

A NEOLIBERAL CRITIQUE: CONCEPTUALIZING THE PURPOSE OF SCHOOL

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Abstract

Throughout this manuscript, I discuss the current trend of neoliberalism, privatization, and deregulation within our educational communities and public schools. Throughout this analysis, I examine the ways in which many neoliberal policies aim to takeover public education through such consequences as false meritocracy, high stakes testing, and drastic funding inequities. I argue that we must seek to understand and challenge such policies in order to speak out against ideologies and “reform” movements that frame the purpose of schooling in ways that go against conceptualizing and actualizing it in a democratic and just manner.

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Education in the U.S. has always had a contradictory nature. On the one hand, schools have been primary agents of social control and the reproduction of class, gender, and racial advantages and disadvantages. However, education also had-and continues to have- potentially liberating, egalitarian, and transformative possibilities as well.

- Jean Anyon (2005, p. 167)

Education and society have been inextricably connected to one other since the birth of public schools (Anyon, 2005, 2011; Ayers & Ayers, 2011, Lipman, 2011, Nieto, 2005, Spring, 1988, 1996; Tyack, 2004). One of the salient links between the two has historically been, and continues to be, the role schools play in working to mold the ideal *American*, or what Hinchey (2008) describes as “ a process intended to blend the individuals into one mass, and eventually producing a homogenous standard product” (p. 8). Tyack (2004) and Spring (1996) note that the tension between citizenship and schooling has been an intertwining element within the common school since before the American Revolution. In fact, Tyack (2004) describes a Jeffersonian virtue in which “political homogeneity was not a vice but a virtue” (p. 17).

Presently, many public schools function as institutions that aim to produce, perpetuate, and maintain “worthy” citizens, and do so, in a manner that demands obedience and compliance (Ayers & Ayers, 2011, Hinchey, 2008; Labaree, 1997; Tyack, 2003). Historically as well as in present time, individualism within this context can be considered undemocratic, and thus it becomes necessary to “break the hold of the group” and inculcate the individual to eventually become “Americanized” (Tyack, 2004, p. 34). Although not a novel insight, the school and prison comparison could not be more striking than it is today (Foucault, 1977). As Ayers and Ayers (2011) argue, “ Schools reward conformity and mindless habits of obedience for a reason, and they relentlessly punish deviance with a purpose” (p. 22). Importantly, not *all* schools and children are subjected to such control and standardized school experiences. The majority of schools that conform to this oppressive form of schooling are those that serve children living in poverty, representing both rural and urban communities.

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This manuscript serves as a platform in which one may interrogate how many current classrooms and schools seem to sidestep the *human* component of education, (Beista, 2006, Freire, 1970, 1974; Greene, 1988,) while also demonstrating why it is necessary to deeply examine and question the current practices, “reform” movements, and ideologies that characterize and encompass the tensions surrounding the purpose of public schools. As Ravitch (2103) argues:

Once upon a time, education reformers thought deeply about the relationship between school and society. They thought about child development as the starting point for education. In those days, education reformers recognized the important role of the family in the education of children. Many years ago, education reformers demanded desegregation. They debated how to improve curriculum and instruction and what the curriculum should be. But that was long ago. (p. 18)

What follows is an analysis of neoliberalism and how, through its current attempt to take-over public education, we see such ramifications and consequences as false meritocracy, high stakes testing, and drastic funding inequities found within all too many public schools.

Understanding Neoliberalism and Education

For a definition and contextualization of neoliberalism, I refer to Davies and Bansel (2007) who discuss its emergence in the 1970s and help define it as a means to make “subjects,” or democratic citizens, both more governable and more able to service capital. Spring (2008) adds that neoliberalism is a practice in which government-provided services are privatized and turned over to the forces of the marketplace. Importantly, a neoliberal presence within the context of schools and education puts a premium on individuality, competition, and self-meritocracy. In fact, when considering the purposes of schools within such a perspective, the focus moves away from school as a common good, and instead looks at it as a purely private and individual good and service. Further, success in school is measured through quantifiable means, which only reinforces the notion that public education is objectively categorized rather than being a unique, nuanced, and complex system of teaching and learning.

Through the selling points of individualism and autonomy, neoliberalism is not seen as a dangerous form of governance, as it is successfully crafted to create a false sense accomplishment. Davies and Bansel (2007) state:

A particular feature of neoliberal subjects is that their desires, hopes, ideals and fears have been shaped in such a way that they desire to be morally worthy, responsible individuals, who, as successful entrepreneurs, can produce the best for themselves and their families. (p. 251)

Ultimately, neoliberal policies shun social projects and capitalize on the notion that they are the binary opposite of economically fruitful policies. As such, “Freedom is rearticulated as freedom from want, and is to be gained through self-improvement obtained through individual entrepreneurial activity” (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 252). Not surprisingly, neoliberal policies have serious implications for our current education system.

Apple (2001) discusses the relationship between neoliberalism and education by placing public schools at the epicenter of such policies. Through a neoliberal vision, Apple (2001) describes the education system as a “vast supermarket.” In fact, he goes so far as to argue that “rather than democracy being a *political* concept, it is transformed into a wholly *economic* concept...the entire project of neoliberalism is connected to a larger process of exporting the blame from the decisions of dominant groups on the state and onto poor people” (p. 39). Consequently, the recent direction of education reform (both liberal and conservative) seems to

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hop on the neoliberal bandwagon, without questioning the severe impact it has upon our children, their families, and the community (Moses & Nanna, 2007).

Categorizing a neoliberal restructuring of public education, Lipman (2011) explains:

[This agenda] features mayoral control over school districts, closing ‘failing’ public schools or handing them over to corporate-style ‘turnaround’ organizations, expanding school ‘choice,’ and privately run by publically funded charter schools, weakening teacher unions, and enforcing top-down accountability and incentivized performance targets on schools, classrooms, and teachers. (p. 116)

In this way, a neoliberal restructuring of education is permeated with a deeply racialized, classed, and gendered subtext (Anyon, 2011; Apple, 2001; Au, 2009; Tyack, 2004).

Moving further, Labaree (1997, 2010) recognizes that a neoliberal agenda considers the social mobility factor of schooling to be the most important purpose of our public schools. In essence, “the social mobility approach to schooling argues that education is a commodity, the only purpose of which is to provide individual students with a competitive advantage in the struggle for desirable social positions” (1997, p. 42). Within this framework, schools become the most important vehicle to prepare our children to be productive members of society. Likewise, this model breeds further inequity, in that the better one achieves in school, the more possibilities become available for higher education, the better the job, etc. Additionally, as Labaree (1997) argues, “Schools create educational channels that efficiently carry groups of students toward different locations in the occupational structure” (p. 50).

Taking all of this as a given, it is important not to forget what Anyon (2011) argues in regards to school and our inequitable society. She states, “The economy creates relatively few highly paid positions-making it increasingly less certain that more education will assure that work pays well... or that education will get a person a good job and thereby reduce poverty and inequality” (p. 68-70). For these reasons, one must not be fooled into thinking that by merely being a “successful” student, one will be able to change their economic status within the current societal structure.

Further, a neoliberal agenda often (but not always) works in tandem with the neoconservative belief¹ that schools serve as equalizers, and that they actually level the playing field for *equal opportunity*. Importantly, the way reformers frame many of their arguments, it is not surprising that we see bipartisan support for them (Ravitch, 2013). For example, who can argue with the following goals:

The reformers say they want excellent education for all; they want great teachers; they want to “close the achievement gap”; they want innovation and effectiveness; they want the best of everything for everyone. (Ravitch, p 19)

Essentially, the word “reform” has been coopted to suit the ideology of its members and supporters.

Moving further, McLaren (1989) refers to the “myth” or what Anyon (2011) terms “false meritocracy,” demonstrating how we “live in a culture that stresses the merits of possessive individualism, the autonomous ego, and the individual entrepreneurship” (McLaren, 1989, p. 225). It is this belief that paves the way for “reform” movements such as standardized testing,

¹ Apple (2001) describes neoconservatism as engaging with a romanticized version of the past. For example, he mentions the following policies as demonstrating a neoconservative agenda: A “return” to higher standards, a revivification of the “Western tradition”, and patriotism, among others. Additionally, neoconservatism believes school to be a place that can and does promote equity through a nationalized curriculum, standardized testing, and looking to value added measurement within teacher evaluations.

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merit pay for teachers, as well as any other school improvement that reduces “failure” to the individual, as opposed to seeing such “problems” as “having to do with social and material inequality and collective greed and privilege” (McLaren, 1989, p. 225). Likewise, Berliner (2013) states:

Instead of facing the issues connected with poverty and housing policy, federal and state education policies are attempting to test more frequently, raise the quality of entering teachers; evaluate teachers on their test scores and fire the ones that have students who perform poorly; use incentives for students and teachers; allow untrained adults with college degrees to enter the profession; break teachers unions, and so forth. (p. 5)

Therefore, when we examine educational “reforms,” it is imperative to deeply scrutinize the current trends in neoliberal and privatization policies that are currently saturating our education system. Picower (2011) argues that the way in which neoliberal policies increase accountability systems by focusing on the responsibility of the individual, there is actually a decrease in the quality of education for all students. In fact, schools become places where students are often times subjected to fear, compliance, and conformity.

Additionally, through the fading of public education and a newly privatized form of schooling, Baltodano (2012) contends that neoliberal policies take away the joy of teaching and learning. The result is a lack of creativity, critical thinking, and an articulate public who may contest such a neoliberal vision of society. However, even within this bleak picture of our current state of education, there are many forward thinking, progressive and radical educators who work daily to push back against such harsh and stifling policies.

It is important to recognize that not all education reformers are driven by a capitalist agenda and personal enrichment whose intention is to privatize education. Ravitch (2013) points this out by recognizing that some individuals in the reform camp truly believe that American education is failing and the only way to actually “fix” our current school system is to redesign and revamp our nation’s failing schools. As she notes, “Some sincerely believe they are helping poor black and brown children escape from failing public schools. Some think they are on the side of modernization and innovation” (p. 20). Thus, although this discussion focuses on the former aforementioned “reformers,” who have the ultimate goal of privatization and a neoliberal takeover, not everyone believes that this is the best direction to employ when working towards and debating educational reform.

Appropriately, what follows is a discussion of how a neoliberal presence creates intense contradictions in regards to how one currently understands the purposes of public education.

False Meritocracy and the “Blame Game”

Lipman (2011) talks about neoliberalism and the institutionalization of oppression, in that it is a “process that works its way into the discourses and practices of schools, through the actions of not only elites, but also marginalized and oppressed people acting in conditions not of their own making” (p. 121). For example, we see the practice of students, teachers, families and communities, believing that “failure” is the result of individual action and lack of motivation instead of considering societal and institutional inequities and exclusionary practices.

With this idea in mind, I refer to Alexander (2010) who does not intentionally or directly implicate our educational institutions, but recognizes that our classrooms and schools are intimately related to what goes on in society, and vice versa. Therefore, when Alexander argues that “something akin to a racial caste system currently exists in the United States” (p. 2), we must be aware of the dangerous educational ideologies that encompass too many of our classrooms and schools. Furthermore, as Spring (1996) argues, there is an assumption that the educational system

is fair, and that “the individual is being judged solely on talent demonstrated in school and not on other social factors such as race, religion, dress, and social class” (p. 8).

Interestingly, although Memmi (1965) wrote his famous text *The Colonizer and the Colonized* over fifty years ago, his discussion of internalized oppression and self-blame continue to ring true today as we talk about meritocracy, individualism, and institutionalized oppression; all components of a neoliberal ideology. Memmi (1965) argues that the colonized are not free to choose whether or not they are colonized, and in fact, they begin to internalize and accept their inferior status as truth. He also recognizes that oppression is so institutionalized that the colonized both admire and fear the colonizers, while also placing blame and “failure” upon themselves as opposed to societal factors and marginalization practices.

Ayers and Ayers (2011) connect with this point stating that “Students are struggling to maintain, and to construct, their own identities within an institution that validates White middle-class student discourse as a matter of routine and puts all others into deep conflict” (p. 109). Additionally, as Grady et al. (2012) assert, “Under neoliberalism, those who work hard are those who ultimately succeed in advancing to the arenas of higher education while those who fail are deemed lazy and only have themselves to blame” (p. 988). Consequently, we see the institutionalization of inferiority that so often manifests itself within many of our students, classrooms and schools.

Even more damaging, and what we see all too often when talking about “failing schools” is what Memmi (1965) refers to as the “mark of the plural.” He talks about the depersonalization of the colonized, stating “The colonized is never characterized in an individual manner; he is entitled only to drown in an anonymous collectivity” (p. 85). Albeit masked in such rhetoric as “underperforming and high needs schools,” the message rings loud and clear... “those” children are the ones who need to be *helped, reformed, and fixed*. This ideology seems to stem from the historical component of education which, overtime, has differed from the role of the schoolhouse acting as an institution where everyone had equal education (e.g. 19th century), to one where the school is responsible for identifying certain individuals and their “abilities” (e.g. 20th century and current day) (Spring, 1996).

The current language surrounding educational reform relies heavily on the American dream-myth – that working hard will undoubtedly result in success and economic growth. However, as Berliner (2013) states, “The *general* case is that poor people stay poor and that teachers and schools serving impoverished youth do not often succeed in changing the life chances for their students” (p. 1). Berliner moves further in arguing that the current wave of reform and policy initiatives (read neoliberal agenda) “often end up alienating the youth and families we most want to help, while simultaneously burdening teachers with demands for success that are beyond their capabilities” (p. 2).

This brings us back to the notion that the “American-dream,” in actuality, is a fallacy. The warped perception of reality that underlies most reform movements is misguided and continues to perpetuate societal inequalities. As Anyon (2011) so eloquently remarks, “Attempting to fix an inner city school without fixing the neighborhood it is in is like trying to clean the air on one side of a screen door” (p. 50). Yet, the “reforms” keep pouring in, and the school environment continues to be seeped within the mess and chaos of privatization and corporate take-over.

Further inequity and high stakes testing²

² I refer to “high- stakes testing” as defined by Au (2009) “ 1) Standardized testing as the technology and tool/instrument used for measurement, and 2) Educational policy erected around the standardized test results that usually attaches consequences to those results thereby making such tests “high –stakes.”

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Spring (1996) talks about the role schools play in social reproduction that he defines as the way in which schools reproduce and perpetuate the social-class structure of society. This idea is manifested in the way schools receive state and federal funding, the turnover rate of teachers and principals, and the extra-curricular activities that schools either provide, or need to eliminate altogether (Berliner, 2013). Within the current craze of accountability, inequitable school resources, and drastic differences between how schools teach and treat their students, we see draconian measures that seem to only be implemented in schools that serve “other people’s children” (Delpit, 2006; Hinchey, 2008). Kozol (2005) painstakingly describes this reality as:

A relentless emphasis on raising test scores, rigid policies of non-promotion and non-graduation, a new empiricism and the imposition of unusually detailed lists of named and numbered "outcomes" for each isolated parcel of instruction, and often times fanatical insistence upon uniformity in teachers' management of time, an openly conceded emulation of the rigorous approaches of the military, and a frequent use of terminology that comes out of the world of industry and commerce-these are just a few of the familiar aspects of these new adaptive strategies. (p. 268)

We must ask ourselves, how is it acceptable for certain schools to function in such a manner as to continuously reproduce socio-educational inequalities that actually seem to become increasingly dire each year?

Grady, et al. (2012) refer back to a neoliberal ideology in explaining this phenomenon, in that “the focus [of such policies and practices] remains riveted on high stakes testing which continually institutionalizes formalized educational inequality and widens disparities” (p.988). In its most obvious form, Hinchey (2008) discusses how a neoliberal ideology is connected to high stakes testing by the way in which corporations benefit from the profits they make from the tests themselves. For example, we see textbook companies creating and recreating curriculum and test preparation that gets adopted by districts, schools and private tutoring companies. Through this, teaching often becomes reduced to scripted curricula which are most often seen in schools that become forced to show student growth via standardized test scores. Au (2009) comments:

Contrary to the explicitly stated policy goal of leaving no child behind, the research body suggests that educational policies constructed around high-stakes, standardized testing increase achievement gaps in education rather than close them, and thus contribute to increased educational inequality. (p. 65)

Furthermore, as Moses and Nanna (2007) argue, “High stakes testing reforms, driven as they are by political and cultural ideology and concerns for efficiency and economic productivity, serve to impede the development of *real* equality of educational opportunity, particularly for the least advantaged students” (p. 56). Thus, we see once again, the hidden elements behind policies that promise to equalize education and opportunity, but in actuality, have the opposite effect and promote even further inequity (Au, 2009).

Au (2007, 2009) digs deeper within this discussion by noting the influence that corporations have on schools in regards to advancing their specific ideological and organization forms associated with capitalist production. For example, just like in the business community, “failing” businesses will be removed and new, better and highly effective ones will come in as replacements. Similarly, the movement and policies surrounding school choice, merit pay, and curricular control all point in the same direction, as “failure” either equates to school closure or loss of job.

Furthermore, the pressure to perform well on such high-stakes tests bodes well for private tutoring companies because many students and families often search for outside help and support in order to help their children perform well on such tests. According to Moses and Nanna (2007):

The number of private high schools and tutoring services aimed at helping students prepare for high stakes tests (or providing an alternative educational pathway for those failing high stakes exams) is on the rise. Government endorsement of corporate ventures either through direct capital support or public policy is certainly nothing new, and the business is most likely welcome in the testing industry. (p. 61)

Again, such behavior demonstrates the move towards privatization and a deregulation of public education. (Apple, 2001; Au, 2007; Lipman, 2001).

As mentioned earlier, such neoliberal and neoconservative policies (here referring to high-stakes testing) are saturated with class, racial and gender bias, in that public schools serving urban African American, Latino, and other communities of color, are driven by a minimalist curriculum of preparing for standardized tests (Lipman, 2011). Au (2009) also describes racist and classist practices in the way standardized tests are disaggregated, as to make it easier to see which students, schools, and communities are not performing well. He further states that because standardized tests are constructed in ways that a percentage of students will perform poorly so comparisons can be made, it seems all too coincidental that “certain” schools consistently underperform on such tests. In fact, Berliner (2013) claims:

The USA appears to have social and educational policies that end up limiting the numbers of poor youth who can excel on tests of academic ability...the political power of a neighborhood and local property tax rates have allowed for apartheid-like systems of schooling to develop in our country. (p.6)

Such an intense focus of standardized testing has had, and continues to have, grave consequences for students, teachers, and the overall school community. Grady et al. (2012) state, “A test-driven education nonetheless, constrains teachers’ and students’ ability to develop critical approaches to knowledge. Since they become consumed with teaching-to-the-test their job security is becoming increasingly linked to student test results” (p. 988).

I, of course, can refer to what Haberman (1991) calls the *pedagogy of poverty*, in that the curriculum and teaching practices not only disempower students and teachers alike, but they almost make everyone involved in the education process immune to any teaching that could potentially include critical thinking or creative engagement. As a consequence, anything that falls outside the testing box is excluded from the classroom and school community, which often means multicultural and anti-racist curriculum and perspectives (Au, 2009). However, we must again recognize those educators, schools, and students who work against this narrative and challenge the status quo whenever possible.³

Conclusion

As I have discussed throughout this manuscript, there are many intersecting and different ideas and policies as to how one understands the purpose of public schools, as well as their relationship to neoliberal policies and “reforms” that aim to privatize public education. Unfortunately, our students are the ones who are most affected by such reforms, as they are the pawns and “projects” in which success is measured. Thus, until such neoliberal policies and projects are deeply scrutinized and actively challenged, there will continue to be a perpetuation of inequitable and unjust education for too many students, families, and communities.

³ In January 2013 in Seattle, WA, teachers and students in the Seattle Public Schools District successfully boycotted the Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) testing, arguing that it was not useful for students, nor was it an appropriate measuring tool for either students or teachers.

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It is important not to be fatalistic in understanding, challenging, and calling out such policies and “reform” movements. Instead, this knowledge must be used and pushed forward, mobilized, and aimed at dismantling such systems beginning at the micro-level of the classrooms, and eventually moving into the greater systems locally, nationally, and internationally. As Apple (2007) states, “Democratic educators seek not simply to lessen the harshness of social inequities in school, but to change the conditions that create them. For this reason, they tie their understanding of undemocratic practices inside the school to larger conditions on the outside” (p. 13). Teachers, students, families, community members, and activists all have the potential and power to work against such a neoliberal ideology. It takes collective action, grassroots movements and voices from the ground to expose this agenda and demonstrate that these policies are not acceptable and only further aim to rupture communities and reinforce economic and social disparities. The work will be difficult, but I believe therein lies the potential for a reconceptualization of the purposes of schools so that all students have access to a just, equitable and democratic education.

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