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# **The Precarious Role of Education in Identity and Value Formation Processes: the shift from state to market forces**

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## **Abstract**

This article briefly reviews the evolving role of major institutions thought to form, reproduce and transform individual as well as collective identities and values, with an emphasis on the impact of state vs market forces via educational systems. This is accompanied by a discussion of various pressures against the state to exert social control on identity and value formation processes. The growing influence of market forces on education and in turn on identity and value formation processes is outlined with reference to specific policy prescriptions that are aligned with the neoliberal agenda, for example the No Child Left Behind Act in the US. The analysis suggests that these prescriptions have contributed to a narrower role for education which may have positive as well as negative implications on identity and value formation processes.

**Keywords:** value formation, identity formation, neoliberalism, governance of education, citizenship education, learning to be, crisis of the self

## **Introduction**

*Learning to be* is fundamentally connected to identity and value formation processes. Several institutions have played and continue to play an essential role in the formation, reproduction and transformation of both individual and collective identities and values, not least educational systems. For example, many scholars have directly linked schooling to the development of the modern State. From this perspective, schooling is seen as a tool that has been used to form national citizens who are politically loyal, uphold the *status quo*, support the State in times of crisis, and help to sustain narratives that are essential for preserving the integrity of the State. A contrasting perspective is that of other scholars who have stressed the role of schooling in developing a skilled workforce. Whether schools emphasise values, attitudes, beliefs or skills, both imply a political manifestation of how schools should or should not relate to identity and value formation processes.

With this as a backdrop, this article will first briefly critique identity and value formation in the context of modernisation logic and then discuss it in the context of post-structuralism. It examines the evolving role of major institutions that form, reproduce and transform both individual and collective identities and values, and offers a conceptual framework through which to understand major developments in the last 50 years which have had an impact on the role of education in identity and value formation. The article then outlines the implications of neo-liberal inclinations for the formation of identity and values, and highlights several policy prescriptions and concrete examples related to neo-liberal principles, including the No Child Left

Behind Act in the US. These implications contribute to a narrower role for education which may have both positive and negative implications for identity and value formation processes.

### A Critique of Value and Identity Formation in the Context of Modernisation Logic

Several major institutions form, reproduce and transform individual as well as collective values, and, by extension, identities. The dominant socio-cultural and socio-political institutions in a given context come to exert a major influence on identity and value formation, often via or in connection with educational processes through isomorphic top-down tendencies associated with institutions (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Education has played a crucial role in identity and value formation processes, but throughout history so have the family, the church and the State. To some extent, the role of the family, church and State continues to do so, but this varies markedly, even today across advanced industrialised countries. However, for most contexts that experienced rapid growth of educational systems, between approximately the 1800s and 1970s, education, often controlled by the State, displaced the previously dominant role of the family and church. Still, religion and other traditions of folklore continue to play a critical role in value and identity formation in large parts of the world, particularly Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and South Asia. Data from the World Values Survey (WVS) have tracked the extent to which people attach importance to their religious beliefs. Within Europe and North America, variations are large, with 80% of Turks reporting that religion is very important in their lives, while only 5% report this to be the case in Estonia (see Figure 1).

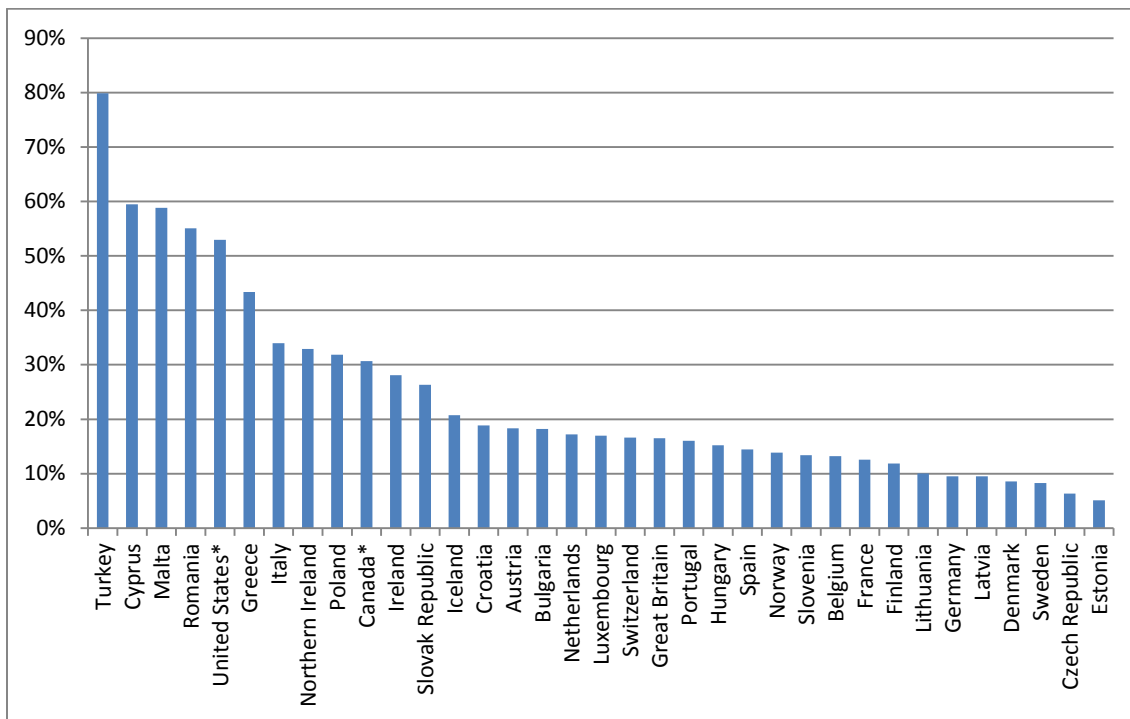


FIGURE 1. Percent of adults aged 15 and over who say that religion is very important in their lives.

Notes: \* The reference year for Canada and the United States is 1990; the reference for all other countries is 2008.

Source: European Values Survey, 1990 and 2008.

There is little doubt that education has played a crucial role in the modernisation of societies – where modernisation is defined as moving from ‘traditional values’ to ‘secular-rational values’, and from ‘survival values’ to ‘self-expression values’, as defined by Inglehart and Welzel (2010). Inglehart and Welzel also point out with evidence from the WVS that ‘secular-rational values’ which correlate with ‘self-expression values’ tend to be observed in countries with large portions of the population who have studied ‘emancipative type’ philosophies as well as empirically-based science at universities, but especially when this has been in countries which also experienced ‘emancipative type’ political developments (e.g. social democracy).

It is thus not just education *per se*, but the socio-cultural and socio-political contexts in which education is delivered that matter for identity and value formation. For example, how religion conditions education seems to be important. In itself, education can be used to strictly reproduce specific values, and not least specific power interests. For instance, the Islamic Republic of Iran as a theocracy has strived to exert control over education processes and their link to identity and value formation. Among many other possible examples, *madrassa*’s as a form of religious schooling reflect extreme religious control on value and identity formation (Arjmand, 2008). While religion remains important in many advanced industrialised nations of the West such as in Europe and North America (see Figure 1), and particularly the US, the State, under predominantly secular principles, maintains a direct hand in education.

While the State as a force remains important for education, market forces are increasingly exerting influence over educational systems. For example, the rise of neo-liberalism since the early 1980s in tandem with the intensification of the globalisation of markets, media and migration, is now one of the dominant forces exerting influence over identity and value formation, often via or in connection with educational processes (discussed further below).

From a structuralist perspective, Inkeles and Smith (1974) proposed a straightforward model: modern institutions → modern values → modern behaviours → modern society → economic development. Structuralism refers to the idea that human and social behaviour should be understood in terms of their relationship to overarching societal systems or structures (Giddens, 1984). This is an important logic embedded in modernisation principles which dominated approaches by the State to govern in many Western countries up until the 1960s and 1970s.

Inglehart and Welzel (2010) advance similar ideas, but they link modernisation more directly to the empowerment of citizens and to the democratisation of society. Specifically, they propose that the spread of modern values fosters a growing freedom of choice, enabling people to choose how they live and to choose more democratic institutions. In this light, education is seen to foster modern values and other empowering resources that enable social action to make institutions more democratic. To the extent that education can be seen as empowering, it also serves an enlightening and even transformative function. In this sense, *learning to be* can be interpreted as a socio-political concept reflecting the ideal role of the *empowered actor* to individually or collectively transform socio-cultural and socio-political institutions for the ‘wider-public’ good.

This optimistic scenario neglects the conditioning effects of power relations and, by extension, the hierarchy of social relations and the fact that education has important effects on

the position of citizens in any prevailing hierarchy of social relations. It also neglects the reproductive forces associated with education, namely those that seek to preserve or even enhance dominant interests. In other words, it neglects how the structure and distribution of different types of capital (e.g. human capital, identity capital, cultural capital, social capital, economic capital) structure the social world and hence power relations (see Figure 2). Capitals in their various forms interact at both the individual and collective levels to enact the reproduction or transformation of dominant socio-cultural and socio-political institutions (Bourdieu, 1986). Central to these processes is education in which it is conditioned by other dominant socio-cultural/political institutions (e.g. church, State, civil society and market) and, in turn, directly impacts the empowerment of individuals and collectives in manifold ways. Education also impacts on the positioning of individuals in the hierarchy of social relations via qualification systems, as classically described by Bourdieu and Passeron (1970). It is in this sense that education is limited in its role to transform power relations embedded in dominant socio-cultural and socio-political institutions and interests. Hence, the role of education in balancing the reproduction and transformation of power relations in favour of *narrow* or *wider* interests is a defining element impacting individual and collective dispositions, including *identities* and *values*. One could therefore add additional categories to a socio-political view of *learning to be*, including *disempowered* or *disengaged actors* and those who *conform* to or *resist* established societal hierarchies.

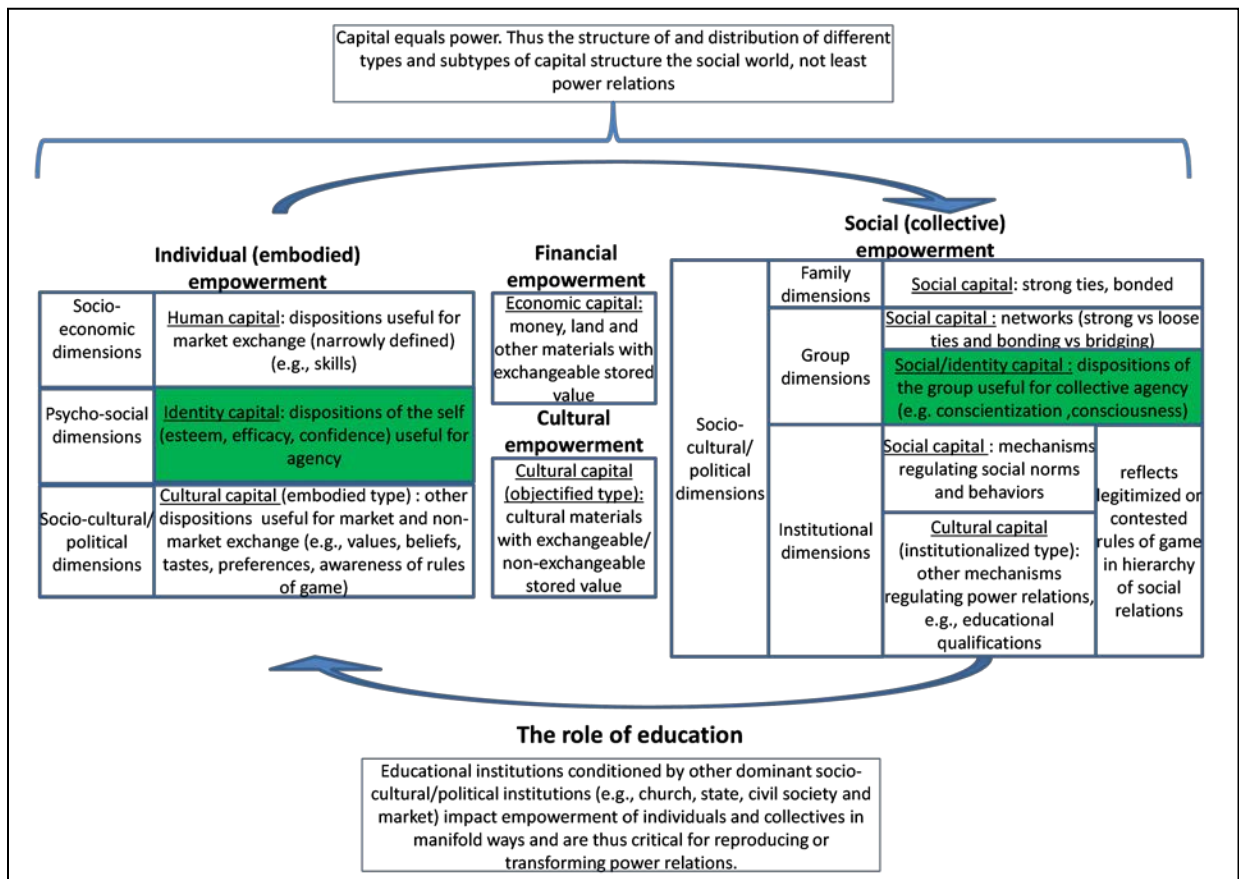


FIGURE 2. The interconnectedness of education to value and identity formation processes via capital formation and empowerment processes.

Note: Highlighted cells emphasise aspects related to identity formation.  
 Source: Author.

To summarise, *learning to be* can be understood to relate to how individuals and collectives perceive their opportunity structure. Not least, it shapes whether it is seen to be fair – a key outcome of the prevailing *social contract* that, in turn, reflects the health of the social fabric of a given society. A *social contract* refers to a social arrangement in which the majority of the public legitimises the authority of the State over individuals. This is important in Europe today because there is evidence of a growing popular disenchantment regarding existing socio-political structures (see Figure 3). While many factors are involved, deep structural inequalities in various resources that help to empower individuals and collectives, and, in turn, impact on identity and value formation, cannot be ignored.

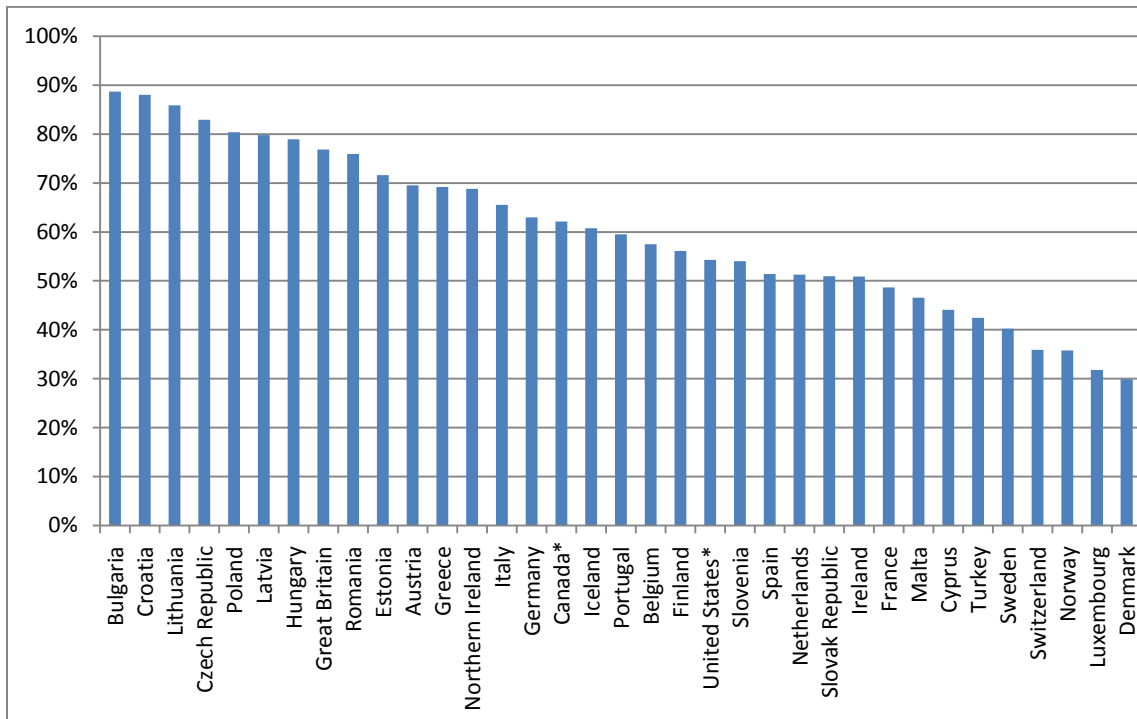


FIGURE 3. Percent of adults aged 15 and over who say they do not have much confidence or none at all in their national parliament.  
 Notes: \* The reference year for Canada and the United States is 1990; the reference for all other countries is 2008.  
 Source: European Values Survey, 1990 and 2008.

## Shifts in Value and Identity Formation Processes in the Context of Post-structuralism

There are many major developments in the past 50 years which have had an impact on the role of education in identity and value formation. These are not necessarily consistent with the modernisation logic described above.

Since the days of nation building, the State has played a crucial role in influencing identity and value formation, often via education. Green (1990), for example, made a broader link between the development of educational systems and the development of the modern State. From this perspective, public schooling is not just about creating a literate and well-trained work force, but also about creating national citizens who are politically loyal, uphold the *status quo*, support the state in times of crisis, and help to sustain narratives that are essential for preserving the integrity of the state (Gellner, 1983). This is done primarily by emphasising moral and social behaviours in education that are consistent with the aims of the State. Thus, education has been used as a tool by the State not only for economic purposes, but also for the social aims of forming and reforming citizens and reproducing power relations.

In Western countries, up until the 1960s, the State upheld modernisation and structural-functional principles that are similar to those outlined by Inkeles and Smith (1974), which implied the dominance of a single identity and value formation system, as well as social control to achieve social cohesion. Since the 1970s, however, many major socio-cultural and socio-political trends have unfolded and translated into pressure by the various groupings in society to reject the State (see Figure 4).

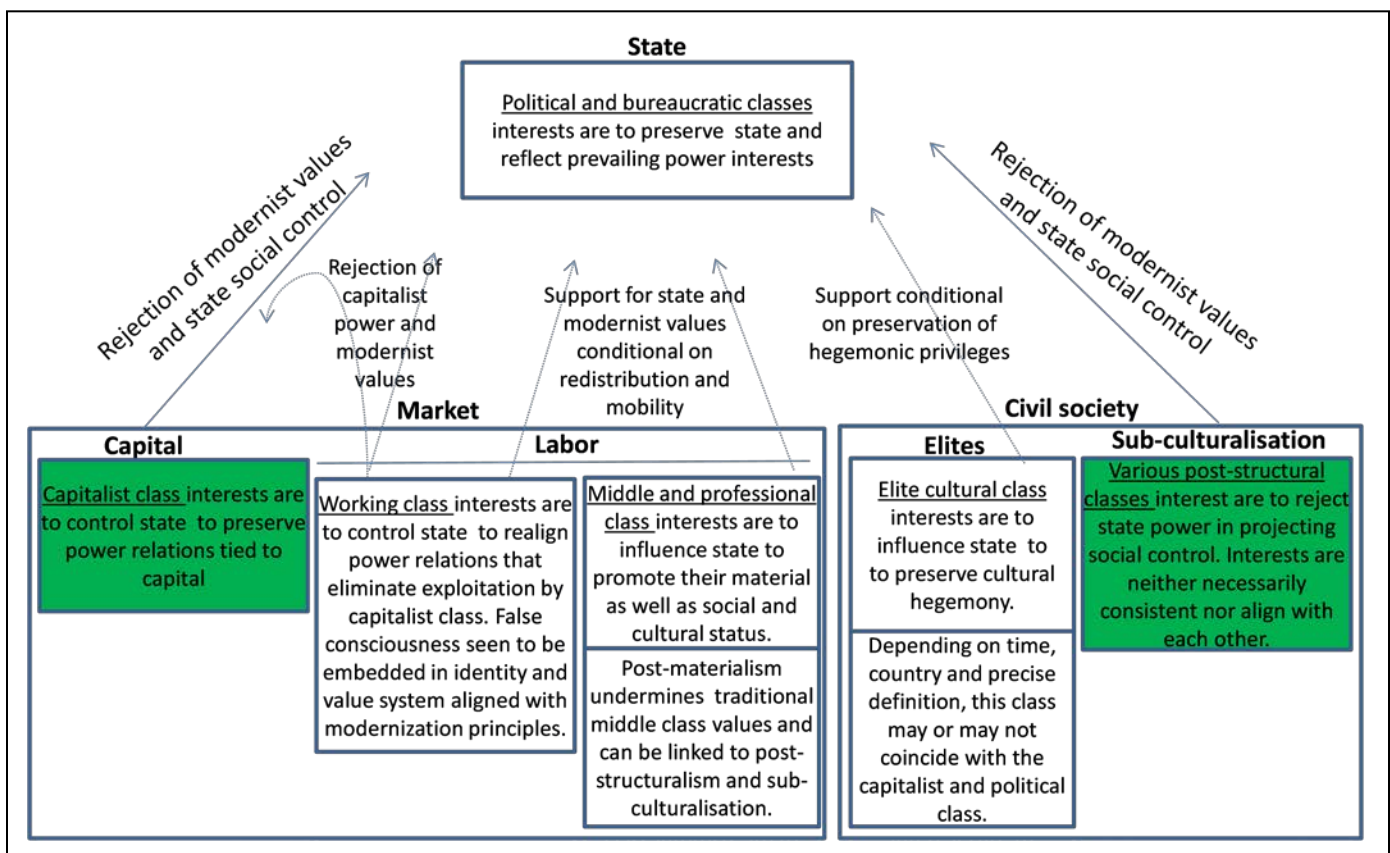


FIGURE 4. The rejection of the state, post-structural tendencies and sub-culturalisation

Note: Highlighted cells emphasise dominant forces rejecting the State since the early 1980s.  
Source: Author.

As revealed by a number of scholars, globalisation and neo-liberalism have become dominant influences over identity and value formation (Rhoads & Torres, 2006). Under the initial intellectual leadership of Milton Friedman, the neo-liberal movement linked the notion of market freedom to political freedom (Friedman, 2002/1962). Using the language of Inglehart and Welzel (2010), this is equivalent to linking free markets to self-expression and hence modernisation principles. An important difference, however, is that the market, not the State, should set the rules of the game in exerting control, precisely because market forces would be more consistent with choice and freedom. Since the early 1980s, neo-liberalism has sought to control the State in order to minimise its control of capital and its ability to exert social control that is not consistent with market-based principles.

Strong state control of capital and the redistribution of resources during the preceding dominant political economy that prevailed from the 1930s to 1970s in Western countries (i.e. Keynesianism) was seen by many as a way of correcting the perceived social injustices of the market (i.e. capitalism) and improving the opportunity structure for citizens in the light of capital accumulation via markets. But for many others, this state control was viewed as a potential threat to freedom (Friedman, 2002). Strong socially-oriented regimes such as the Soviet Union or China were portrayed as examples of what can happen when the State is given too much power to govern, namely a brutalisation of civil society, individual freedoms and other democratic principles. In particular, strong centralised control over capital interests could be seen as a stepping stone for ideological control over a wider spectrum of human thought and activity. In this context, education might be used as a tool by the State to centrally impose the ideology of those in power and thus directly control the thought patterns and the collective memory of the citizenry, and thus their capacity to explore and debate alternative ideas. The notion that the Keynesian Welfare State could hinder freedom beyond those of capital interests is debatable: a more complex set of conditions is involved and there are examples of successful market democracies which are strongly socially oriented, such as the Nordic countries. Nonetheless, this was an important line of reasoning for the early neoliberalists, strongly influenced by the powerful neoclassical economic framework which advocated minimal state intervention in both economic and social affairs.

Meanwhile, the 1960s and 1970s brought a radicalism that rejected top-down social control and in which different sub-populations of Western countries, such as women, minorities and the working class, struggled for civil rights and personal liberties. Despite the Keynesian consensus, capital-labour relations became strained because of increasingly visible inequalities associated with post-war economic expansion, including in access to education. This led to an added emphasis on the social distribution and social implications of education. Social liberalism, cultural relativism and progressivism were on the rise. In this context, neo-liberalism could be seen as an effective way to regain social control after the social unrest of the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. student and worker rebellions that culminated in the confrontations of May 1968 in Paris) and the more progressive positions being taken in education and in the media (Crozier *et al.*, 1975). The early 1970s were an era of serious critical analysis of education and policy, which reflected a rejection of capitalism and an attempt to break with the conservative tradition (Zajda, 2002). By veiling itself as a necessary programme of response to the deep economic crisis of the day, however, neo-liberalism avoided direct confrontation with these various political, social and



cultural discourses. Davies and Bansel (2007) suggested that neo-liberalism was in fact a convenient way to accommodate all these emerging discourses, but at the same time to make them subservient to a dominant discourse of capital in an invisible way through the implementation of what they call 'piecemeal functionalism'.

Like neo-liberalism, post-structural inclinations in Western countries since the 1970s can also be linked to the rejection of a single identity and value formation system or any form of top-down social control. Instead, post-structural inclinations promote diversity, bottom-up governance and local value systems. From an historical perspective, these amount to pressures to reject the State as an entity that exerts social control via education in forming the national narrative and citizenry. In Europe, supra-national tendencies associated with the EU have interacted with these phenomena, sometimes in unpredictable ways, depending on the historical and geopolitical specificities of different countries (Moutsios, 2010). These tendencies to reject a mono-culture in favour of diversity can be conceptualised as a process of 'sub-culturalisation'. Many sub-cultures can be linked to the traditional working and middle classes which have tended to support the State as long as it fulfilled their material values and well-being, including social and cultural empowerment towards this end. In promoting diversity in values, sub-culturalisation places pressure on this traditional support for the State. For example, post-materialism undermines traditional middle class values by rejecting the State and instead seeking to protect diversity and foster local value systems. Critics have viewed this trend as relativistic and sometimes as a threat to traditional values, to modernist values, and to social processes that control the national narrative, not least identity and value formation. From this perspective, it is not surprising that living in a post-structural world has brought inward-looking and protectionist ideologies based on nationalism and ethnocentrism (e.g. rising support for far right political parties in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, France, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland). These tendencies are complex and not necessarily mutually exclusive or separable in consistent and rational ways.

Interestingly, post-structural inclinations to reject state power in projecting social control coincide well with neo-liberal interests to atomise the State and promote growing freedom for people to choose how they live. This may help to explain the success of the neo-liberal paradigm as implied by Davies and Bansel (2007). However, these alignments do not necessarily coincide with the disproportionate accumulation of power and resources in the hands of those who benefit from the neo-liberal project, i.e. while post-structural inclinations can be linked to the rejection of social control by the State, they can also be linked to the rejection of social control by the dominant forces underlying the market (i.e. capital, competition). While the market is seen by neo-liberals as consistent with greater choice and freedom, others are realising that greater market control also implies a single value and identity formation system imposed from above, which may severely limit their opportunity structure in ways that are perceived as unjust.

### **The Increased Role of the Market in Identity and Value Formation**

The set of power relations underpinning the new dominant common sense of the neo-liberal movement has an important impact on identity and value formation in today's world (Torres, 2013). Critical analysis has been instrumental in revealing these impacts which are often hidden from everyday awareness and difficult to observe (Cox, 1996).

Friedman (1962) argued that market liberalism was key to freeing individuals from the shackles of the State and necessary for political freedom, choice and democracy. Contrary to

Friedman, however, it can be argued that the power relations inherent to liberalism, combined with a rejection of the State as the primary arbiter of the *social contract*, feature similar top-down tendencies to those of the State. Under market dominance, the resulting social contract may lead to a marginalisation or disenfranchisement of large segments of the population and be inconsistent with social cohesion.

The impact of market forces on value and identity formation is playing out via the market itself, for example, via growing materialistic and consumeristic values (Baudrillard, 1970). Lifestyle choices and identities are now increasingly linked by what individuals choose to consume. Even with regard to spiritual needs and other forms of individual empowerment, there has been a burgeoning growth of the self-help industry and alternative forms of spiritual gratification (McGee, 2005).

The impact of market forces on value and identity formation is also playing out via education. The rise of neo-liberalism has had a number of implications for the stronger role of economic principles in the internal functioning of educational systems. Since the early 1980s, economic principles have come increasingly to influence education policy-making. This has materialised in the US and the UK since the early 1980s in a number of ways and spread throughout the world. The adoption of market-based principles in education has been uneven but undeniably influential in many parts of the world, even as many systems remain within the control of state forces. A clear example of this influence in education systems is calls for budgetary discipline. This puts pressure on the claims of education to function in the public good. In particular, returns to education estimates as measured by economists have indicated that private vs public returns to education are comparatively high, especially for higher education (Psacharopoulos, 1985). From an economic perspective, this implied that individuals should help to cover the costs, otherwise a smaller, more fortunate sub-population would benefit at the expense of the wider public. Consequently, tuition fees have steadily risen in the last decades in many OECD countries, notably with the recent rapid rise in the UK.

There are other ways that the adaptation of market-oriented principles has deeply influenced structural reforms in education as part of a wider movement to modernise the public sector (i.e. New Public Management). An aim of New Public Management has been to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of public services whilst maintaining recognition of the special characteristics of public goods. This has involved greater pressures for privatisation and marketisation in education (Wells & Holme, 2005), as well as a stronger focus on learning outcomes and the pursuit of better alignment of incentives, responsibilities and rewards (accountability). In some countries such as the US, this has resulted in greater efforts by the State to exert control over education through mechanisms aimed at ensuring that education is as effective as it can be and that objectives are being met efficiently. At the same time, there is a more decentralised market-oriented approach promoting quasi-competitive conditions within the education system. How accountability, standards and measurement in education are formulated in the US No Child Left Behind Act can be seen as a means to balance a more decentralised market-oriented approach, while at the same time allowing for greater centralised control over quality and cost efficiency (US Department of Education, 2001). This conveniently distinguishes between using procedures that are strategically centralised, but operationally decentralised: the State holds strategic control, yet is not necessarily accountable, since the schools, teachers and local systems are held responsible for reaching targets set by the State.

Most OECD countries are now in agreement regarding the pillars of a successful knowledge-based economy in a globalised world, namely knowledge, innovation,

entrepreneurship and technology. It is easy to see that education has a critical role to play in nurturing each of these pillars. Therefore, it is no wonder that there is a commonly-held perception that economic ends have priority claims in education.

There have been more direct effects on what schools should be prioritising. The perceived impact of education on competitiveness and other economic outcomes has taken on a prominent role in setting the direction of educational systems. It has influenced the debate on what educational systems are supposed to achieve, and more precisely which learning outcomes (e.g. science and math literacy). Increasingly, this is seen to be in competition with the socialisation function of education vis-à-vis its role in identity and value formation. The logic of neo-liberal principles as applied to educational systems amplifies this by focusing the purpose of educational systems on high priority skills that can be measured. It is an agenda that seems to fit very well with greater individualisation in modern society as a political design to circumvent the top-down transfer of identities and values which have historically served and reproduced certain power relations and interests (that do not necessarily align well with market-based principles). Hence, the agenda has an exclusive focus on skills and an enhanced valuation of competition, financial goals, innovation, growth and other ideals meant to reinforce market-based governance.

### **The Growing Role of Free Information Flows in Identity and Value Formation**

Recent developments, including global media, the Internet and social connectivity (all referred to as 'media') are now also having a major influence on identity and value formation (Kellner, 1995; Miles, 2000), for some even becoming the dominant factor. In the context of such powerful market and media forces, parents, communities and teachers can be seen as losing the battle in helping children to form their identities and values. Hence, critical media literacy has now become a top priority for some educators in order to foster critical awareness (Kellner, 1995).

In an increasingly individualised, hybridised, and globalised context, individuals are bombarded with information, values, and potential lifestyle choices, while there is a growing incidence of anxiety, depression and accompanying ailments in today's advanced modern societies (Hidaka, 2012). It is still unclear to what extent this increased menu of possible identities and values that children face is directly linked to these ailments. Some have suggested that there is a so-called *crisis of the self* and that the contemporary search for the self has become increasingly challenging in the information age (Barglow, 1994). *Learning to be* in today's modern context has therefore become more challenging than ever for children, young people and adults of all ages.

### **Concluding Remarks**

#### *Pressures on the Role of Schools and Teachers*

Although the role of education has arguably been narrowed by the neo-liberal agenda, ironically, the increased role of market and media forces may place an even greater responsibility on schooling and teachers to enable children and youth to develop as responsible, successful and healthy citizens. But are teachers willing and able? Are parents and communities willing to enable schools and teachers to play such a strong role? The political dimensions are complex and

the debate is controversial, yet the implications are crucially important for the welfare of individuals and communities.

The objectives of education are not always clear. Setting objectives is a political issue that is influenced, as seen, by the dominant political economy, but also by the tension between different groups in society and competing values. Thus, it is difficult to reach a consensus on well-defined objectives and it may even be disadvantageous to do so. At the same time, the debate on the broader identity and value dimensions associated with *civic education* has gained momentum in Europe. For example, the 2006 European framework for key competences included social and civic competences, thereby elevating the status of elements related to identity, values and attitudes. Yet, while curriculum reform is a feature of many EU countries, little change has occurred with regard to improving teachers' knowledge and skills for teaching citizenship. Few, if any, related reforms to initial teacher education or continuing professional development have been identified (EACEA/Eurydice, 2012). This brings into question the availability of suitably qualified teachers in the EU for teaching related to identity and value formation.

Despite the inclusion of citizenship education in curricular content, it is not clear whether it is really seen as important. Eurydice surveys find that, even when civics is taught as a separate subject, it is often not included in the external national examinations. Eurydice suggests that the lack of national standardised assessment of citizenship education may put more emphasis on the teaching and learning of subjects and skills that are externally tested (EACEA/Eurydice, 2009). Hence, the significance of education in transmitting attitudes, values and beliefs, as well as knowledge, and therefore in identity and value formation is not well reflected in the framework of objectives in many countries, especially as regards measurement, accountability and teacher training. Evidence suggests that there is still an unduly narrow focus on measurable skills.

### *The Role of Policy-Makers under Pressure*

Policy-makers are faced with a real challenge to create conditions that foster a renewed social contract among diverse groups, interests and values. Education is a key tool to enable this because it is at the core of the opportunity structure that most individuals encounter during their life span. Not least, the challenge involves the development and fine tuning of a vibrant and flexible adult learning system that is integrated into a seamless set of educational opportunities offered to citizens over their entire lifespan in ways that enable empowerment and mobility. This means not just opportunities that enable employment, but also those that foster social transformation that is consistent with democratic principles and social justice.

A key question is the extent to which the State should renew efforts to weave a cohesive social fabric via the educational system, or continue along a pathway that enables market forces to displace the value and identity formation functions out of educational spaces altogether in favour of only narrow market interests for marketable skills. On the one hand, a hands off or *laissez-faire* approach is consistent with fostering diversity. On the other, it may lead to identity and value formation being dominated by market interests, as well as a fragmentation of individual and social empowerment, and ultimately a deepening of structural inequalities and loss of social cohesion. It would be unproductive to view this as an either/or scenario. The challenge is to foster advanced governance involving top-down and bottom-up processes, including markets and all other stakeholders supported by the State.

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