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## Give Us a Break! A Sceptical Review of Contemporary Discourses of Lifelong Learning<sup>[1]</sup>

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**ABSTRACT** Over the past 40 years a whole cluster of discourses centred on the ideas of the learning society and lifelong learning has emerged. These discourses have moved from being theoretical and aspirational to become increasingly embedded in international and national policies and professional practices. This article raises some concerns about what happens when the aspirational discourses which abounded in the 1960s and 1970s are translated into real-world practice and policies. The article begins with a brief review of the range of discourses bound up in the theory and practice of the learning society, and some of the sociological explanations for the proliferation of learning society and lifelong learning discourses. It then goes on to ask some questions about the potential risks of specific manifestations of these totalising approaches to education, focusing in particular on threats to 'learning-rich' and 'learning-free' spaces. In the spirit of lifelong learning, the author develops her arguments by drawing on some reflections on her own experiences as a worker (specifically as a supervisor of doctoral students) and as a parent of young children.

This year there has been a great deal of looking back 40 years to the events of 1968 as marking a turning point in European history. Arguably, reflecting on ideas about the learning society should be seen as part of this process because one of the earliest discussions of these ideas cited in the literature is Hutchins' *The Learning Society*, which was published in – and indeed in some ways reflected the spirit of – 1968. For Hutchins, a learning society

would be one that, in addition to offering part-time adult education to every man and woman at every stage of grown-up life, had succeeded in transforming its values in such a way that learning fulfilment, becoming human, had become its aim and all its institutions were directed to this end. (Hutchins, 1968, p. 134)

Hutchins, Illich, Faure, Schon and Husén, among others, are generally credited with being key founding figures representing different strands of thought that have fed into contemporary learning society and lifelong learning discourses. As well as trying to articulate visions and ideals for education, the work of these thinkers is often informed by a critical impulse that recognises the limitations of, and dissatisfactions with, established models of education, especially as represented in the formal sector of schooling and higher education.

Forty years on – specifically at the end of January 2008 – we have the publication of the draft European Union (EU) progress report, *Delivering Lifelong Learning for Knowledge, Creativity and Innovation*, which reviews the progress that has been made in delivering EU lifelong learning policies. This progress includes the growing number of explicit lifelong learning strategies now adopted in the majority of European countries – each incorporating, in the words of the document, 'a comprehensive vision of lifelong learning' (Council of the European Union, 2008, p. 4). The EU is in a position to judge progress because in 2002 it set out both an account of the aims of lifelong learning and 15 quality indicators.[2] It described a lifelong learning approach as 'an essential policy

strategy for the development of citizenship, social cohesion, employment and for individual fulfilment' and specified the principal aims of lifelong learning as follows:

- to build an inclusive society which offers equal opportunities for access to quality learning throughout life to all people and [to provide] education and training provision [that] is based first and foremost on the needs and demands of individuals,
- ... to ensure that people's knowledge and skills match the changing demands of jobs and occupations, workplace organisation and working methods and,
- to encourage and equip people to participate in all spheres in modern public life ... at all levels of the community, including at European level. (European Commission, 2002, pp. 4-5)

So it seems that, 40 years after Hutchins was writing, the EU policy climate is one in which there is a clear expectation that Member States will have comprehensive 'life-wide' and 'lifelong' learning policies, the design and effects of which are subject to central monitoring and evaluation.

In this paper I would like to do two things. In the first half I will provide a brief review of the range of discourses bound up in the theory and practice of the learning society, and some of the sociological explanations for the proliferation of learning society and lifelong learning discourses. In the second half I want to ask some questions about what happens when the aspirational discourses which abounded in the 1960s and 1970s are translated into real-world practice and policies, and, in particular, I will raise some concerns about the potential risks of these totalising approaches to education. Some of these concerns reflect debates about the purposes of education and the tensions between various conceptions of vocational and liberal education. Other concerns relate to the costs of making learning a pervasive obligation. In large part, I am presenting my arguments in a fairly conventional – that is to say impersonal – academic way but, in the spirit of lifelong learning, I want to draw on some reflections of my experiences as a worker, particularly from my experiences as a teacher in higher education and specifically as a PhD supervisor. I will also draw on my experiences in my home life, particularly as a parent of young children.

In my opening remarks I may have given the impression that the learning society is one big idea, but in fact it is better seen as the meeting point of a range of different, and sometimes competing, ideas. A number of authors have produced accounts of the lineage and various components of learning society discourses.[3] Rather than review these various typologies here, or, even more impractically, try to produce a representation of the multiplicity of ways in which the learning society has been talked about, I will offer a deliberately simple approach to the field by suggesting that what is characteristic about learning society discourse is its tendency towards comprehensiveness, that is towards erasing any boundaries between learning and the rest of life such that all of society's activities and institutions come to be reconceived as sites of learning. This idea of comprehensiveness is captured in van der Zee's (1998, p. 75) definition of a learning society as one 'in which learning is the whole of life and the whole of life is learning', and can be summed up as the pulling together of four different discourses about learning, namely discourses about personal fulfilment, citizenship, social inclusion or social justice, and work-related learning. Each of these discourses can have different ideological inflections – inflections that are more or less conservative or progressive in various ways. To a large extent the model of the learning society with which we operate will depend upon how these discourses are combined, the relative emphasis placed on them, and the different ideological inflections given to them.

The first discourse – personal fulfilment – is illustrated by the quote from Hutchins with which I began, which makes the process of learning to 'become human' the central purpose of all social institutions and, indeed, of society itself. This discourse emphasises the ways in which learning produces personal development, personal growth and, potentially, personal fulfilment.

The other discourses place more emphasis on the social purposes of learning. The stress in the second discourse – citizenship – is on the duties and entitlements of individuals in relation to other members of society or, increasingly, to future generations and to the environment itself as an object of concern (see, for example, Ainley, 2008). This is reflected in the growth of education in national and European citizenship in the formal schooling sector as well as of initiatives like citizens' juries and community forums (Ranson & Stewart, 1998) in the broader society.

The third discourse – social inclusion or social justice – relates to a cluster of partly overlapping and partly competing concerns that include social solidarity, equality of access and respect for difference. Such discourses emphasise, for example, the role that learning can play in securing universal access to the skills deemed necessary for full participation in a ‘knowledge-based’ society, in promoting a sense of community, and in enhancing intercultural understanding and communication. More radical versions of these discourses – for example, those inspired by the emancipatory politics of Freire and the critical pedagogy school – emphasise justice rather than inclusion. Here, the concern is with promoting the kind of learning that can empower working-class and minority groups to engage critically with and actively challenge the social and political injustices that shape their everyday lives.

The fourth discourse – work-related learning – is currently dominated by a neo-liberal take on the relationship between learning and work, which often produces quite narrow and instrumentalised conceptions of education as a means of enhancing individual employability and national and international economic competitiveness within a globalised economy. However, neither learning for work nor learning at work need be thought of in these narrow terms. In principle, there is no reason why goals related to the other discourses – personal fulfilment, citizenship and social inclusion/justice – should not be seen as achievable through work-related learning policies and practices.[4]

Versions of all four discourses come together in much of the documentation about the learning society and they are mentioned in, and roughly coincide with, the aims of EU lifelong learning policy. One way of looking at these developments is to see them as signalling a victory for progressive social movements in and around education which have been directed against the limitations of narrow traditional approaches to public education provision – where traditional is taken to signify insularity, a separation of learning from life, a lack of relevance, and a lack of attention to the civic and social goals of education. I think it is important to underline this more positive reading and to stress that there is much to celebrate about the idea of lifelong learning, and that the criticisms I will be developing in the latter part of this paper are directed at *particular manifestations* of lifelong learning, and not lifelong learning *per se*.

Thus far, I have only discussed what the learning society means or could mean. Before going on to focus in on some specific concerns about it, it is important to ask some questions about where these discourses have sprung from and what other aspects of social change they are associated with. One way of doing this relatively quickly is to summarise the readings of the learning society offered by three contrasting sociological approaches: theories of reflexive modernity, neo-Marxist critiques of contemporary economic change, and post-structuralist theories of governmentality. These sociological approaches combine explanatory and normative components. That is to say, they not only shed light on the sources of these discourses but also raise some critical questions about them. So, considerations of these approaches will also allow me, in the remainder of the article, to change tack from an essentially descriptive towards a more evaluative consideration of policies and practices that treat learning as lifelong and life-wide.

Giddens (1991) theorises modernity as ‘a post-traditional order’ – one in which we can no longer rely on pre-established ways of doing things and in which we are less likely to defer to authority. Within this new order, we are constantly surrounded by new information and knowledge about which we have to make endless choices. As a consequence, the scripts of our lives are, according to Giddens, no longer stable and, to a large extent, we have to write and rewrite our own scripts on a continuing basis. Hence, there is a constant imperative – both for institutions and individuals – to grow, adapt, reinvent themselves and, perhaps most importantly of all, take charge of their own identity and ongoing search for fulfilment. Giddens uses the concept of reflexivity to capture these processes of self-reflection and reinvention through which the self becomes ‘a reflexive project for which the individual is responsible’ (1991, p. 75). There is, therefore, a close correspondence between sociological readings of modernity and some of the dominant currents within learning society discourses which stress the importance of lifelong learning in the context of ‘a late or postmodern world where we are forced to make choices, and to compose a life, without confident reference to inherited templates, established knowledge or undisputed authority’ (West, 2004, p. 140).

The neo-Marxist account of the phenomena I have been discussing centres on the explosion of ways in which learning has become a site of activity for capitalism. The main focus of neo-

Marxist critiques, therefore, is economic versions of the learning society which treat education as a servant of the marketplace, where purposes centre around profit, where market thinking dominates everything, and where what matters about individuals is their trainability and employability. Within such a society, the desirable dispositions of individuals become defined around the needs of a post-Fordist knowledge economy which calls for 'enterprising, flexible economic subjects' (Jessop, 2000, p. 182). Continual innovation is regarded as an imperative and hence employees need to be ever ready to adapt to whatever is required of them. In short, they have to be trainable. According to this vision, the substantive knowledge content of the curriculum moves into the background and what is emphasised instead are flexible attitudes, a capacity for self-direction, an ability to cope with uncertainty and embrace change, transferable skills such as interpersonal and communication skills, and metaskills such as problem solving or learning to learn. In this vision, not only must individuals be trainable, they must also see themselves as responsible consumers of, and participants in, their own learning; they must be ready to seek out and invest in those learning opportunities that will best enhance their own employability.

Moving on to the third approach, Rose's (1989) theories about the governance of the soul are focused on essentially the same phenomena that concern Giddens, but Rose sees them through a rather different, more critical and Foucauldian-inspired lens. Rose captures some of the differences between government and governance by describing the shift within advanced liberal democracies from a rejection of the *social state*, 'where the political apparatus and its functionaries take the responsibility in arranging the affairs of the nation', to an *enabling state* that governs without governing 'society'. The enabling state gets people – as individuals, families, communities and organisations – to govern themselves by using the twin mechanisms of 'autonomisation' – that is, making people autonomous – and 'responsibilisation' – that is, making people responsible for themselves. Rose sees these mechanisms as both liberating and restrictive, 'opening free space for individual actors whilst enwrapping these autonomized actors within new forms of control' (Rose, 1989, p. xxiii).

What Rose is arguing here is that many contemporary policy complexes and professional practices – and those surrounding notions of the learning society arguably fit this bill – operate in the name of promoting autonomy and responsibility, holding out the prospect of self-direction and self-improvement, but are fundamentally double-edged. A particular kind of subject position is produced and privileged – a subject position that revolves around ideas of individual 'autonomy and rights to self-actualization' (Rose, 1989, p. xxiv) – but it is one that occludes other possibilities, for example, the construction of a subject position that revolves around ideas of mutuality and collective social action.

These three sociological approaches help to illuminate different dimensions of the individual that are brought into existence by learning society discourses. In a nutshell, these can be summarised as continuously reinvented selves, flexible economic subjects and governed souls. Although these approaches can be seen as competing, they can equally well be treated as complementary. Indeed, some of the most powerful critiques of the learning society – in particular those advanced by Illich & Verne (1974) and Bernstein (2001), which I will return to shortly – draw on perspectives that in large part cut across these three approaches and, taken together, reflect each of the dimensions of reinvention, flexibility and governance.

So, there are different constructions of the learning society, there is a range of angles from which the learning society can be critiqued and there is plenty of scope for scepticism. I cannot possibly represent all of that in any depth in the space available here, so from now on I will focus in on what I see as two main dimensions of the learning society, which I will call 'learning to live' and 'living to learn', and two key concerns which I see as threats to learning-rich contexts and threats to learning-free contexts.

I am using the term 'learning to live' to stand for all the ways in which learning can be instrumentalised as preparation for life. This includes education for economic and civic participation at all levels of the education system from early years to higher education. By 'living to learn' I am referring to the ways in which all aspects of life are increasingly translated into domains of learning. This, for example, includes every aspect of the life course, from prenatal to third-age learning, and every aspect of the self, including emotional and spiritual as well as cognitive and moral components.

At this point I think it would be helpful to turn to some examples which will allow me to specify what I mean and this is where I am going to draw on my own experience. I will take as my example of 'learning to live' my experience of changes in the climate surrounding PhD supervision in the United Kingdom and in many other European countries. For my example of 'living to learn', I will use my experiences of the pressures that prospective parents and parents of young children are increasingly subjected to.

### **Example 1. The Changing PhD**

My first example is the changing PhD. At King's, where I work, as is commonplace in the UK university sector, there is currently a debate about producing a specification for the skill set that makes up doctoral study. This is just one example of a whole series of changes that have taken place around the governance of the PhD in recent years, and in every case these changes reflect national and, to some extent, international policy shifts about the way doctoral study is construed, as is evident, for example, in the report on excellence in researcher training published by the League of European Research Universities last year (League of European Research Universities, 2007). The crux of the current discussion is about fleshing out the ways in which PhD study should be seen in terms of the delivery of certain generic and transferable skills. The UK Research Councils have drawn up a checklist of competencies that is now embedded in quality assurance and funding mechanisms and thereby drives institutional practice, and it is this framework that has prompted the current debate at King's. A total of 36 competencies are divided into 7 groups:

- A: research skills and techniques
- B: research environment
- C: research management
- D: personal effectiveness
- E: communication skills
- F: networking and teamworking
- G: career management (Research Councils UK, 2001)

Other recent changes in the United Kingdom have included an intensification of the monitoring of progress and a battery of targets, including not only targets for completion, but also a series of timelines for individual students as to what they are expected to have done by when, supported by penalties of various kinds. Taken together, these changes arguably amount to a reconstruction of what a PhD is, with a strong shift embodying an economic rationality in which a PhD is treated as preparation for the world of work in one way or another. There is also an analogous shift in which the role of the university in relation to the PhD is defined through conceptions of productivity and value for money – conceptions which have traditionally been associated with private sector organisations. It is important to recognise that there is an educational as well as an economic rationale for many of these changes, and I genuinely would not want to take a wholly critical or negative approach towards them, but here I am just rehearsing what I – and some of my colleagues – see as some of the risks and costs of some of these changes.

Andy is the pseudonym I have given to a humanities lecturer at a university in the north of England who I interviewed for a research paper on the changing climate of doctoral supervision (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2006). In that interview, Andy expressed a number of misgivings about the transformation in the supervisory relationship that had taken place from the time when he did his own PhD to the time of the interview 20 years later. In reflecting on his own experiences as a PhD student, Andy describes a laissez-faire model of supervision [5] where the student 'paid some fees which entitled [him or her] to some supervision' but it was left to the student whether or not to take up this opportunity, and very often Andy did not because he was busy with other things. However, he did develop a close friendship with his supervisor:

And I would see my supervisor, because we developed a friendship, and on many occasions there was a kind of mutually understood code of politeness, which meant my PhD was never mentioned. And there was clearly no point mentioning it, because I wasn't working on it. And it would have just spoiled the meeting if it was mentioned.

Even though Andy was not always actively working on his PhD, his conversations with his supervisor were about topics such as Jewish law, the Soviet constitution, poetry and ballet. These were not always directly connected with his PhD topic but indicated that, from an academic point of view, the supervisory relationship was far from 'a waste of time'.

One of Andy's main worries about the new officially preferred mode of PhD supervision is its insensitivity to what Nixon (2009, p. 194) has called the 'rich unpredictability of learning'. For example, 10 or 20 years ago it would have been possible for students, a couple of years into their PhD, to decide that they had got things, as Andy puts it, 'completely wrong' and to start again from scratch – and for their supervisor to celebrate that decision as a great leap forward. Whereas

[w]e are in a climate now where ... the constant pressures between supervisors and students ... is just about getting on with it ... and making the most of what you have got. So there is a kind of pressure to produce a text rather than ... to personally explore a domain in a way that you find fulfilling, with an uncertain destination and an uncertain length of travel.

Across the interview as a whole, Andy raises a number of serious concerns about the potentially corrosive effects of the new climate of doctoral study on supervisor–supervisee relationships, on equality of access to doctoral study for students from non-traditional backgrounds, and on the quality of both the doctoral experience and of the doctoral work produced. His concerns about quality are echoed in recently published comments by two of my senior University of London colleagues, Paul Gilroy, Professor of Social Theory at the London School of Economics, and Kevin Sharpe, Professor of Renaissance Studies at Queen Mary College.

In an article published in the *Times Higher Education* magazine, Sharpe (2008, p. 24) argues that the current policy climate means 'many a doctoral thesis falls far short of what we might expect and no longer constitutes a reliable qualification for academia'. In an interview published in the newsletter of the British Sociological Association last year, Paul Gilroy fills out this idea:

It took me eight years to write my thesis. Now people have to write something in three or four years. Otherwise they would be struck off. This produces a generation of ignorant academics who only know their own project, who may be deep in their own project but who are only about an inch wide – they don't know anything else at all and that's the condition of getting the work done. It's all very well training people with a capital T but if you are producing people who are not only ignorant of the wider world, ignorant of how disciplines are developed and historical and social conditions arise and operate outside of their own particular slice of those things, then you're compounding the problem. (Gilroy, interviewed by Farrar, 2007, p. 9)

Both Sharpe's and Gilroy's comments revolve around the irony of reforms that are designed to make doctoral study *more* relevant to work having the perverse consequence that doctoral study becomes *less* relevant, in their eyes, to the development of an academic identity and as a preparation for academic work.[6]

Of course, these rather doom-laden reactions can be seen as overblown or overstated and they need to be countered by more positive accounts, because, as I have already said, it is possible to sketch in many possible benefits from the reform of the design and governance of PhD study, and also because the changes that I am describing are very much open to contestation and resistance. So, for example, within King's, the consultation exercise on a draft statement which defined a PhD in terms of a list of discrete skills produced a useful reframing by colleagues, who suggested an alternative version underpinned by a broad-based conception of scholarly identity including an ethical commitment to the values of scholarship and research.

My own concerns about the changing nature of PhD study and those of Andy which are expressed so sharply in the comments of Sharpe and Gilroy are, in fact, more prosaic and concrete formulations of the critique that Bernstein (2001) mounted of what he called the 'totally pedagogised society' – or TPS for short. Echoing the neo-Marxist critiques I summarised earlier, Bernstein described the TPS as the pedagogic expression of flexible capital. At its heart is the concept of trainability – 'the ability to be taught, the ability to respond effectively to concurrent, subsequent, or intermittent pedagogies' – which is now deemed necessary for individual, institutional and societal survival. The problem with the notion of trainability, as Bernstein saw it, is that it represents an impoverished form of pedagogy, one that fosters atomism and is therefore 'socially empty'. If people are going to be able to make sense of the world and act on it in

meaningful ways, then they need to be inducted into what Bernstein calls 'specialised identities'. Such identities are sustained and nurtured by – and are embedded within – a particular community of practice, and they are characterised by a commitment and dedication to the nature and quality of the work of that community. The specialised identity that is lost is one that cannot be constructed by individuals' 'solitary' efforts at self-improvement. Rather, it is an identity that 'arises out of a particular social order, through relations which the identity enters into with other identities of reciprocal recognition, support and legitimation, and finally through a negotiated *collective purpose*' (Bernstein, 2001, p. 366).

This contrast between specialised but rich collective identities, on the one hand, and socially empty identities on the other is the very contrast that Gilroy is worried about. This is what Andy is also striving to capture when he distinguishes between the open-ended and broad-ranging interactions which nurtured him as a student being supervised and the contemporary expectations upon him to process his students efficiently. Andy is reporting what, in one sense, can be represented as an increase in the success rate of doctoral study but which he feels – and Bernstein's analysis illuminates – might equally be seen as an erosion of a deeper and thicker version of educational success.

### Example 2. Pressures on Parents

I will turn now to my second area of concern, which relates to what I have called 'living to learn', by which I mean the push towards extending the idea that life is about learning and extending the reach of the educational frame of reference both in relation to the totality of the life course and the totality of the person.

As a parent of young children, I cannot help but be aware of the way in which the climate of educational expectation surrounding both young children themselves and their parents has changed in the last 15 years from when I had my first baby to the present when my youngest daughter is in her first few months of infant school. Some of these changes are strikingly analogous to the changing expectations surrounding PhD study. The UK Government has produced the equivalent list, which maps what it calls the 'skill' and 'competence' of babies and toddlers aged 0-3 (Sure Start, 2002).

In order to understand the impact of this list, it is important not just to see the aspects of child development that are included but also the ways in which the list is designed to be used – and indeed has been used – by practitioners. For example, the municipal nursery my children attended when they were babies had to adopt this framework, which is applied very systematically in terms of the way in which the children are observed, measured and reported on to parents. The framework has 4 themes and 16 dimensions, each of which has 4 components, making a total of 64 components. Each of the components is supported by detailed guidance on what to observe and record, conceptions and examples of effective practice, planning and resourcing, and addressing diversity and challenges. For Foucauldian scholars, the framework and the forms of governmentality it embodies represent a perfect textbook example.

The effects of these policy changes on my relationship with the nursery were quite significant. Fifteen years ago, the relationships between the nursery staff and the babies and parents were broadly analogous to extended family relationships but, over time, these relationships have become in many ways more analogous to, or at least overlain with, the kinds of professional relationships that are typical of the formal schooling sector such that, for example, I increasingly received reports that provided very detailed feedback on progress against the 64 yardsticks.

Again, speaking personally, I have very mixed feelings about these changes. In some respects, they represent enhanced professionalism for nursery staff and they have arguably stimulated the staff to rethink their practices and sensitised them to a whole range of child development considerations. On the other hand, I have a clear sense that something may be being lost in this process and that the constant requirement for both staff and parents to be thinking about their babies and toddlers in relation to endless yardsticks risks undercutting something more holistic and authentic and, it seems to me, less oppressive and more joyful about early childhood.[7]

However, in addition to these formal public sector pressures, parents are now bombarded with a constant barrage of enticements and injunctions from private sector organisations with an

interest in turning parents into educators. For example, *Prenatal Music for Life* is a commercial package of CDs (compact discs) and a DVD (digital versatile disc) designed to teach parents to communicate with their prenatal babies using music that has, according to the promotional video [8], been 'specifically created and digitally mixed to teach the children different rhythmic patterns'. Endorsed by Dr F. Rene van de Carr, who is described in the video as 'a world-renowned obstetrician in the field of prenatal stimulation', the package is marketed as a 'gift for life' – 'the perfect gift for you and your baby', which will help you form 'a positive, loving, and teaching relationship with your Child BEFORE Birth and DURING infancy!' The promotional video also informs us that 'prenatal-stimulated babies consistently walk first and talk first'.

Moving on from the prenatal market, there is an even more extensive market for the education of babies. For example, the ThinkBaby website (which is part of the Pampers corporation) promotes numerous products to support the learning of young babies, including the *Brainy Baby* series of DVDs:

Here at ThinkBaby we think the new Brainy Baby DVDs are a great way to give your little genius a head start! ... Titles in the collection include Right Brain which focuses on cognitive skills such as creative thinking and spatial reasoning and Left Brain which concentrates on logic using patterns and numbers.[9]

There is also a large number of websites advertising parenting and baby education classes. One such example is Baby College:

Our Baby College classes introduce you and your baby to fun learning for life. We believe that you are your baby's best teacher ... Our structured programme provides your baby with a complete developmental workout. It helps to build the strong neural pathways that are vital for early brain development and all subsequent learning.[10]

So, conscientious parents are now under commercial pressure to undertake prenatal education of their children, then to purchase all manner of educational gadgets and toys to make them brainy babies, and to enrol themselves and their babies into baby college. These are just some of the many examples of prenatal and post-natal education products that are available, but they helpfully illustrate the ways commercial organisations can appeal to parental care and a parental sense of duty by exploiting the idea of the parent as a teacher along with the idea that we should not miss any opportunity to advance the education of our children in order to make sure they have the best possible start in what these products present as life's competitive race.

Although the nursery that I discussed earlier takes a much more responsible and less crass approach to its work, it is important to see that the framework of yardsticks that has been transmitted through it will inevitably plug into some of the same anxieties and competitive instincts that are more crudely appealed to in these commercial products. To put it starkly, the sorts of policy developments I have reviewed for early years children in the United Kingdom can in part be read as importing the ethos of competitive individualism from the world of work to the world of the infant.

Although arguably, once again, using a rather overblown and doom-laden register, some of my concerns here are very well captured in Illich & Verne's critique as 'permanent education'. Illich & Verne (1974, p. 14) make very useful analogies with processes of medicalisation [11], arguing that just as '[m]edicine has made life the subject of medical care; education makes existence the subject of a study course. Just as suffering has been medicalized, existence has been scholarized'.

Illich & Verne's prediction was that:

The institutionalization of permanent education will transform society into an enormous planet-sized classroom watched over by a few satellites. Only the labels will enable one to distinguish it from an enormous hospital ward, from a planetary mental home and from a penitentiary universe, where education, punishment, medical care and imprisonment are synonymous. (Illich & Verne, 1974, p. 20)

And they went on to argue that 'The educational mega-machine ... ensures that permanent education becomes not the symbol of our unfinished development, but a guarantee of our permanent inadequacy' (pp. 12-13).



Here, Illich & Verne paint a bleak and threatening portrait of education as an aspect of total governance, with individuals subjected to permanent and pervasive surveillance and striving hopelessly for never-ending self-improvement. Although there may be a science-fiction-like quality to these images, they do provide an acute, and therefore arguably quite helpful, expression of the more qualified anxieties that I have reported about the climate of expectation and surveillance that is now commonplace in the UK nursery sector, and is arguably engendered by the commercial pressures to hothouse our babies. For example, their reference to the possibility of 'permanent inadequacy' dramatises some of the anxieties and other drivers that may motivate parents to relate to their babies as constantly in need of additional investments in learning.

In order to express this in more positive terms, I want to use the example of babies and toddlers to argue for the importance of learning-free spaces. That is, I want to stress the value of not thinking about all spaces as spaces in which learning needs to be consciously promoted but rather thinking about them as spaces in which babies and toddlers – and indeed anyone else – can just *be* – hence my title, 'Give Us a Break!'.

Of course, I recognise that no space is learning-free in the sense of being free of opportunities for learning, just as it is equally impossible to smother the space for rich forms of learning in educational settings. The concept of 'learning-free' relates to the idea of trying to liberate people from the logic that has just been rehearsed above and specifically from the idea that they will always be obliged to learn or support the learning of their children. Without taking seriously this particular form of liberation, I see two significant dangers. One is that the permanent requirement to learn can be oppressive both for parents [12] and their children and the other is that, from the point of view of actual learning, the constant pressure to learn is likely to be counterproductive.

### Conclusions

So, in this paper I have sought to do a number of things. I have briefly reviewed the discourses of lifelong and life-wide learning and simplified them into two categories: 'learning to live' and 'living to learn'. I have rehearsed three sociological approaches that help explain, but also critique, these discourses, using – in very simplified terms – the lenses of constantly reinvented selves, flexible economic subjects and the governed soul. And I have used two examples from my own experience and from different moments of the life course, in combination with theoretical resources drawn from Bernstein, Illich and Verne, to set out some personal and theoretical worries about specific manifestations of these discourses.

In the case of 'learning to live', I have tried to capture the threat that rather narrow and arid conceptions of training can pose to learning-rich environments. In the case of 'living to learn', I have tried to capture the potentially corrosive effects of pervasive pressures and expectations surrounding learning and how these might reasonably be experienced as oppressive. Indeed, in both examples, one underlying worry is that the impact of lifelong and life-wide learning discourses may sometimes be counterproductive from an educational point of view.

### Notes

- [1] This article was originally given as a keynote lecture to the European Conference on Educational Research in Gothenburg, Sweden on 10 September 2008. I would like to thank my colleague Alan Cribb for some extremely valuable conversations and detailed comments that fed into the production of this article.
- [2] The 15 quantitative and qualitative indicators of quality fall into four areas: skills, competencies and attitudes; access and participation; resources for lifelong learning; and strategies and system development. They relate to formal, non-formal and informal education spheres and aspire to the 'development of a statistical approach [to] lifelong learning' including 'the remaining fields of learning which are not sufficiently represented in present education statistics' (European Commission, 2002, p. 80).
- [3] For example, Edwards (1997) distinguishes between liberal, market-oriented and postmodern conceptions, and Griffin & Brownhill (2001) distinguish between three models which they call the

cultural values/humanistic model, the futurological/technological model and the democracy/participation/citizenship model.

- [4] For example, as Simon et al (1991, p. 5) remind us, for Dewey, the primary purpose of vocational education 'is the development of such intelligence, initiative, ingenuity, and capacity as shall make workers, as far as possible, masters of their own industrial fate ... The kind of vocational education in which I am interested is not one which will "adapt" workers to the existing industrial regime ... but one which will alter the existing industrial system and ultimately transform it' (Dewey, 1915, p. 412).
- [5] This has some similarities with supervision stories reported by others (see, for example, Delamont et al, 2000; Johnson et al, 2000).
- [6] It is noteworthy, of course, that the scholars reported here work in the humanities and the impact and relevance of these models of researcher training arguably vary considerably according to discipline and field of study.
- [7] Since September 2008 all early years providers in the United Kingdom (including childminders) are required by law to work to a new framework of learning and development requirements which will involve supporting, assessing and reporting on the learning of children *from birth to 5* in relation to 69 early learning goals that children are expected to meet by the age of 5. These are organised under 6 headings: personal, social and emotional development; communication, language and literacy; problem solving, reasoning and numeracy; knowledge and understanding of the world; physical development; and creative development (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008).
- [8] Available at [http://www.prenatalmusic4life.com/Home\\_Page.php](http://www.prenatalmusic4life.com/Home_Page.php)
- [9] Quoted from <http://www.thinkbaby.co.uk/news/article/mps/uan/1026>
- [10] Quoted from <http://www.babycollege.co.uk/index.shtml>
- [11] These are arguably much more often discussed and debated within the health professions than are what Illich & Verne call processes of 'scholarization' within the education professions.
- [12] Indeed, parents are subject to a 'double whammy' as they are permanently obliged both to learn themselves and to support the learning of their children.

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