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Kay Fuller & Howard Stevenson

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Global education reform: understanding the movement

It is several years since Pasi Sahlberg used the term Global Education Reform Movement, or GERM, to describe the emergence of a new global orthodoxy in education policy. The acronym-as-analogy worked perfectly to describe a phenomenon that Sahlberg identified as both spreading and destructive, behaving “like an epidemic that spreads and infects education systems through a virus” (Sahlberg, 2012, no page). The power of such acronyms lies in the extent to which they take hold in the social imaginary and act as a signifier for a complex amalgam of policies and practices that students and educators experience as an education system that feels “cracked” (Ball & Olmedo, 2013, 85).

Sahlberg has identified the principal features of the GERM as increased standardisation, a narrowing of the curriculum to focus on core subjects/knowledge, the growth of high stakes accountability and the use of corporate management practices as the key features of the new orthodoxy.

The early indications of the policies that have given rise to this orthodoxy can be traced back at least three decades and became visible in the education reforms introduced in the United States, Chile and the UK. The development of the GERM in these three countries was no coincidence because the political leaders of the countries that have acted as a laboratory for the GERM were all intimately connected in the 1970s and 1980s (Harvey, 2007). It was during this time that the ideological work undertaken by New Right think tanks on both sides of the Atlantic was able to secure expression in the political programmes of Premiers Pinochet, Reagan and Thatcher. This was not, however, a battle of political ideas that was disconnected from wider developments. Rather, it was an ideological agenda that emerged from the crisis of capital in the late 1960s and 1970s and the subsequent abandonment of Keynesian economic orthodoxy. As faith in Keynesian demand management diminished, so too did confidence in welfarism as affordable and sustainable. At this time of crisis and uncertainty, it was the political right that was on hand to offer the solutions. As Milton Friedman asserted:

Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable. (Friedman, 2002, p. xiv)

It was at this time that the ideas underpinning the GERM assumed practical expression in Pinochet’s school privatisation programmes, *A Nation at Risk* in the USA and the 1988 Education Reform Act in England. Since that time, the policies that emerged in Chile, the USA and England in the 1980s have become increasingly common around the world, hence Sahlberg’s adoption of the term GERM, with all its connotations of something malignant – spreading apparently uncontrollably. However, this is a GERM that has mutated in different forms – assuming different features and developing at a varied

pace. Some parts of the world have appeared more resistant to the GERM than others, although such patterns have not always followed the form book – see, for example, Sweden’s development of for-profit Free Schools. Although the notion of the GERM works well as a shorthand for a set of linked policies and practices, the danger is that the label hides the nuance and complexity that is the reality of neoliberal restructuring of public education systems which looks different in different jurisdictions and which is propelled forward by myriad drivers, many of which are contextually specific.

In this special issue of *Educational Review*, the contributing authors seek to deepen our understanding of the GERM as it has developed and as it is experienced by students and educators. The various articles explore different features of the GERM, but also analyse its existence in different jurisdictions and in different phases of education. The scope of the articles allows for a more nuanced understanding of the GERM in its contemporary form, but also raises methodological questions of analysis and measurement.

The opening article by Toni Verger, Lluís Parcerisa and Clara Fontdevila focuses on testing and the central role that National Large Scale Assessments (NLSAs) play in the global spread of the GERM. The authors’ analysis demonstrates how standardised testing has often acted as the vanguard of global education reform, in which comparison, ranking and competition have provided the foundation on which other elements of reform have been built. The huge testing machine has not only provided substantial opportunities for private actors to further penetrate the education “market”, but the competitive pressures that testing fuels have often acted as a spur to wider privatisation and marketisation of education systems.

In the face of such powerful global pressures it is easy to become pessimistic about the possibilities for resistance and the opportunities to create counter movements. Two of the articles address precisely these issues and seek to understand where there are opportunities for agency and resistance in relation to the neoliberal restructuring that is so widespread. Kay Fuller’s article explores issues of resistance in school leadership and focuses on a section of the educational labour force whose apparent co-option and mobilisation by those driving reforms has often been seen as central to bringing about change on such a substantial scale. Fuller rejects a simple dichotomy between compliance and resistance and argues that our understanding of how school leaders “resist” needs to be more nuanced and more sympathetic. In her study of school principals in England, she argues that resistance is common, but it is not always clearly visible. Drawing on post-colonial theories, she presents an alternative approach to understanding what school principal resistance looks like and the forms it can assume.

The article by Guopeng Fu and Anthony Clarke is also concerned with questions of agency and resistance, with a focus on classroom teachers in China. The extent to which the policies associated with the GERM have spread in China highlights that this is a phenomenon that can develop in very different contexts. However, despite the degree of system centralisation, and the lack of autonomous worker organisation, Fu and Clarke still find evidence that classroom teachers in China are able to create spaces in which they are able to challenge the logic of a harsh external accountability system and assert the primacy of students’ interests.

There is no doubt that privatisation, in its myriad forms, is a defining feature of the GERM and several of the articles highlight this. The contribution by Alessandro Carrasco and Helen Gunter focuses on Chile, which has already been identified as one of the

countries where the GERM can be considered to have been developed. Recent political reforms offer some reason for optimism, but the country's education system remains one badly disfigured by aggressive policies of privatisation and marketisation. The article by Carrasco and Gunter focuses on the specifics of how the market for school education functions, and how the interaction of supply and demand pressures are privatising the decisions of both parents and the private providers of "public education" in Chile. The article demonstrates how decisions that were previously collective and democratic have been largely removed from the public sphere, with a concomitant impact on inequalities in the system.

Emily Winchip, Howard Stevenson and Alison Milner are similarly concerned with system privatisation, but argue that researchers need to draw on a broader range of research methodologies in order to address key questions in the field. Critical scholars have tended to eschew quantitative methodologies when researching phenomena like privatisation, arguing that such approaches are unable to reflect the complexity of the issues under consideration. In this article, the authors argue there are quantitative methodologies that can provide critical scholars with useful tools of analysis and which open up the possibility of providing measures for complex phenomena such as privatisation.

Viv Ellis and Sarah Steadman focus on a critically important, but often neglected aspect of the GERM, which is teacher education. Many of those who have driven neoliberal reforms in education have recognised the role of independent teacher educators in promoting ideas considered as antithetical by GERM reformers. As a consequence, in many jurisdictions, teacher education has found itself in the eye of the storm as powerful policy actors have sought to re-engineer the teaching profession as one that is more favourably disposed to the new educational landscape and which is less willing, and less confident, to push back. The authors analyse these developments in England and show how new privatised institutions are being developed to spearhead change and challenge traditional notions of university-based teacher education.

The final article by Matt O'Leary and Philip Wood argues that key features of the GERM have long been evident in higher education, but largely in relation to the datafication of research activity. They argue that such approaches are now becoming increasingly evident in the management of teaching and demonstrate how the UK's "Teaching Excellence Framework" further embeds GERM practices in the higher education sector. They highlight how these developments threaten the quality of provision in universities and also pose a threat to academic freedom and the notion of the university as a site of independent and critical thought. They conclude by offering an alternative framework which provides a much more optimistic analysis of how teaching and learning might be developed in higher education institutions.

All of these articles deepen our understanding of how neoliberal restructuring of public education systems continues to have a huge impact on the institutions where we study and work. Differences are significant – whether between different countries, or different education phases within countries. Appreciating difference and nuance is essential and this collection of articles seeks to shed light on these differences, but it is also important to recognise the unifying aspects of forces that are shaping public education systems across the world. However, this collection of articles is not only intended to deepen our understanding of the world, but also to help change it. Many

of the articles point to the possibilities of hope and resistance as students and educators seek to speak back to a system that is visibly “cracked”. From the student movement in Chile, to the “Red States” strike waves of teachers in the USA, the Global Education Reform Movement discussed in these articles is being challenged in many of the sites where it has been most deeply embedded. We hope that this collection of articles can make a modest contribution to building that movement of hope and possibility.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Kay Fuller

University of Nottingham, UK

 Kay.Fuller@Nottingham.ac.uk  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5531-7553>

Howard Stevenson

University of Nottingham, UK

 Howard.Stevenson@nottingham.ac.uk  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5172-1807>