All that glitters is not gold: The depoliticization of social inequality in European education policy on ‘microcredentials’

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Abstract

At the present conjuncture of political, economic, social, and ecological crises, it is important to pay attention to the ways in which intensifying demands for equality, sustainability and social inclusion are met in education policy. In this article, we present results from a critical discourse analysis of an EU council recommendation on ‘microcredentials’ – credits for short courses primarily oriented towards the attainment of skills. Through our analysis, we identify a set of discursive techniques that use progressive language in order to depoliticize issues of social inequality and protect a fundamentally neoliberal and market-oriented agenda from being contested. We conclude that the linguistic expressions used in the operationalization of these techniques have the capacity to 'bling' the argumentation for microcredentials – making invisible an underlying neoliberal foundation and hypervisible an apolitical and consensus-oriented surface, thereby preventing disagreements over aspects of education that are fundamentally political.

Keywords*: Microcredentials, critical discourse analysis, policy, depoliticization, neoliberalism*

Background

It is difficult to contest that the intensified dissemination of 'market values and metrics to every sphere of life' (Brown, 2015), which characterizes neoliberalism and its gradual economization of society, has had a major impact on the education system on a global scale (Ball, 2003; Ball, 2012a; Ball, 2012b; Davies and Bansel, 2007; Olmedo and Ball, 2015; Rizvi and Lingard, 2009; Singh, Kenway and Apple, 2005; Verger, Fontdevila and Zancajo, 2016). For higher education (HE), it has resulted in heightened competition between universities and a larger emphasis on branding, rankings and global excellence, closer relations between curricula and the business sector in terms of a focus on skills rather than knowledge, and a demand for increased efficiency. It has not only had consequences for how institutions for higher learning define their purposes, but also how they make decisions around the organization and content of education; the university sector is increasingly expected to actively engage in creating the ideal conditions within which citizens can develop an entrepreneurial subjectivity and contribute to the maximization of human capital in order to strengthen global competitiveness.

Previous research has shown that the European education project is embedded within a neoliberal rationality which produces both discursive and material consequences (Alexiadou, Fink-Hafner and Lange, 2010; Muñoz, 2015; Robertson, 2008). The late 90s and early 2000 witnessed a shift in EU educational policy from a political-economic to a functional-economic agenda, in which education forms an element within other policy fields rather than a 'teleological policy area' (Gornitzka, 2005, p. 17), and is emphasized as 'a tool for achieving economic progress and global competitiveness' (Walkenhorst, 2008, p. 577). Since the Lisbon summit, which concluded that the EU should be 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world' (Council of the European Union, 2000), EU's transnational governance of

education has intensified, and a more managerial approach can be observed (Simons, 2007). This approach, which includes the utilization of tools such as soft persuasion, standardization, best practice and the collection of performance data (Lawn, 2019) under the umbrella of the Open Method of Coordination, allows the EU to influence national educational systems while, formally, respecting its own principle of subsidiarity.

In contrast to the openly competition-focused agenda of the early 2000s, in the past decade there has been a reappraisal of social goals and a stronger emphasis on social inclusion objectives in EU policy in general (Laalo, Kinnari and Silvennoinen, 2019; Zeitlin and Vanhercke, 2018), for example through the establishment of the European Pillar of Social Rights (European Parliament, European Council and European Commission, 2017). This underlining of the social dimension – which has been particularly visible in the wake of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic (Symeonidis, Francesconi and Agostini, 2021) – is demonstrated in the educational area by policies and plans such as The European Skills Agenda (European Commission, 2020c), The Digital Education Action Plan (European Commission, 2020b), as well as the European Council's recommendations on microcredentials (Council of the European Union, 2022a) and individual learning accounts (Council of the European Union, 2022b). Symeonidis et al. (2021) argue, however, that also in recent EU education policy, 'the idea of investing in people is predominantly conceptualized as a growth and competitiveness factor, and secondarily as a key instrument for social inclusion' (p. 111), and voices of warning have been raised regarding the risk that such social goals are appropriated by an economically motivated logic of competitiveness and 'market fitness' (Dawson, 2018, p. 207).

Many scholars have contributed to our knowledge of the history, workings and effects of neoliberal politics on all levels of education, some might argue to the

extent that a saturation in the field has been achieved. On the contrary, we suggest that in present times it is more important than ever to be observant of how neoliberal rationality may be repackaged to legitimize ideas of the past through imaginaries of the future, especially at a conjuncture when it is challenged by political, economic, social and ecological crises. Policies are important arenas for such observations since they direct and constrain the ways in which we are able to think and act. They thus create conditions for what is possible to do, in particular as they merge with existing structures of inequality on national and local levels. In a previous article (anonymized), we highlighted the presence of social inclusion objectives in national (Swedish) digitalization policy and demonstrated how the conceptual stretching of Scandinavian welfare values made it possible to accommodate them within a neoliberal framing of society and education. In the present study we are interested in how potential tensions between market-oriented and social equality discourses are managed in European education policy. Of particular interest are policy proposals that are representative of the EU's efforts to create a European education policy space, the governance over which produces both political and material effects (Lawn, 2019). The EU council's recent recommendation on microcredentials, we suggest, represents such an effort.

Against this background, our research questions are:

- How does the EU council's recommendation on microcredentials construct the role of education in relation to economic and social objectives?
- What tensions and contradictions can be identified in such constructions?
- How are these tensions and contradictions discursively managed?

With this study, while – more broadly – contributing to the growing field of critical policy studies which addresses the 'how' of governing, we – more

specifically – aim to direct the focus to the 'subtleties of neoliberal reasoning' (Plehwe, Slobodian and Mirowski, 2020, p. 7) within educational policy and the ways in which it attempts to shape the future of education. Scrutinizing and exposing such reasoning is crucial for enabling critical discussion around its material consequences, and, ultimately, for making possible radical resistance and structural change.

Microcredentials and Lifelong Learning

Microcredentials are defined within an EU context as the 'the record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning' (Council of the European Union, 2022a, p. 14). While there is some variation in terms of the size of a microcredential (although it should be noted that this term is rarely used in singular), OECD countries' definitions seem to converge on the implication that the educational provision associated with microcredentials is smaller than other, related, educational offerings (Kato, Galán-Muros and Weko, 2020).

Microcredentials are strongly associated with the concept of 'lifelong learning', the political interpretation of which has fluctuated over the past 60 years – from an emphasis on self-development, social justice and improving citizens' quality of life to an increased focus on competence development (including 'learning how to learn'), employability and competitiveness (Centeno, 2011; Fejes, 2006; Lima and Guimarâes, 2011; Nuissl and Przybylska, 2016). 'Lifelong education', with its close connection to formal educational systems and institutions, and perceived 'as a collective entity and a state obligation' (Barros, 2012, p. 120), was towards the end of the last century increasingly replaced by 'lifelong learning' in the latter sense, which instead underlines the responsibility of the individual citizen. In tandem with more pronounced political associations

between education and economic growth (the human capital theory), as well as technological advancements and widened access to information, lifelong learning has, since the 1990s, represented an important policy instrument – not least in the EU – with the aim to foster continuous adaptation of the educational system and citizens alike to a competitive economy (Mikelatou and Arvanitis, 2018).

The impact of information and communication technologies on the political imaginaries about what is possible within the domain of education were instrumental in the forming of close ties between digital technology and lifelong learning. This development should also be viewed against the background of a HE system that has for many years been characterized as insufficient to cater for individuals' adjustment to a rapidly changing society. Digitalized education, it is often claimed, offers larger degrees of flexibility, choice, scalability and the maximization of human capital. These, of course, are ideals that permeate the neoliberal rationality, which 'promises to shape the conduct of diverse actors without shattering their formally autonomous character' (Miller and Rose, 2008, p. 39), and many critical researchers have demonstrated the relationship between various aspects of the digitalization of education and neoliberal imaginaries (see for example Ball and Grimaldi, 2022; Castañeda and Selwyn, 2018; Decuypere 2019; Grimaldi and Ball 2021a; Grimaldi and Ball 2021b; Means 2018; Munro 2017; Munro 2018; Selwyn *et al.* 2020). Also for the conceptualization and materialization of microcredentials, digital technology plays a crucial role (Reynoldson, 2022; Symeonidis, Francesconi and Agostini, 2021); microcredentials are digitally stored, shared and portable, and much of the educational provision associated with them is likely to be in digital form (see f. ex. the European Commission's Digital Education Action Plan, 2020b).

As both digitalization and lifelong learning have become fields in which ‘games of truth’ (Foucault, 1997, p. 297) around education take place, we can expect the merger of the two in the form of microcredentials to reproduce and expand on the political project of submitting education to the logics of the market. This is confirmed by previous critical research on microcredentials, which has demonstrated that microcredentials are embedded in highly neoliberalized political visions (Pollard and Vincent, 2022; Ralston, 2021; Reynoldson, 2022; Wheelahan and Moodie, 2021; Wheelahan and Moodie, 2022). Microcredentials construct learners as consumers (Reynoldson, 2022); blur the lines between public and private educational provision – thus contributing to the privatization of education (Wheelahan and Moodie, 2022); steer the curriculum of HE institutions towards labor market requirements and fragment the knowledge bases of the disciplines (Wheelahan and Moodie, 2021); and – through their emphasis on training of isolated skills rather than the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake – are likely to exacerbate class divides rather than diminish them (Ralston, 2021). In this paper, we build upon these research contributions as we explore the ways in which microcredentials are discursively framed within contemporary European policy at a time when neoliberalism is facing a ‘crisis of hegemony’ (Fraser, 2019).

Theoretical framework

Hegemony, argues Gilbert and Williams (2022), is a process which is always concerned with determining the general direction of the social, the political and the economic through the aggregation of interests. Which interests, or potentialities (in Gilbert and Williams’ terminology, with reference to Deleuze, 1994), appear to be realizable within a specific conjuncture depends on which can be enabled by the ‘common sense’ – the complex and sometimes contradictory set of assumptions about the state of the world common to citizens of a specific time and place and embedded within the dominant political

rationality. In his adaptation of Gramsci's (1971) definition of the concept, Hall (1988) describes common sense as that which 'shapes out ordinary, practical, everyday calculation and appears as natural as the air we breathe' (ibid., 8). In moments of deep crisis, he argues, political forces will make efforts to reconfigure the hegemonic project around new political orientations and discourses that can still be envisaged within its ideological limits. A central task for members of the hegemonic bloc is to construct a politics which frames social reality in a way that aligns with its political objectives. At the same time, however, it also also engages in the expansion of its dominance by absorbing potentially antagonistic, hegemonically subordinate groups in the hope of constructing a common sense which resonates with, and appears to enable, the interests of such groups, thus creating a '"unity" out of difference' (Hall, 1988, p. 165). Alternatively, the same construction may be used to ensure the continuing support from those groups (primarily within the professional middle class) whose task it is to mediate on behalf of the political class and its mission to determine 'what type of democratic or egalitarian concession may be offered to the general population without in any way compromising the profitability of finance' (Gilbert and Williams, 2022, p. 6).

The consequences of refusing to acknowledge the antagonistic dimension as a crucial part of politics, and of denying the existence of a hegemonic bloc, has been articulated in the works of Mouffe (2005; 2000). Mouffe describes two liberal paradigms that have functioned as to emasculate the political and ensure the neoliberal order. The first equates politics with the production of compromise between self-interested individuals while the second, developed in reaction to the first, appeals also to morality, and seeks to replace the instrumental rationality of the former with a communicative rationality building on deliberation (Mouffe, 2005, pp. 12-13). Both paradigms deny antagonism and the real presence of irreconcilable interests – the essence of 'the political'

according to Mouffe – and hide the fact that ‘every consensus is based on acts of exclusion’ (ibid., 11). Central to the neoliberal hegemony is thus the denial of antagonism and the disguise of its political project under the veil of rationality and propagation through other means than parliamentary. The persuasion of populations to accept the neoliberal project has always been characterized by the negation of conflict and the securing of consent (Gilbert and Williams, 2022), sometimes through (often superficially) satisfying interests that are seemingly at odds with its ideological base. Recruiting at least the passive consent of groups with such interests is crucial for minimizing antagonism and for securing the long-term survival of the neoliberal order.

In this paper, we approach the concept of ‘depoliticization’ as a theoretical and analytical tool for exploring discursive strategies aimed at mitigating the potential tension between two arguably conflicting goals – economic growth and social inclusion – in contemporary education policy discourse. Our understanding of depoliticization as a theoretical concept follows the well-known definition set out by Burnham (2001, p. 128) as ‘the process of placing at one remove the political character of decision-making’, i.e., the indirect governing through tools and methods aimed at relocating the responsibility for a certain policy issue to actors outside the political space. Depoliticization is realized not only in political processes and policy implementation – for example in the form of a private-public network governance characterized by horizontal decision-making and consensus-orientation – but also semiotically, in political discourse. Discursive, or ‘preference-shaping’ (Flinders and Buller, 2006), depoliticization includes the presentation of issues as natural, rational, inevitable or beyond political control, and the obscuring of potential fields of conflict and tension in favor of consensus formation. It thus constitutes an obstacle for fundamentally addressing unequal power structures – and ultimately undermines democracy – by denying people ‘the capacity for agency and deliberation in

situations of genuine collective or social choice' (Hay, 2007, p. 77).The analysis of the specific nature of depoliticization as it presents in contemporary policy discourses on education may provide important knowledge if we want to be able to identify and bring attention to the negligence of potential social wrongs or to improper or insufficient political measures for addressing them (Fairclough, 2010).

Data and methodology

EU recommendation on micro-credentials

The text selected for analysis is The Council recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability (Council of the European Union, 2022a), one of four recommendations within the area of education adopted during 2022. The recommendation is in line with the tenth 'action' of the European Skills Agenda for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness and Resilience (European Commission, 2020c). It links to several other EU policies and initiatives such as The European Pillar of Social Rights (European Parliament, European Council and European Commission, 2017); The Commission Communication on achieving the European Education Area by 2025 (European Commission, 2020a); The Council Recommendation on Vocational Education and Training (VET) for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness and Resilience (European Council, 2020), and The Council Resolution on a Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training towards the European Education Area and beyond 2021-2030 (European Council, 2021). It was preceded by a proposal from the commission in December 2021 on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability (European Commission, 2021).

Excluding the two appendices (p. 21-25)[1], the document spans 20 pages. The first pages (p. 10-13) introduce the readers to the background and rationale for

the recommendation. The rest of the document explains the policy's objectives and scope, lists definitions for microcredentials and associated terminology, and gives recommendations for how member states should develop, implement and promote systems of microcredentials, as well as for how the European commission should support member states in this endeavor.

The council recommendation was selected as the object for analysis for several reasons. First, microcredentials represent a materialization of educational policy. Materiality is deeply involved in the construction of a common sense as it is permeated by and reinforce dominant ideas on social structures (McCarthy, 2011). One example of this is the introduction of student fees for international students outside of the EEA in Sweden. This materialization of policy was both embedded in and resulted in assumptions about education as an 'investment commodity' (Nilsson and Westin, 2022, p. 16), of HE institutions as profit-driven providers, and of students as consumers – even if the reform was legitimized in policy as providing benefits for disadvantaged groups (Lundin and Geschwind, 2023). The relationship between policy discourse and materiality is thus important to scrutinize and problematize. Secondly, microcredentials are both discursively and materially connected to the tech industry. They are often associated with trophies or 'badges' (Tamoliune *et al.*, 2023), common in mobile games, health gadgets, and for-profit learning platforms. Materially, their implementation depends on large-scale digital platforms and online educational provision. Microcredentials thus seem to be positioned at a borderline between the tech industry and the education sector, which makes the rhetoric surrounding them particularly interesting to analyze. Thirdly, the European recommendation on microcredentials is one of the most recent European policy documents launched in the post-pandemic period, a period which, according to Symenoidis et al. (2021, p. 92), 'highlight some new priorities that will influence the remaking of the European space of education in

the twenty-first century'. It is thus likely to contribute to the agenda-setting for the future political direction of the member countries and has the potential of catalyzing and legitimizing cross-national educational reform.

Methodology

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was used to analyze the council recommendation, following the methodology suggested by Fairclough (2010). Our readings of existing research on European education policy as well as of previous European lifelong learning policies drew our attention to possible tensions between, on the one hand, calls for a more just and equal society in the midst of economic and social crises and, on the other hand, the neoliberal ambitions characteristic of European education policy. The aim of the analytic process was to study the argumentation around microcredentials in the recommendation, and, in particular, to identify discursive strategies for mitigating potential tensions between the market objectives with which microcredentials are associated and the contemporary context of growing social inequalities. The process was framed by our reading of national and international policies on microcredentials as well as of existing research on the topic. As a starting point for the discourse analytical process, we used the lexica contributed by Eagleton-Pierce (2016) and Leary (2018), which both list and define expressions that can be deemed inherent to contemporary neoliberal discourses and practices. Examples of such words are 'flexibility', 'entrepreneurship', 'innovation', 'best practices', 'competition', 'challenge' and 'competency'. We looked for and highlighted occurrences of such words in the text. In this process, we also identified other terms that were similar or related to the expressions found in the lexica, which were also marked as relevant. Guided by Phelan's (2007) analytical distinction between ideologically 'transparent' and ideologically 'euphemized' neoliberal discourses, we continued to examine the policy text for words and phrases that we distinguished as promoting a more

progressive, social agenda, such as ‘inclusive’, ‘socially fair’, ‘vulnerable’ and ‘empower’, and paid particular attention to parts of the text where they occurred within an economically informed discourse. This process highlighted an interdiscursively complex intertwining of discourses of competitiveness and economic growth with discourses representing non-economic ambitions and values such as inclusion and social fairness. We used CDA to analyze the text segments in which such discourses co-occurred, exploring both linguistic (such as how arguments are being linguistically realized, how people and events are represented, and how the social world is constructed) and interdiscursive (such as what genres and discourses are drawn upon and how they are articulated together) components of the text. This allowed us to identify specific strategies for mitigating between the two competing political objectives: that of maintaining the competitive order and that of narrowing the inequality gap. While we found that this mitigation was embedded within arguments found throughout the whole policy, the stated objectives of the policy represent a condensation of those arguments and thus deserves particular attention. In Fairclough’s terminology, our analysis aims fundamentally at identifying ‘obstacles to addressing the social wrong’ (2010, p. 249) – the social wrong in this case being radically unequal power structures preventing people from accessing higher education – and enables us to consider how such semiotically realized obstacles may be interpreted in relation to the dominant political rationality.

Results

In what follows, we begin by, demonstrating how the policy frames the premises for a joint European system for microcredentials within a more or less overt – transparent – neoliberal discourse. With that as a background, we then proceed with a series of illustrations of how such discourses are also reconstructed through a euphemized framing of neoliberal ambitions, both in the policy

objectives and elsewhere in the document. These illustrations, we suggest, serve as examples of how neoliberal rationality is maintained through the discursive depoliticization of social inequality. In the result section, all page numbers within parentheses refer to the policy, unless otherwise stated.

The transparent Economization, Quantification and Individualization of Education

The background for the recommendation is presented in the first pages of the recommendation. It states that the European labor market faces serious challenges; the recovery from the Covid-pandemic, the digital and green transitions, and an increasingly fast-changing society have resulted in both increased unemployment and new and emerging needs at the labor market. These needs must be met by 'a skilled, trained and adaptable workforce' (p. 10). Beside this *responsibility* thus imposed upon the citizens in the EU member states, the citizens also have the *right* to acquire skills that will enable them to 'participate fully in society and successfully manage transitions in the labor market' (p. 11). To enable individuals to perform these responsibilities and rights, 'flexible' (p. 10) and 'responsive' (p. 11) educational systems that form part of a 'culture of lifelong learning' are of central importance:

> An effective culture of lifelong learning is key to ensuring that everyone has the knowledge, skills and competences they need to thrive in society, the labour market and their personal lives. It is essential that people can access quality and relevant education and training, upskilling and reskilling throughout their lives. (p. 10)

While this statement alludes to values that are not necessarily economic (lifelong learning is constructed as a 'culture' – albeit an 'effective' culture – rather than a political conceptualization of an educational system, and people should 'thrive' not just at the labor market but also in their personal lives), it also makes clear that lifelong learning is essentially about a necessary and

never-ending process of improving one's competitiveness at a market. As 'skill' is turned into a verb, 'to skill (oneself)', it becomes possible to use it as a call for action. Citizens are expected to take on a constant and lifelong readiness and duty to adapt in the face of an unpredictable future; firstly, they must accept that their value on the labor market is determined by the set of isolated skills that they possess (each of which in turn can be subjected to evaluation in terms of their attractiveness at the market) and secondly, they must take action to replace those skills which are not in need, in order to improve their chances of a decent life. An offer is made to citizens (the access to 'quality and relevant education and training'), but it is their own responsibility to take action – to 'upskill' and 'reskill' themselves.

Against this backdrop, microcredentials can be constructed not just as a certification of completed education, but also as an arrangement which will make sure individuals are always able to adapt to society's needs. It is therefore crucial that the provision associated with microcredentials can guarantee that individuals acquire exactly those skills that are currently sought after, and that they can do so regardless of their life situation:

> Micro-credentials could help certify the outcomes of small, tailored learning experiences. They make possible the targeted, flexible acquisition of knowledge, skills and competences to meet new and emerging needs in society and the labour market and make it possible for individuals to fill the skill gaps they need to succeed in a fast-changing environment, while not replacing traditional qualifications. (p. 11)

The speed at which the world is changing ('a fast-changing environment') is a recurrent theme in the policy, representing what Fairclough (2003; 2010) terms 'the new global order', an economic reality lacking social agents. There is no one to hold responsible for these changes. The only thing that one can do is to respond, and especially to do so at the individual level. However, if one does so

strategically, i.e., recognizes one's 'skill gaps' and takes action, it is possible to achieve success. Clearly, succeeding in this hypercompetitive world rests upon the supply of education that is personalized, takes up a minimal amount of one's time, is easily digested, and can be accessed at any time and from any place, thus educational provision needs to be conceived of as 'small', 'tailored', 'targeted', and 'flexible'. The learning process is constructed as uncomplicated and frictionless – 'skill gaps' can be quickly 'filled' by a short course or rather, as we shall see, a 'learning experience'. Skills can also be 'updated' when needed, much like the operating system on a computer:

> These smaller units can help learners to develop or update their cultural, professional, and transversal skills and competences at various stages in their lives. (p. 12)

A skill, thus, is constructed as something generic, quantifiable and substitutable – independent of someone's occupation, identity, long-term personal development and, possibly, pride – which can lose in value as markets fluctuate and which needs to be renewed. It is also presented as closely tied to individual capabilities rather than embedded within and inseparable from collective social practices. While the 'smaller units' (of learning) in reality mainly represent educational provision, the word 'course' is only mentioned twice, and only in one of the appendices to the recommendation (which presents more detailed principles for the design and issuance of credentials). In the recommendation itself, educational provision that may result in microcredentials is instead described as 'units of learning' (p. 12); 'volumes of learning' (p. 14); 'learning experiences' (pp. 11, 12, 14 and 16); 'learning activities' (p. 16), or 'learning opportunities' (pp. 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 18 and 19). The design of these, it is emphasized, should be 'flexible and modular' (p. 12), they should center upon the learner's 'goals and needs' (p. 15), and they can be placed within 'all settings in which formal, non-formal and informal learning can occur' (p. 15).

The global ‘learnification’ trend within education (Biesta, 2009; Biesta, 2010; Biesta, 2012), exemplified here by these expressions, has been linked to a neoliberal rationality through, among other things, its emphasis on the individual as a consumer of educational provision. Additionally, contrary to ‘skill’, which is turned into an action (‘to skill’), the verb ‘learn’ is here nominalized, thus representing, not a process, but matter. ‘Learning’ is something which can be cut up into neat modules and measured in volumes, experiences and opportunities; it can be ‘stackable’ and ‘portable’ (p. 15). Learning is thereby likened to the assemblage of Lego bricks, that can be ‘stand-alone’ or ‘combined’, ‘build logically upon each other’ (p .15) and collected along individually constructed ‘pathways’ (pp. 11, 14, 17 f. ex.). In this way, learning becomes something quantifiable, a bundle of skills and competencies rather than a non-linear process of engaging in deep, connected, extended and complex educational experiences that may not necessarily result in immediately ‘useful’ or clearly demarcated knowledge – but could even, in fact, belong to the ‘useless things that give [life] spiritual significance’ (Flexner, 1939, p. 544).

Coating market-oriented Objectives in soft Values

At the same time as the arguments throughout the policy document to a large extent embedded are within a crass economic discourse, constructing education as competence and competition oriented, individuals as constantly self-improving, and learning as commodified and quantified, the policy also positions itself as a response to calls for strengthening social protection and inclusion. Referring to ‘The European Pillar of Social Rights’ (European Parliament, European Council and European Commission, 2017), it calls on educational institutions to ‘find solutions to deliver more learner-centred, accessible and inclusive learning to a wider range of profiles’ (p. 10). Expressions such as ‘inclusive’, ‘socially fair’, ‘just’, ‘equal’, ‘equity’ and ‘widening learning opportunities’ are used to emphasize the potential of micro-

credentials to provide marginalized groups with opportunities to become integrated in society, especially into the labor market. In what follows, we will take a closer look at the three objectives for the 'European approach to microcredentials':

1. enabling individuals to acquire, update and improve the knowledge, skills and competences they need to thrive in an evolving labour market and society, to benefit fully from a socially fair recovery and just transitions to the green and digital economy and to be better equipped to deal with current and future challenges;
2. supporting the preparedness of providers of micro-credentials to enhance the quality, transparency, accessibility and flexibility of the learning offering in order to empower individuals to forge personalised learning and career pathways;
3. fostering inclusiveness, access and equal opportunities and contributing to the achievement of resilience, social fairness and prosperity for all, in a context of demographic and societal changes and throughout all phases of economic cycles. (p. 14)

Following Eagleton-Pierce's (2016) and Leary's (2018) vocabularies of key concepts for neoliberalism[2] we identify a number of expressions within these objectives which can be associated with neoliberal ideology. Words such as 'competences'; 'challenges'; 'flexibility', and 'resilience' are representations of the 'penetration of market discipline' into every aspect of everyday life (Leary, 2018, p. 8) but also frame the world and the ideal citizen within a discourse of work ethics, corporateness, and self-commodification. This type of vocabulary could potentially be expected to construct a crass and reductionist imaginary of education, learning and the learning subject. However, it is here cushioned with expressions that are associated with 'softer' values and have environmentally conscious, socially fair and self-nurturing connotations, such as 'green', 'just'; 'accessibility'; 'inclusiveness'; 'equal opportunities', and 'social fairness'. Expressions of social inclusion and sustainability – i.e. non-economic attributes

– thus help ‘softening the blow’ at the same time as they are productive for pushing neoliberal objectives. It is not only the case that, as Savage et al. (2013, p. 163) puts it, ‘[e]ducational equity and economic competitiveness are now presented as harmonious and complementary goals in global policy discourses and national policies’; notions associated with equity also take on new meanings as they become tools for pushing a market-oriented agenda in educational policy – meanings that are both economized and void of political connotations. Words such as ‘inclusive’ and ‘equal’ hence become stripped of their political load as they are embedded within the context of an agenda which is deeply economicized. Inclusion, fairness and justice should here not be conceived of as concepts associated with political objectives that aim to confront the unequal structures affecting fundamental access to education and societal and political agency. These concepts are instead rearticulated as a scheme of values that shape educational systems and provision, but that must be balanced against the needs to engage in, persist and succeed at a global market. What Mikelatou and Arvanitis (2018) describe as the tension between non-financial (inclusion, fairness, equality) and financial objectives (competitiveness, employability, resilience) in the EU’s lifelong learning policies is in this text managed by recontextualizing the former as embedded into ‘a consumer regime of competition’ (Atasay, 2015, p. 183). The consequence of this ‘forced marriage’, connecting concepts that – by virtue of their original meanings – do not fit together, into oxymoronic compounds such as ‘sustainable competitiveness’ (p. 11), is the construction of an educational system that puts the responsibility on the achievement of social inclusion on the individual. The main function of this system is discipline and control: to ‘enable’ and ‘foster’ the mindsets of citizens so that they can change their life trajectory – leading eventually to ‘resilience, social fairness and prosperity for all’.

Janus-faced Imaginaries of the precarious Life

If we unpack the policy's constructions of the social processes involved in the recommended approach, as they are presented in its three objectives listed above, we find that these processes are also discursively 'euphemized' (Phelan, 2007) and depoliticized. For example, individuals don't settle with a decent salary after having struggled to acquire the qualifications for a position; they 'thrive in an evolving labour market and society'. They don't just take a course that they need in order to be able to get a job; they 'forge' their personal 'learning pathways'. They do not feel powerless in the face of seemingly insurmountable demands that face them; they are 'empowered' to take action.

The verb 'thrive', according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, can both mean 'to grow vigorously' and 'to gain in wealth and possessions'. It is thus possible to understand it as achieving happiness and well-being as a result of a nurturing, positive and encouraging environment, but also as, simply, becoming economically successful. A third definition is 'to progress toward or realize a goal despite or because of circumstances' (ibid.). The latter connotation is commonly associated with 'thrive' when it is found in self-help resources encouraging individuals to 'turn challenges into opportunity', and to 'look for possibilities rather than limitations'. As it is here placed within a context describing unsecure and potentially strenuous circumstances (an 'evolving labour market and society') it evokes associations with other expressions more intrinsic to a transparently neoliberal vocabulary, such as 'grit' and 'resilience', but also to 'passion' and 'creativity', all of which, as Leary (2018) shows, are closely linked to moral virtues and feed into the myth that success is earned by pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps, and the result of 'hard work in a fair system' (ibid., 103) – if you do not thrive, thus, you only have yourself to blame.

The noun ‘pathway’ appears to indicate that the learning process is a pleasant journey which can take us from one place to another, in our minds, but also, as implicated here, in the material world. However, pathway is an ambiguous metaphor, and together with the verb ‘forge’ – meaning ‘to beat something into shape’ – its other associations, with personal responsibility (Checkland *et al.*, 2020), individual choice-making, and moral strength (Fopp, 2009), are also made possible. Reynolds (2000) has problematized the journey metaphor for not acknowledging ‘fundamental differences in people's socio-spatial worlds and their unequal access to modes of travel or their reluctance to cross borders’ (ibid., p. 545). These fundamental differences, both material, cultural, and social, form embodied practices that constrain individuals’ movement in the world. Such constraints are neglected here, or rather assumed to be erased through the thoughtful design of the educational provision associated with microcredentials and the disciplining of the individual into a strategic decision-maker. The collective aspects of the learning process are also ignored since the emphasis is on individuals’ personal choices and experiences.

The verb ‘empower’ is, etymologically, an ambiguous term meaning both ‘bestow power upon’ and ‘gain power over’ (Lincoln *et al.*, 2002, p. 271). While its second definition is now rare, ‘empower’ has retained an air of ambiguity. As a noun, ‘empowerment’, it was, in the 60s and 70s, associated with ideas about radical political and social transformation, of taking back that which is ‘rightfully one’s own’ (Leary, 2018, p. 77), which is more in accordance with its second original meaning. The verbal usage has since become more common, and ‘empowerment’ has, claims Batliwala, transitioned ‘from a noun signifying shifts in social power to a verb signaling individual power, achievement, status’ (Batliwala, 2007, p. 563). Today’s use of the verb ‘empower’ is ambiguous in other ways as well. First, it can mean both to give someone the feeling of power (confidence), or to give them actual power or authority. Secondly, the power to

which ‘empower’ refers can be interpreted either as an end in itself or as a means to an end, of which the latter interpretation is currently the most common (Lincoln *et al.*, 2002, p. 272). In the context of the present policy, ‘empower’ demonstrates all these ambiguities; it simultaneously constructs the subject as a patient – a receiver of the offerings microcredentials bring in terms of new opportunities for learning – and as an agent. Empower, as it is used here, places the responsibility, ‘power’, on the individual to change her own personal destiny, but only in one respect – to increase her attractiveness on the labor market. The radical connotation of a once politically loaded expression is lost as it is appropriated by an economic discourse.

Finally, a joint system of microcredentials is expected to contribute to ‘prosperity for all’. The noun ‘prosperity’, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, means ‘the condition of being successful or thriving’, and describes (often economic) vigorous growth and development. In this text, however, ‘prosperity’ is placed within a context that frames it as the result of individuals investing in themselves by making autonomous educational choices corresponding to society’s and industry’s needs, and overcoming even the most strenuous circumstances (‘in a context of demographic and societal changes and throughout all phases of economic cycles’). It refers to the prognosis that microcredentials will lead to everyone’s wellbeing, or, depending on the interpretation, everyone’s economic success. This may come across as both overly ambitious and hypocritical, since in the harsh competitive world constructed in this recommendation not everyone can be a winner.

By drawing on an ambiguous vocabulary that, on the surface, aligns with a progressive political agenda and attaches to ‘soft’ concepts such as well-being, health, freedom, creativity and power, the policy can, in a sense, have it both ways; it allows for the construction of microcredentials as a way of effectively

addressing inequality and enabling a fairer society, at the same time as it – through the contextual framing – is able to unify these values with a discourse reproducing a neoliberal notion of subjectivity.

Motivating the Undesirable: Contradictory Constructions of Exclusion and Inclusion

Who, then, is supposed to be included in the evolving labor market and society through the roll-out of a European system for microcredentials? In the policy text, microcredentials are described as 'learning opportunities to all' (p. 12) aimed at meeting 'new and emerging needs in society and the labour market' (p. 11). However, particular emphasis is placed on their benefits for 'non-traditional learners' (p. 12). These individuals form part of a 'wider range of learners' (p. 12) expected to utilize the opportunities to up-skill and re-skill through microcredentials, in particular:

> disadvantaged and vulnerable groups (such as people with disabilities, the elderly, low-qualified/skilled people, minorities, people with a migrant background, refugees and people with fewer opportunities because of their geographical location and/or their socio-economically disadvantaged situation) (p. 12)

The individuals included in this group are characterized by what they *lack* rather than what they *have* (Serrano Pascual and Martín Martín, 2017), and while they quite certainly have different strengths, ambitions and needs, they are here constructed as atypical and low-skilled. The members of these groups are also in need of motivation in order to maximize their employability capital:

> [member states are recommended to explore] the use of micro-credentials in targeted initiatives to support and motivate disadvantaged and vulnerable groups…to re-enter the labour market or continue in employment (p. 18)

This segment illustrates the depoliticization of the deep inequalities embedded in, for example, socio-economic and racial segregation that may have a fundamental impact on educational attainment, by reframing them as problems concerning lack of motivation, qualification and skills (i.e., the 'right' qualification and skills) – all problems that can be 'fixed' by the implementation of microcredentials, specifically directed at individuals. Inherently political questions of economic, social and cultural privilege are insulated from critique through a euphemized neoliberal discourse, in which, for example, gig-workers are portrayed as 'people in non-standard forms of work' (p. 12), or, as in the extract below, grouped together with entrepreneurs, thus ignoring the dependency that many of these workers have to the company for which they perform their services and the lack of freedom they enjoy as compared to those traditionally defined as self-employed entrepreneurs (Todolí-Signes, 2017):

> [member states are recommended to promote] the use of micro-credentials as a means of updating and upgrading the skills of self-employed and non-standard workers, including people working through platforms and SMEs; (p. 18)

Inherent in the idea of microcredentials is the element of choice rather than decision. The expressions 'learning opportunities' and 'learning pathways' for example, signal that the individual is presented with an endless smorgasbord of possibilities to choose from. This may be deceiving, considering, as Ball et al. (2002, p. 51) argues, that '[w]here choice suggests openness in relation to a psychology of preferences, decision-making alludes to both power and constraint'. The depoliticization of structural inequalities through the reframing of social problems as questions of access to flexible 'learning opportunities', constructs a world in which there are no limitations except for those that are self-imposed; it makes it possible to direct the focus to the individuals' responsibility to render themselves employable through training and self-

improvement rather than on society's responsibility to address social problems and inequalities embedded in societal structures, all of which may constrain citizens' ability to make decisions about their future. When reasons for such inequalities are presented as questions of access, for example that platform workers 'may have difficulties accessing training' (p. 12), complex and deeply problematic systems of power relations can be ignored and quick-fix solutions be promoted. In fact, the recommendation is a response to the call by the commission president to 'bring down barriers to learning' (Leyen, 2020, p. 14), a response which clearly does not acknowledge that barriers to accessing education and training include structural inequalities that cannot be solved by simply offering individuals the option of taking a 2-week online course.

Interestingly, throughout the policy, which both explicitly and implicitly is addressed to (among others) HE institutions in the member countries, the word 'student' is used very sparingly in conjunction with microcredentials (only twice). Instead, the individual engaging in educational provision leading to microcredentials is defined as a 'learner', a word which is used 34 times in the document. This not only points (again) to a learnification of the discourse – in which learning is individualized and the 'user' of the educational provision is constructed as an autonomous consumer with a self-identified need – but is also gives rise to a suspicion that the provision intended to lead to microcredentials equals a form of second-rate education, aimed primarily at individuals – non-students – who are, indeed, excluded from the HE system, but for reasons that are unlikely to be solved through the implementation of a system for microcredentials throughout the European Union. The policy in fact emphasizes that microcredentials are not intended to in any way 'disrupt', 'undermine' or 'replace' traditional HE but should be seen as a 'complement' within the 'ecosystem' of education and employment, thus highlighting the importance of a

close relationship between microcredentials and traditional HE on the one side and microcredentials and employability on the other:

> Micro-credentials can be used to complement and enhance education, training, lifelong learning and employability ecosystems. The measures outlined in this Recommendation are aimed at strengthening opportunities for learning and employability without disrupting initial, higher education, vocational education and training (VET) systems, and without undermining and replacing existing qualifications and degrees. (p. 14)

The ambiguous framing of the potential beneficiaries of the recommended microcredential system enables a depoliticization of unequal power structures. These individuals are constructed simultaneously as separated from 'us' by their vulnerability, inabilities and poverty, and as equals – all of us have the same possibilities to make choices when presented with 'learning opportunities'. On the one hand, 'they' are not 'students' at a university and the education they receive should not be conceived of as traditional HE, but on the other hand, they are – as are all of us – included in the more generously defined category of 'learners'. In this way, the policy is able to embed market-oriented objectives that force already stigmatized groups to self-objectification and self-improvement, within a discourse of inclusion and saviorism. These techniques thus render fundamental inequalities that may exclude individuals from certain educational futures invisible, as they enforce the idea that mere access to individually tailored learning provision places everyone on an equal footing.

Discussion

Our results demonstrate a set of depoliticization techniques used in EU educational policy to obscure a neoliberal agenda. The first legitimizes market-oriented objectives by appropriating and adjusting a social justice vocabulary to fit an economic discourse. The second fends off potential contestation over the

commodification of the oppressed by embedding ambiguous 'trans-ideological' (Fox, 2010) constructions in a context of self-improvement and responsibilization. The third draws from a discourse of saviorism to obscure a competitive order and fundamental inequalities, enabling the preservation of exclusion through the 'lexicon of inclusion' (Bourassa, 2021, p. 255). The operationalization of these techniques hinges on linguistic expressions that, through a complex interplay with other discursive elements, protect neoliberal policy from being challenged and, ultimately, allow for it to produce material effects in the world.

The expressions that we have highlighted in this analysis add a layer of sheen to the policy arguments – they make the arguments seem more attractive, at the same time as they divert our attention from other possible understandings of the conditions, situations, and biographies that they refer to. They bestow upon the constructions of education a benevolent, warm, and positive ambience, despite the often blatantly economic rationality underlying them. As we worked on this text, we played with the concept of 'bling' as an explanatory metaphor for the observed techniques. Thompson (2009), in her text about the history of the visual culture of hip hop, traces the origins of the notion of 'bling' and argues that it can be understood as simultaneously overdetermining the surface (in Thompson's example, the black body) and obscuring what is beneath (the subjectivity of the individual of African descent), making an object both *hyper*visible and *in*visible. Bling, says Thompson, 'denotes a state of visibility in which the optical field is so saturated that nothing can be seen; it is a state of hypervisibility that is, in effect, blinding.' (ibid., 489). Expressions that add 'bling' to a policy have the capacity to gloss over, conceal and prevent disagreements over the political. In 'Deconstructing development discourse: Buzzwords and fuzzwords', Rist (2010, p. 21) describes the concept 'sustainable development' as an oxymoronic creation awarded 'star status' because of its

ability to reconcile two conflicting agendas (protection of the environment **and** economic growth). The often vague and seemingly apolitical character of such concepts, and their 'luminous obviousness' (Toye, 2010, p. 45) further enhance their potential to effectively depoliticize issues that could arguably be arenas for conflict, creating an impression of consensus. When something can mean many things, or even anything, 'the possibility to discuss it in terms of conflict and structural inequalities decreases' (Jacobsson, 2019, p. 25). The ability of such concepts to – by virtue of their attractiveness and ambiguity – disguise ideological positions can only be uncovered through close scrutinization of 'the context of their use by particular, positioned, social and political actors' (Cornwall, 2010, p. 10), which is what we have attempted to do in this study. The techniques that we have identified through our analysis 'bling' the arguments for a joint European microcredential system by making *hyper*visible an apolitical and consensus-oriented surface of the recommended reforms, and *in*visible its underlying transparent neoliberal rationality. By framing the microcredentials recommendation in euphemistic narratives of inclusion and social fairness, the fundamental political character of issues relating to inequality in relation to education possibilities and life trajectories can be denied, potential organized resistance from the targeted groups be prevented, and continuing support from influential groups – who otherwise only with difficulty might accept the policy's premises and consequences – be preserved.

If we accept that neoliberalism is facing a 'crisis of hegemony' (Fraser 2019), we can view the policy as part of its response to the threats posed by the present conjuncture of political unrest and global emergencies. Although hegemony can never be idle, in times of potential contestation it needs to reinforce its leadership and find new ways to sustain a common sense that is conducive to its goals and material interests, and preempts political antagonism. Apart from adapting and re-orienting discourse to a changing socio-political landscape, this

can also include efforts to create material circumstances and lived experiences that are concurrent to the neoliberal common sense. Arguably, such strategies can be just as effective, or more, than strict discursive ones, since they strive to create what Gramsci (1971) terms ‘good sense’ among those whose active or passive consent is required for the neoliberal project’s continuation but not necessarily are to gain from it – and who would be better served by other developments, for example a more redistributive politics. In the case of the present policy, its performative ambitions are visible not only in its ‘blinging’ of neoliberal discourses and worldviews, but in its efforts to create such good sense. With microcredentials serving as tokens of exchange value, an educational marketplace can be constructed in which it makes material sense for individuals and HE institutions to engage. This could reinforce a common sense in line with a neoliberal functional-economic agenda for HE and a further aligning and subjugation of the behaviors of individuals and educational providers alike to market dynamics and capital interests through which risks and costs of employment preparation can be transferred to citizens (Wheelahan and Moodie, 2022) and public providers of education.

In this article we have shown how tensions and contradictions between social and economic objectives are discursively managed. Our results illustrate the agility of neoliberalism to constantly reinvent itself (Plehwe, Slobodian and Mirowski, 2020) and the ways in which contemporary consensus-oriented political processes and discourses obscure adversity and protect the hegemonic order from being challenged. Such processes prevent, in effect, contestation and conflict, and thus not only preclude alternative responses to contemporary crises, but also, as Mouffe (2005) argues, pose a threat to democracy.

Notes

[1] The appendices include a detailed list of standard elements to describe a microcredential (mandatory and optional elements of the certificate) and a list of principles for the design and issuing of microcredentials.

[2] or 'late capitalism', which is the term Leary uses

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