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Researching Neoliberal Reforms in Child Protection Agencies: A Quest for the New Century

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Abstract: *This study highlights the usefulness of a different mode of analysis to foreground the connections between neoliberal reforms in education and training and public sector organisations, and the practices of new technologies of training – in this case the "learning organisation."*

Purpose of the Study

As we stand at the beginning of a new century we require new and different ways of understanding reforms taking place in organisations and their implications for education, training and learning in these organisations. The recent focus on workplace learning and notions of "the learning organisation," and the dominance of human resource development as key parts of corporate strategy, raise challenges to understanding their significance as "technologies of training." In social services organisations struggling with a decade of reforms pushing them to be more "competitive and business-like," these reforms are even more complex.

This study of child protection agencies and their workers in the state of New South Wales (NSW), Australia, provides an insight into a different way of analysing and understanding the reforms in vocational education and training and public sector organisations as they are made practicable in organisations providing child protection services. In a site with extreme media and public gaze, this research foregrounds the linkages and assemblages of neoliberal rationalities to these technologies of training and the ways workers are governed.

Perspective or Theoretical Framework

This research uses the governmentality literature (Barry, Osbourne & Rose, 1996; Burchell, Gordon & Miller, 1991; Dean & Hindess, 1998; Rose, 1999a, 1999b) to provide the conceptual framework. This approach implies "framing investigations [not in] terms of state or politics, …[but] more productive[ly] to investigate the formation and transforma-

tion of theories, proposals, strategies and technologies for the 'conduct of conduct'" (Rose, 1999b, p. 3). It is concerned with government, not as "the State," but rather refers to "all endeavours to shape, guide, direct the conduct of others, whether these be the crew of a ship, the members of a household, the employees of a boss, the children of a family or the inhabitants of a territory [and] embraces the ways to govern ourselves" (Rose, 1999b, p. 3). In investigating these complex "assemblages" a focus is on five inter-related domains: forms of problemisations; techniques and technologies; modes of reasoning; the shaping of identities and agencies and the ethos of these governmental practices (Dean & Hindess, 1998). Problemisations are concerned with particular events which might "call into question the activity of governing and the attributes of those who are governed"(Dean & Hindess, 1998, p. 8). But different styles of problematisations linked with a particular ethos of these governmental practices, such as neoliberalism, will see different situations as problematic. These problems do not exist by themselves but through particular modes of reasoning which makes the world thinkable and calculable. These modes of reasoning may be knowledgeable discourses, such as economics, psychology or the expertise and know-how of specialists – trainers, managers, workplace assessors. But the technical aspects are critical to objectives and plans being realised. As Dean & Hindess (1998) suggest there are some broad types of technologies which deploy the agency and capacities of individuals and populations. These include the technology of the contract, so

popular in education and training in the form of learning contracts, learning plans etc; the technologies of citizenship, with the multiple techniques of self-esteem and empowerment, and the technologies to evaluate and monitor performance – the technologies of performance. The fifth domain is concerned with the ways in which agencies and authorities attempt to shape and direct conduct of individuals and the ways there is a shaping of the conduct of the identities of those whose conduct is to be governed.

This form of analysis opens new spaces for thinking about child protection training in the field in NSW that have usually reflected primarily normative ways of thinking. It focuses on analysing the ways different rationalities and technologies of training, namely the "learning organisation," are used to regulate and govern workers in organisations (Du Gay, 1996; Rose, 1999b; Usher, Bryant & Johnston, 1997). This foregrounds different connections and aspects. The linkages between certain rationalities, such as neoliberalism, with particular technologies, such as "the learning organisation" and the necessary character or makeup of subjects, the enterprising worker are the focus of the analysis. In this way the study is interested in developing understandings that "question our present certainties about what we know, who we are, and how we should act" (Rose, 1999a, p. x).

Using this approach, this study engages with the literature in the adult education field on the current education and training reforms and uses different conceptual tools for understanding these reforms particularly within organisations. These include the literature on the policy reforms in Australia (Chappell, Gonzci, & Hager, 1999; Marginson, 1997); on global and key educational issues (Edwards, 1997; Usher, Bryant & Johnston 1997; Usher & Edwards, 1994) and workplace learning and the learning organisation (Boud & Garrick, 1999 ; Watkins & Marsick, 1993, Marsick & Watkins, 1999).

In particular the study engages with the literature and discourse of the "learning organisation." The concept of the "learning organisation" has been defined variously to include

employees (being) recognised as active participants in the learning process, and a whole range of workplace experiences – participation in decision making, developing learning resources, teamwork, undertaking new assignments, mentoring, even dealing with controversy and crises – are seen as opportunities for learning (Field, 1995, p. 163).

As the quote above indicates many commentators have described the "learning organisation" as part of post-fordist forms of work organisation, encouraging team-work and increased participation by workers. But this extensive academic and popular interest over the past decade about "learning organisations" and organisational learning has mainly focused on technicist issues – how will it assist companies to be more competitive, how to implement it? (Senge 1991; Garratt, 1986). Much of the literature has come from the management field, with a continuing interest from an adult education or human resources development perspective (Watkins & Marsick, 1993) and has lacked critiques of the social and political context of organisations or issues of power. Rather the organisations are painted as "rosy" post-fordist organisations and organic and environments for learning. Only recently has there been some acknowledgement of what is portrayed as the "dark side" of organisational life – downsizing; insecurity etc and raising questions of the impact on workers' opportunities to participate in "learning organisations" (see Marsick & Watkins, 1999; Fisher & White, 2000).

Research Design

This paper loosely uses the research tools of the later work of Foucault and the writers on governmentality, as described above, to study the specific strategies, techniques and practices for the governing of conduct of child protection workers through the technologies of training. It is inspired by other studies using this approach – on child abuse (Bell, 1993); on education (Hunter, 1994); on the dominance of psychology and the "psy" disciplines (Rose, 1999a) and on different sites in Australia (Dean & Hindess 1998). The study uses an analysis of the organisation's texts, interviews and focus groups with managers and staff to highlight different

ways in which regulatory regimes are constructed in the agencies through discourses and social and institutional practices as well as foregrounding the contestation within these organisations. In particular this study examines the discursive struggles over the new approaches to workplace learning such as the "learning organisation."

The research uses data gathered from a commissioned research project which I undertook as the key researcher in 1998. The research project for the NSW Child Protection Council audited current training and development provision for child protection workers across NSW, covering over 400,000 staff based in organisations dealing with children. It developed a strategic framework and integrated statewide direction for child protection training and development into the next millennium. The research methodology included conducting focus groups with child protection workers; interviews with senior managers of key child protection organisations; gathering key documents, such as training policies and plans and recent research and policies on child protection practice; and a survey of child protection organisations and training providers.

Findings and Conclusions

This study is set within an analysis of public sector and vocational education and training reform which highlights the dominance of neoliberal rationalities or neoliberalism as the ethos of governmental practices. It is also set in the context of the "crisis of child protection." The child protection field in Australia has been a key state responsibility, particularly with the perceived "failure of the family" (see Bell, 1993). It has traditionally employed a range of welfare and allied health professionals in state-run welfare agencies, with some funding granted to "quangos" for the provision of specific services.

The findings highlighted the usefulness of the approach indicated by the governmentality literature in foregrounding the assemblages that govern the child protection worker in the agencies in NSW during the late 1990s. It was a time of major reforms in the public sector which over the past ten years had reconstructed the public service worker from the "civil servant" to the enterprising worker, disrupting the previous ethos of office (Minson, 1998). In the child protection field, it was a time of "crisis" with a

hysterical and heightened media and public focus on issues of child abuse, including a Royal Commission into Paedophilia. Press reports continued for months to focus on the incapacity of the key government agencies, especially the child welfare department, to prevent child abuse and be "responsible for yet another death of a child." This media intervention constructed discourses touching on the hearts of the public and their feelings about children and their needs for protection. The problem of governing child protection services and its workers, became a problem of training. Numerous key reports on the child protection system (see Wood, 1997; Cashmore, Dolby & Brennan, 1994) focused on training as a solution. It became a key strategy in governing child protection workers to make them efficient at solving the problem of child abuse and neglect.

Of particular interest to this study was the technologies of training employed, the knowledge discourses of experts and the identities of workers formed. As was common in many "modern" organisations during the 1990s, technologies of training utilised the knowledge discourses of human resource development popularised in management as well as adult education and training fields, and technologies such as "the learning organisation." This concept was part of a dominant human resource development discourse of empowerment of workers in the post-fordist organisation. But in this study the technology of the learning organisation became linked with the dominant ethos of governmental practice in the Australian public sector – that of neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism brought a proliferation of practices characteristic of this ethos to child protection agencies – competition, the creation of markets, increased flexibility and the framing of social policy in terms of cost-effectiveness and efficiency criteria (Tomison, 1997, p. 28. Rather than being a technique for encouraging team-work and increased participation by workers as part of post-fordist forms of work organisation this research indicates the ways the "learning organisation" has been adopted as a technique in making neoliberal reforms practicable in the organisation. Using the concept of the inter-related domains of assemblages (Dean & Hindess 1998) as a tool to analyse the texts, these assemblages, discursive struggles and social and in-

stitutional practices which made the neoliberal re-forms linked to the technologies of training, thinkable and calculable are foregrounded.

There is not the space in this paper to provide details of this analysis. Briefly, I will summarise some aspects of these assemblages. For example, the modes of reasoning used to make the problem thinkable and calculable highlighted included the discourses of human resource development and management used by managers to create enterprising workers, who are self-responsible. The struggles over the dominant knowledge discourses were evident, with resistances by workers using discourses of "specialist" training. Further, the study highlights the technical aspects critical to the plans to effect the neoliberal reforms, indicating the ways technologies of contracts, in this case, individual contracts for training linked to unit and corporate plans, were used as ways of shaping the practice of child protection workers. Similarly, other technologies were in play with the introduction of the "learning organisation" such as the performance management systems installed to measure the performance of workers and the outcomes of the training, and the enlistment of the techniques of empowerment. The characters of the workers were shaped to make them active subjects in participating in their own self-regulation – to become more "enterprising selves" (Du Gay, 1996, p. 62). Cultural change, the new cry of organisations and a key to progress towards a learning organisation and more efficient and enterprising organisations, required workers to be active and enterprising selves. Workers were to take responsibility for not only identifying and finding their own training but in some instances taking on its financial burden.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

This study provides the field with a different way of thinking about reforms that have occurred in western democratic countries over the past decade and their implications for future research and practice in the adult education field. It moves beyond analysing neoliberalism and neoliberal reforms as an ideology of "certain rulers" and destabilises the notion of neutral techniques, such as the "learning organisation" spreading vision and goodness to workers and

increased productivity to organisations. As particular sites are studied the rosy paintings start to peel and different layers of discursive practices and resistances which shape the ways these techniques are made practicable and the characters of workers and managers involved, are surfaced. As Rose comments, "technologies involve all manner of translations, alliances, and compromises, and seldom approximate to their ideal form" (Rose, 1999b, p. 53). It is in only in the study of particular sites that these assemblages can be understood.

This approach, foregrounding the linkages between the neoliberal reforms occurring in education and training and the public sector and technologies of training, provides workers and adult education practitioners with a different way of understanding the often disruptive experience of reforms in their workplaces over the past decade. For those interested in exploring the practice of new technologies of training, such as the "learning organisation," it provides a different mode of analysis which foregrounds issues of power and resistance and provides new spaces to emerge.

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