
Social Justice and Resisting Neoliberal Education Reform in the USA

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ABSTRACT Efforts to reform public education along free-market, corporate-styled models have swept across many nations. In the USA these reforms have included an intense focus on the use of high-stakes, standardized tests to quantify students, teachers, and schools for market comparisons, the deprofessionalization of teaching, and the establishment of deregulated for-profit and non-profit charter schools (equivalent to the United Kingdom's 'academies'). These trends aim to challenge teachers' unions, gain access to public school monies, and restructure schools in a competitive market and at the same time erode autonomy in education. However, these corporate education reforms in the USA have met resistance from multiple contexts and in a variety of forms. After briefly providing an overview of these corporate reforms and their impacts in the USA, this article takes up some of the ways that educators, parents, and communities in the USA have organized against the encroachment of neoliberal, corporate reform in public education policy and practice.

Introduction

Efforts to reform public education along free-market, corporate-styled models have swept across many nations (Verger et al, 2016). However, the imposition of these corporate-styled education reforms in the USA has met resistance from multiple contexts and has developed in a variety of forms. After briefly providing an overview of these corporate reforms and their impacts in the USA, this article takes up some of the ways that educators, parents, and communities in the USA have organized against the encroachment of neoliberal logic in public education policy and practice. More specifically, this article will look at examples of resistance to neoliberal corporate education reform through organizing for equity, social justice, and autonomy offered by teachers, students, and parents in Seattle, Washington and the pedagogic work done by the group *Rethinking Schools*.

Neoliberal Education Reform

Neoliberalism is a paradigm that implicates ideology, policy, and economy, and operates on the assumption that human progress and development is best served through economic systems based on free trade, deregulation of markets, and individual, entrepreneurial freedom (Harvey, 2007). As Lipman (2011) explains, neoliberalism is:

An ensemble of economic and social policies, forms of governance, and discourse of ideologies that promote self-interest, unrestricted flows of capital, deep reductions in the cost of labor, and sharp retrenchment of the public sphere. Neoliberals champion privatization of social goods and withdrawal of government from provision for social welfare on the premise that competitive markets are more effective and efficient. (p. 6)

Further, the neoliberal commitment to market mechanisms grows out of a faith that the market distributes resources in a fair, just, and meritorious manner, with neoliberal education reformers in the USA and elsewhere advocating for a set of market-based reforms that they presume will breed innovation and improve systems of public education (Apple, 2005; Au, 2016). Bill Gates Jr (2009), as he was attempting to build support for a set of national standards called the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in the USA, illustrates the neoliberal educational paradigm well in asserting that:

When the tests are aligned to the common standards, the curriculum will line up as well – and that will unleash powerful market forces in the service of better teaching. For the first time, there will be a large base of customers eager to buy products that can help every kid learn and every teacher get better. (n.p.)

The application of neoliberalism to public education has resulted in a constellation of policies and practices, most of which seek to financialize educational resources through deregulation, incentivizing, and privatization of delivery of services (Fabricant & Fine, 2013). This restructuring of public education takes on particular policy forms that include, among others, the reconstruction of public education as a competitive market through charter schools and voucher programs, the deregulation of educational labor practices, including challenges to teacher unions and the subversion of university-based teacher education programs. Furthermore, there has been a marked increase in the use of high-stakes, standardized testing as a market metric for evaluating schools, teachers, and students, and the reliance on non-democratic, unelected bodies (e.g. philanthropies, non-governmental organizations, for-profit organizations) to determine and implement education policy (Apple, 2006; Lipman, 2011; Fabricant & Fine, 2013; Au & Ferrare, 2015). In a process that Harvey (2007, p. 74) refers to as 'accumulation by dispossession', the neoliberal project in education seeks to transfer public monies to private, profit-making firms through the production and consumption of a bevy of products such as

new assessments, textbooks and classroom materials aligned to assessments, and online learning platforms, producing and disseminating research data in an attempt to access the hundreds of billions of dollars being put towards public education (Fabricant & Fine, 2013).

Recent research has shown that the neoliberal project has failed to improve public education in the USA and has worked against social justice and educational autonomy (Fabricant & Fine, 2013). The focus on high-stakes, standardized test data as the basic metric for the neoliberal educational market has failed to improve test scores generally, and has not ameliorated race and class based educational inequality in the USA (National Research Council, 2011). Charter schools (akin to the deregulated 'academies' of the United Kingdom) on the whole have not been proven to outperform regular public schools in terms of achievement, and they have been racked with financial scandals, sudden closings, discipline problems, and discriminatory entrance requirements (Miron et al, 2010; Center for Research on Education Outcomes [CREDO], 2013; Welner, 2013; Center for Popular Democracy & Integrity in Education, 2014). Philanthropist billionaires like Bill Gates Jr, the Walton family, and Eli Broad have been allowed to use their considerable financial resources to exert a tremendous amount of influence on federal education policy and local classroom practices (Barkan, 2011; Au & Lubienski, 2016), with no accountability to the public (Ravitch, 2013). University-based teacher credential programs have come under assault through federal education policy and the support of quick-credentialing programs like Teach For America (Zeichner, 2015), and in many places teachers' unions have come under direct assault from the state (Compton & Weiner, 2008). However, the failure of the neoliberal, corporate reform agenda for public education has bolstered the case for critics and contributed to pockets of popular resistance devoted to promoting social justice and autonomy in education.

Popular Resistance to Neoliberal Education Reform in the USA

Despite the substantial forces aligned in the promotion of neoliberal education reform (Apple, 2005), it is important to understand that teachers, students, and parents have mounted significant resistance, both big and small, to the corporate agenda. For instance, there are growing networks of teachers and community activists sharing resources and promoting ways to teach for equity and social justice in their schools and communities. In San Francisco, Teachers 4 Social Justice (2016) has been gathering annually for well over 15 years with conference attendance topping 1600 participants. The Pacific Northwest region of the USA sponsors a similar Northwest Annual Teaching for Social Justice (2016) conference that draws over 1200 attendees. Similar conferences exist in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (Educators Network for Social Justice, 2016), New York (New York Collective of Radical Educators, 2016), and Chicago (Teachers for Social Justice, 2016). In all of these spaces, and others not mentioned here,

people are gathering, creating alliances, and building resources that push directly against the neoliberal corporate reform agenda in the USA. Further, all of these spaces promote a politics of social justice and offer opportunities for educators to share liberating practices that encourage acting autonomously of state-mandated reforms. In what follows I will provide two more detailed examples through the work done by Rethinking Schools and recent organizing efforts in Seattle, Washington.

One example of critical resistance to neoliberal corporate education reform can be found in the teacher and community activism in Seattle, Washington, where in January 2013 the teachers at Garfield High School informed the world that they refused to administer the Measure of Academic Progress (MAP), a district-mandated high-stakes, standardized test. Local support for this boycott grew immediately, as the Garfield Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA) officially endorsed the boycott. Garfield student government leaders vocalized support for their teachers. Other schools in the district joined the boycott. Activists in the teachers' union, the Seattle Education Association, lent their support. The Seattle National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) also endorsed the test boycott (Hagopian, 2014a). Support for Garfield's teachers also began to flood in from national corners. Teachers in Hawaii expressed their solidarity in pictures and messages. Teachers in Berkeley, Portland, Chicago, and elsewhere took local actions and sent in letters of support. Teachers in Florida had pizza delivered to their colleagues at Garfield High. Leadership of both of the national teachers' unions in the USA sent letters of support to the Garfield teachers (Hagopian, 2014a). Additionally, over 100 scholars from universities around the country signed a petition expressing their solidarity with and support of the Garfield MAP test boycott (Rethinking Schools, 2013).

Students and parents then became active as well. The Garfield PTSA circulated a flyer informing parents of their rights to opt their children out of the MAP testing, and dozens of parents sent letters to the school stating that they were not allowing their children to take the test. Students made their own flyer telling their peers that they did not have to take the MAP test. On test day, many Garfield students performed impromptu sit-ins by refusing to go to the library to be tested. Other students went to the library to take the test but sabotaged their scores by rushing through answers so fast that the computers automatically registered their exams as invalid (Hagopian, 2014a). The combined resistance of teachers, the student body government, the Black Student Union, parents, scholars from around the country, civil rights leaders, and colleagues from around the city defeated the MAP test at Garfield – which was officially made optional by the Seattle School District for the following academic year.

Although the Garfield/Seattle MAP test boycott was a singular event, it was a watershed moment for the national movement against high-stakes, standardized testing. In the years since there have been large protests by students in places like Santa Fe, New Mexico and Long Island, New York, and

massive opt-out numbers in New York State (200,000 in 2015) and Washington State (over 60,000 in 2015), among others (Hagopian, 2015; Foster, 2016). In Providence, Rhode Island, students in the Providence Student Union walked the streets dressed as zombies to illustrate how high-stakes testing was killing their education and numbing their minds (McKay et al, 2014). In Portland, Oregon, the Portland Student Union organized a successful student walkout after struggling with the district over the improper use of high-stakes tests in their schools (Garcia, 2014). New York City parent and public school teacher, Jia Lee, tells the story of how she organized with her community at the Salt of the Earth School to lead an opt-out movement and make a public protest to the New York City schools chancellor, a protest which spread to other schools like the Brooklyn New School (Hagopian, 2014b). Teacher Sarah Chambers (2014) relays the story of how she and her colleagues at Saucedo Academy in south-west Chicago led a successful boycott of their state exam, the ISAT. Also in Chicago, parents held a 'play-in' at the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) headquarters, where they and their children settled down in the CPS lobby to play in protest at how high-stakes testing was taking play and recess out of the earlier grades and negatively impacting their children's education (Roberts, 2014). Dao Tran (2014), a parent at Castle Bridge School in New York City, helped organize a successful high-stakes test opt out and boycott movement at her school.

Another example of education organizing for social justice in the face of unjust corporate education reforms comes in the form of Rethinking Schools (2016), a small, non-profit magazine and publishing house that started in Milwaukee, Wisconsin almost 30 years ago when a group of teachers, parents, and community activists gathered to work on issues of anti-racism, teacher autonomy from unjust district mandates, and school resources in their city. Since then Rethinking Schools has grown to publish a quarterly magazine, a website and multiple books, all aimed at getting concrete resources for teaching for social justice, as well as critical perspectives on education policy, into the hands of teachers and community members (Levine & Au, 2013). Rethinking Schools' reach has been significant, with some curriculum collections, such as *Rethinking Columbus* (Bigelow & Peterson, 1998), selling in the hundreds of thousands of copies to teachers, teacher education students, and community educators (Levine & Au, 2013). As just one example among many possible ones, I will highlight Rethinking Schools' role in pushing back against the corporate support of charter schools in the USA.

In September 2010, the documentary *Waiting for Superman* (Guggenheim, 2010) was released to much critical acclaim. In his documentary, director Guggenheim critiques US public education through the stories of students seeking entrance into charter schools in various regions of the country. Corporate reformers lauded *Waiting for Superman* because its criticism implicated teacher unions and teachers themselves as the main obstacle to student success, while also endorsing high-stakes testing and top-down reforms. *Waiting for Superman* subsequently asserted that charter schools were the solution to ending

educational inequality in the USA. Publishing in the pages of *Rethinking Schools*, former *Rethinking Schools*' editor Barbara Miner (2010) subsequently documented how wealthy philanthropists, corporations, and foundations bankrolled and promoted the film in a bipartisan alliance that, 'unites 20th century conservatives closely aligned with the Republican Party who made the bulk of their money before the dawn of the digital era, and 21st century billionaires more loosely aligned with the Democratic Party who generally made their fortunes through digitally based technology' (p. 2).

In response to the mass media campaign supporting *Waiting for Superman* (Guggenheim, 2010), *Rethinking Schools*, NOT Waiting for Superman (NWS), a website and a Facebook page aimed to 'talk back to the film and support efforts by teachers, students, and parents to improve and preserve public education' (*Rethinking Schools*, 2010). From September to December 2010, the NWS website had over 50,000 new individual visitors to the site, over 80,000 total visits, and over 1,100,000 total hits. The NWS website added almost 60,000 new individual visitors, 116,000 total visits, and over 1,100,000 total hits in 2011 (Karp, 2012). While not nearly as totalizing as the mainstream media campaign in support of *Waiting for Superman* (Guggenheim, 2010), *Rethinking Schools*' (2010) NOT Waiting for Superman efforts offered a site of resistance to critically educate hundreds of thousands of people around the USA with regard to both the problems with charter schools generally, and the misinformation contained within the movie itself.

Conclusion

The examples of the resistance to the neoliberal corporate education reform agenda in the USA offered by the test boycott and *Rethinking Schools* all illustrate this Special Issue's themes of social justice, autonomy, and alternative education. Neoliberal policies in education have exacerbated race and economic class inequalities in particular. Resistance to these policies often aims to challenge these inequalities in the name of social justice. In the test boycotts in the USA, teachers, parents, and students have resisted testing policies that they feel have done damage to their schools and the system of public education more generally. Further, the test resistance is fundamentally an assertion of autonomy against state-sanctioned control of education, since the tests have become the lever for forcing free market reforms onto schools and communities. Additionally, implicit in the test resistance is a call for alternative forms of assessment and education, even if those forms are not yet fully articulated. The *Rethinking Schools* example similarly illustrates the themes of social justice, autonomy, and alternative education. In their capacity as a publisher that reaches a popular audience, *Rethinking Schools* both publicly challenged an unjust, neoliberal education reform and played a direct role in educating the public. In this way, *Rethinking Schools* articulated a politics of social justice, promoted ideological autonomy from the hegemonic corporate education

reform agenda, and embraced a vision of un-institutionalized, popular education aimed at developing critical consciousness among the public.

It is true that the forces of neoliberal, corporate education reform have swept across many nations, as public education has been increasingly marketized in ways that increase the profits of private industry while also challenging the very existence of education as a public institution (Fabricant & Fine, 2013; Verger et al, 2016). However, it is equally true that, as has been the case in the USA and in many places around the globe, teachers, students, and community members have organized against these reforms in a broad attempt to reclaim public education in the name of a democratic commitment to local communities. Parents in the United Kingdom are openly talking of boycotting schools because of the intense pressures placed on their children by high-stakes testing and the neoliberal focus on competition (Rose, 2016). Teachers in Oaxaca, Mexico have engaged in massive protests against the implementation of neoliberal education reforms there, where state police have shot and killed teacher-protestors (Stockwell, 2016). These resistances, large and small are critically important because the act of resistance itself, in the face of repressive and damaging education reforms, not only grows out of a commitment to social justice and autonomy, it also forces us to envision and articulate alternative, progressive, and democratic models of public education.

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Wayne Au

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