school.

Individualistic: dishonest because it focuses on extending choice within a rigged system.

Hyperbolic: advocated through soundbites and normative claims.

Episodic: disconnected from narratives that give meaning as a person and a shared society.

Calibrated: focused on measurement.

Dishonestly vacant: normatively sketchy.

Fielding's (2008) critique still stands and is applicable to the 'needs' rhetoric of Conservative-led governments from 2010.

My contribution is to develop Fielding's (2008) analysis by arguing that personalisation in a segregated system illuminates embedded eugenicist ideology (Chitty, 2007). There are now between seventy and ninety different types of schools in England (Courtney, 2015) where children are set apart and kept apart through the operation of a market that weaponises archaic beliefs about bodies. Hence personalised segregation is based on being:

Ahistorical: certainty about blood inheritance and the natural order.

Superficial: organisational effectiveness and improvement for categorising children.

Insular: the resilience of class, race and gender hierarchies in determining rank order.

Technicist: the abuse of metrics to determine standards.

Conservative: solutions as 'standards, not structures' as a preservation project.

Individualistic: dishonest choice opportunities to as faux social mobility aspirations.

Hyperbolic: ensuring consumers keep children separate from those who are 'less fortunate'.

Episodic: periodic interventions (e.g. transformational leadership) that modernised division.

Calibrated: self-calculation about ‘needs’ that are met by tailored categorisation.

Dishonestly vacant: the acceptance of ‘natural’ abilities and aptitudes that warrant exclusion.

In summary, these ten can be developed to show how we need to connect marketisation to bio-political distinctiveness (Gunter, 2018). The body is rendered successful or a failure through how certain individuals can demonstrate that they matter more, while other individuals accept their lot.

Personalisation, education and eugenics

Personalisation is actually personalised segregation, and it was and is a eugenicist project.

In 1984 Ranson reported data from a civil servant in the then Thatcher government, whereby the claim was made that there was a direct relationship between social unrest and excessive educational achievement: ‘there has to be selection because we are beginning to create aspirations which increasingly society cannot match’, and so ‘people must be educated once more to know their place’ (p241). Hence the issue for the Conservatives (in office 1979-97) was how to legitimately preserve the myth of natural hierarchy and extend segregated schooling in ways that are accepted by those whose prospects would be damaged.

Eugenicist ideology provided the ordinary know-how and know-why that made the statement by the civil servant acceptable. Educability is related to the inheritance of exceptionality within elite families, where *others* display degenerative behaviours regarding breeding, disease and the ‘feble-minded’ (Lowe, 1979). Such views remain visible where Young (2015) identifies the relationship between ‘entrenched poverty’ and ‘the same old problems – teenage pregnancy, criminality, drug abuse, ill health – being passed down from one generation to the next like so many poisonous heirlooms’ (unpaged). Such logic is deeply embedded in English society, and is evident in daily practices regarding language, dispositions, and the design of the curriculum, pedagogy, examinations and careers.

New Labour’s categorisation of children’s needs (DCSF, 2008) combined with structural redesign to meet those needs spoke to those who accepted biological determinism, and provided a cultural agenda in which to pursue such claims in a post-New Labour world. Importantly, the legality of schools leaving local democratic accountability (e.g. grant-maintained status), being set up outside of local democracy (e.g. city technology colleges), and corporatised within local democracy (e.g. local management of schools) all took place before 1997, but the same legal framework was used by New Labour to set up academies from 2000, and was built on by successive Conservative governments from 2010 in order to legitimise radical deregulation e.g. free schools. Knowing your

place is based on the interplay between privatised decision-making by branded school providers and families exercising parental choice.

The acceptance and development of markets in the provision of and access to school places by New Labour emboldened eugenicist ways of thinking, not least through setting up a National Academy for the Gifted and Talented. While as Chitty (2013) argues the impact of eugenicist ideology should not be exaggerated, it remains the case that New Labour and Conservative diversity policies are causally linked to the acceptance of personalised segregation. The defence of academies was based on popularity with the middle classes, however actual ‘improvement’ and ‘effectiveness’ were not due to academy status but because different ‘categories’ of children attended them (Gunter, 2011). From 2010, successful schools could become academies, where heads collaborated with and extended personalised segregation (Hughes et al., 2020). New Labour’s *Every Child Matters* strategy was abolished, where the expunging of every child as mattering from 2010 did not cause national uproar.

Animated eugenics visibly entered Tory-led governments from 2010 through the beliefs of: first, those who took office, e.g. May’s (2016) defence of extending grammar schools regarding inborn talent and intelligence testing, and Johnson’s promotion of inherited abilities and success (Mason, 2013); second, those who advise ministers, e.g. Cummings’ (2013) claims that much public investment in education is wasted on children who are not educable; and third, those who make policies work, e.g. Young (2015), director of New Schools Network and co-founder of four free schools, argues for genetically engineered intelligence, where he suggests that because embryos can be selected in order to break the link between poverty and intelligence, then: ‘why not offer it free of charge to parents on low incomes with below-average IQs?’ (unpaged). New Labour’s failure to hold back or even eradicate eugenic ideology is important because of the recent growth in genetics and educational potential. While writers such as Asbury and Plomin (2014) seek to distance from eugenics, their characterisation of the crisis in education and the solution described as a ‘genetically sensitive school’ (p178) again bolsters eugenicists (e.g. Young, 2017).

Deserving an education?

While the New Labour personalisation fizz was archived from 2010, a combination of deregulated marketisation and vicious austerity from Conservative-led governments benefited from the development of and possibilities for intensified personalised segregation. The person as individual and dominant consumer was given symbolic clarity through the L’Oréal Paris sound bite: ‘because I’m worth it’.

Integral to the culture and practice of public services is the notion of worth and worthiness. This tends to be expressed through claims about who does and does not

deserve 'some-thing'. Evidence from wider cultural tropes in the media shows how audiences have been enculturated into accepting that there are people who have had a tough time but who warrant something special, and there are people who are evil and should be punished. Those who do or do not deserve what happens is a logic that speaks to how those making judgements use opinion rather than evidence to declare a position. Hence the acceptance by the viewer/reader of the person or family who are offered and experience a make-over (of a garden, a body, a relationship, a house), and/or airtime to express their horror and demands for change (due to a crime, or benefit fraud, single parents, feckless poor or its 'their own fault' situations) is based on a reinforcement of accepted norms regarding what is right, proper and decent.

Those who do or do not 'deserve' is a reactive and privatised cognitive and affective decision-making process that is primarily about enabling hierarchies to work. This is particularly evident in the provision of obtaining and keeping a school place, where the complexities of who deserves what and why is played out: first, the off-rolling of children based on predicted grades, so that their actual grades do not damage league table positioning; second, the algorithm that 'moderated' school-based grades for A levels during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic had been designed with inbuilt assumptions that children in smaller classes in elite schools should do better than children in larger sixth-form colleges; and, third, ongoing examples of schools closing due to market failure, mainly in areas of social disadvantage where this is a matter of 'collateral damage', where people may not directly deserve it but 'after all, life is not fair'.

Deserving is used as a way of handling the lack of scientific objective evidence and reasoning to justify eugenicist segregation, and that those deemed to have inherited 'bad blood' will experience what will be. What is integral to the doxa of deserving is to preserve the relationship between bio-political distinctiveness and gains made in ways that must not be challenged. Notably this means that the idea and reality of pooling risk, sharing resources and supporting each other through difficult times within the commons has to be discredited and prevented from taking hold as common sense. Ostrom's (2015) analysis shows that for the commons to work all have to make a sacrifice (time, money, expertise), and this has been ridiculed by invoking the 'free rider problem' by those who take more than they give (p6). In other words, human nature is such that some people will want to know 'what's in it for me?' and some will take what they don't deserve, and hence what matters is private and not communal responsibility.

Fielding (2008) argues for person-centred education, and this requires the acceptance of the educability of all children within democratic cultures that enable the design and realisation of the school as an educational and educative organisation. Such an approach requires a different way of thinking, not only by demonstrating that eugenicists fail on their own terms (e.g. children of the working classes who become professors in elite universities; and children of elite families who go to jail), but also

by developing a different way of demonstrating human worthiness. As already noted, this territory is now inhabited by geneticist researchers and populists who are claiming fairness on the basis of the prediction of human potential, where Plomin (2018) argues that ‘the DNA differences inherited from our parents at the moment of conception are the consistent, life-long source of psychological individuality, the blueprint that makes us who we are’ (pix). And so, there is no need for eugenicist beliefs because all that has to be done is to give teachers the personalised genetic data and they can design a better fit between learning and the needs of the learner. However, it is a research world that does not acknowledge or seek to resolve the impact of race, gender and class on access and achievement, and so the dangers remain, not least that it can retain and reinvigorate the eugenicist claims by being easily grafted on to notions of who or what is deserving. Consequently, policy researchers need to consider which policy they are investigating, the espoused one such as New Labour’s investment in personalisation, or the actual policy of personalised segregation enabled by false but seductive claims about whose body deserves to gain and be acclaimed.

References

- Asbury, K. & Plomin, R. (2014) *G is for Genes: The impact of genetics on education and achievement*. Chichester: John Wiley.
- Chitty, C. (2007) *Eugenics, Race and Intelligence in Education*. London: Continuum.
- Chitty, C. (2013) The educational legacy of Francis Galton. *History of Education* 42 (3), 350-364.
- Courtney, S.J. (2015) Mapping school types in England. *Oxford Review of Education*. 41 (6), 799-818.
- Cummings, D. (2013) Some thoughts on education and political priorities, *Guardian*, 11 October, 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/interactive/2013/oct/11/dominic-cummings-michael-gove-thoughts-education-pdf>. Accessed 7.5.20.
- DCSF (2008) *Personalised Learning – A Practical Guide*. Nottingham: DCSF Publications.
- Fielding, M. (2008) Personalisation, education and the market. *Soundings* 38, *Cultures of Capitalism*. 56-69.
- Gunter, H.M. (ed.) (2011) *The State and Education Policy: the Academies Programme*. London: Continuum.
- Gunter, H.M. (2018) *The Politics of Public Education: Reform Ideas and Issues*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Hughes, B., Gunter, H.M., and Courtney, S.J. (2020) Researching professional biographies of educational professionals in new dark times *British Journal of Educational Studies*. 68 (3), 275-293.

Lowe, R. (1979) Eugenicians, doctors and the quest for national efficiency: an educational crusade, 1900-1939. *History of Education* 8 (4), 293-306.

Mason, R. (2013) Boris Johnson's IQ comments met with outrage. *Guardian*, 28 November, 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/nov/28/boris-johnson-iq-comments>. Accessed 23.10.20.

May, T. (2016) *Prime Minister's Question Time*. 14 September 2016. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2016-09-14/debates/16091429000002/PrimeMinister>. Accessed 9.2.17.

Miliband, D. (2006) *Choice and voice in personalized learning*. In OECD (ed.) *Personalising Education* Paris: OECD, 21-30.

Ostrom, E. (2015) *Governing the Commons*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Plomin, R. (2018) *Blueprint*. London: Allen Lane.

Ranson, S. (1984) Towards a tertiary tripartism: new codes of social control and the 17 plus. In: P. Broadfoot (ed.) *Selection, Certification, and Control: Social Issues in Educational Assessment*. Lewes: Falmer Press, 221-244.

Young, T. (2015) The fall of meritocracy. *Quadrant*, September, 2015. <https://quadrant.org.au/magazine/2015/09/fall-meritocracy/>. Accessed 20.4.20.

Young, T. (2017) How I was turned into a free speech martyr. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/how-i-was-turned-into-a-free-speech-martyr>. Accessed 16.4.20.

Helen M. Gunter is Professor of Educational Policy in The Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester, UK. She is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences, and recipient of the BELMAS Distinguished Service Award 2016. Her work focuses on the politics of education policy and knowledge production in the field of school leadership. Her most recent books are: *An Intellectual History of School Leadership Practice and Research*, 2016, Bloomsbury Press; *Consultants and Consultancy: the Case of Education*, co-authored with Colin Mills, 2017, Springer; and *The Politics of Public Education*, 2018, Policy Press.

Helen.Gunter@manchester.ac.uk