International Professionalism versus Corporate Global Players and National Elites – Alternative Perspectives for Educational Research

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Client-centred and participatory or advocacy professionalism in the service of local and national socio-cultural diversity and disadvantaged minorities needs its own independent international networking and capacity-building as an alternative both to global(orientated) corporate managerialism and to traditional conservative and nationalist academic elitism.

In the field of the teaching and social work professions – being re-defined as human rights professions – this means that there is a need for an independent coalition of academics and students in professional schools or colleges of education and social work in defence of, or in favour of restoring professional education and practice-relevant or practitioner-based research and for participation of local lay communities. Such a coalition has to be formed as counter-force against the dominating global trend of anti-professionalism as part of new corporate public management of universities, colleges and schools, partly based on a new type of evaluation and bench-marking-oriented applied research for educational management purposes.

On the level of individual universities this implies that there should be division of labour or a plurality, based on academic and professional autonomy, between different actors or units engaged in bi- or multi-national exchange and cooperation programmes. Even within the academic disciplines of education and social work there are at least three competing actors with different interests and strategies for multi-national cooperation and exchange:

1. the perspective of the central management of an entrepreneurial corporate university for multi-national exchange, competition or strategic cooperation with other universities’ corporate leaders sharing the same aims and styles of new public management (implying a weakening of academic and professional autonomy and corresponding client-orientation);

2. the vested interests of those applied research and development centres being created and supported in the service of a corporate-managerial transformation of education and social work and other professions, for instance centres for evaluation and quality management of education and research;
(3) the perspective and interest of those academic and professional public bodies and expert units responsible for the ethos, mission and standards of free and client-centred practice, in coalition with non-governmental civic associations representing professional practitioners as well as client groups (youth, parents, students, patients, local citizens).

In the case of the partnership between the University of Oldenburg and NMMU there is a triangle of three actors:

- faculty-based and inter-faculty academic centres of professional educational and related research for the training and professional development of teachers and social workers,
- study programmes and continuing education programmes for higher education management
- and service and marketing units for international students.

Interestingly enough the DAAD has separate programmes and instruments for the support and promotion of these three different types of international exchange and they seem to understand and accept this kind of division of labour.

Unfortunately, the expert community of educational and social work research is also divided into several different programmes or positions:

(1) theorizing and research expressing conservative and national elitist academic traditions and orientations
(2) democratic client-centred and community-orientated and cultural-context-embedded, but independent critical research based on a professional service ethos,
(3) applied and socio-technological research and evaluation in the service of a new corporate and public management of education and social work, transforming it into marketable private goods under corporate capital control and provided or enacted by dependant micro-entrepreneurs as licensed agents,
(4) radical cooperative and advocacy research in the service of, or in alliance with, radical social movements,
(5) seemingly neutral, value-free and marketable context-disembedded empiricist research governed by corporate university or science business management.
For instance, research and theorizing on epistemic beliefs and subjective concepts of teachers, learners, parents will be, and has been partly shaped differently from the perspectives and in settings of these five types or models of research. These concepts, data sampling and research results can be defined or interpreted from a conservative elitist academic perspective (measured against a traditional set or canon of values or knowledge), embedded in local community cultural contexts of professional client-centred practice, in order to support new public management strategies for school and curriculum development based on general formal skills and competences, from a radical theoretical and political advocacy perspective in favour of lower class and oppressed groups and their social human rights, disembedded from cultural and local contexts and marketable for utilization in corporate management strategies.

In his analysis of current academic and school management practices Richard Münch has shown how research into curriculum development can be shaped and utilized in order to defend particular independent academic or professional domains of knowledge, culture and learning or to strengthen global or universal transformation programmes in favour of non-academic and non-professional types and modes of formal and general competence learning manageable for just-in-time and on-demand application within science and technology industries. (R. Münch: Globale Eliten, lokale Autoritäten. Bildung und wissenschaft unter dem Regime von PISA, McInsey & Co. Frankfurt a.M. 2009).

During the course of the current world economic crisis the hegemony of neo-liberal ideology and global-oriented corporate powers and players will be reduced and limited in general and also in the field of academia and the professions. A number of alternative new and old forces will be strengthened, but will compete and cooperate in different coalitions. Differences between countries and regions will become more important in this context (and this should be a subject of comparative research). Similar to the financial service industry speculative investments and false promises of the global corporate education and science industries (as the power basis of a knowledge-based post-industrial capitalism) will be partly break down or be devaluated. The lost trust of client communities and tax payers represented by political parties in the value and legitimacy of research and expert services will have to be restored by distinguishing between ‘bad service providers’ with discredited research expertise and ethical and transparent client-responsive research and expert service providers, a distinction based on regulations set by democratic and law-based government and judiciary agencies enforcing participatory peer-review and peer-self-government. Oligopolistic and intransparent closed-shops and
insider-networks have to be replaced by a broadly-based and transparent system of joint academic, professional, student and client-community peer-governance. For instance, faculties or schools of education, social work and health sciences should negotiate with local and national practitioner, student and client communities the introduction of supplementary systems of partnership-peer-review of the education and research services they are providing, and co-producing. For example, school governing bodies are both clients and co-producers of school development practices, in partnership with university faculties and research centres and they should set up joint peer-review bodies.

International exchange and cooperation in higher education and academic research should not be dominated by corporate capitalist power groups and their representatives or junior-partners in the so called entrepreneurial university leadership, nor by conservative academic elites. Instead an alliance of concerned academic researchers, teachers and students with their client and practitioner communities and partners in public and private spheres should be the major actors in international exchange and cooperation. A special focus in this context should be comparative and cooperative research analyzing, clarifying and developing the different relationships between academic ‘producers’ of education and research (academics and university students) and their client, consumer and alumni/practitioner communities (teachers, physicians, social workers as well as parents, learners, patients, trainees and clients). This research should comprise both academic basic research (including international comparative studies), for example, on beliefs and subjective concepts of knowing, learning and practice, as well as participatory and practitioner or action research owned and pursued by individuals, teams and networks of practitioners, clients, consumers and citizens as stake-holders being affected by research and research-based study, training and services.

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