Neoliberalizing Educational Reform

America’s Quest for Profitable Market-Colonies and the Undoing of Public Good

Keith M. Sturges (Ed.)

“In this era, when ‘commonsense’ in educational discourse is so deeply framed by neoliberalism, we must better understand both the uniquely situated and the insidiously interconnected nature of so-called reforms. Thank you to Keith M. Sturges and colleagues for illuminating exactly this in their important and hard-hitting new book that reveals not merely how neoliberal reforms are designed to reinforce inequity, but also how the contradictions within provide ample opportunity to collectivize and act with hope.”

– Kevin Kumashiro, author of Bad Teacher!: How Blaming Teachers Distorts the Bigger Picture

“In this important volume, editor Keith M. Sturges has taken the most useful discussions of neoliberalism and – with great precision, clarity and utility – seen them applied to the education arena. Over 13 chapters, leading education thinkers lay bare sets of realities that the broader public, school administrators, and policy makers would do well to fully understand. These range from the impact of neoliberal thinking upon chartering, parent involvement, teacher training, school climate, funding and more. I’ll be using the chapters in this text in a variety of ways. They’ll inform conversations with local, state and federal policy makers, and inform conversations with school leaders and district leaders. I’ll also be assigning the text in my graduate seminar on education policy. Finally, the chapters will inform several lectures in my undergraduate class on ‘The Promise and Peril of Public Education.’ What a gem of a volume!”

– Kevin Michael Foster, Executive Director, The Institute for Community, University and School Partnerships (ICUSP)
Neoliberalizing Educational Reform
Scope:

Bold Visions in Educational Research is international in scope and includes books from two areas: teaching and learning to teach and research methods in education. Each area contains multi-authored handbooks of approximately 200,000 words and monographs (authored and edited collections) of approximately 130,000 words. All books are scholarly, written to engage specified readers and catalyze changes in policies and practices. Defining characteristics of books in the series are their explicit uses of theory and associated methodologies to address important problems. We invite books from across a theoretical and methodological spectrum from scholars employing quantitative, statistical, experimental, ethnographic, semiotic, hermeneutic, historical, ethnomet hodological, phenomenological, case studies, action, cultural studies, content analysis, rhetorical, deconstructive, critical, literary, aesthetic and other research methods.

Books on teaching and learning to teach focus on any of the curriculum areas (e.g., literacy, science, mathematics, social science), in and out of school settings, and points along the age continuum (pre K to adult). The purpose of books on research methods in education is not to present generalized and abstract procedures but to show how research is undertaken, highlighting the particulars that pertain to a study. Each book brings to the foreground those details that must be considered at every step on the way to doing a good study. The goal is not to show how generalizable methods are but to present rich descriptions to show how research is enacted. The books focus on methodology, within a context of substantive results so that methods, theory, and the processes leading to empirical analyses and outcomes are juxtaposed. In this way method is not reified, but is explored within well-described contexts and the emergent research outcomes. Three illustrative examples of books are those that allow proponents of particular perspectives to interact and debate, comprehensive handbooks where leading scholars explore particular genres of inquiry in detail, and introductory texts to particular educational research methods/issues of interest to novice researchers.
Neoliberalizing Educational Reform

America’s Quest for Profitable Market-Colonies and the Undoing of Public Good

Foreword by Antonia Darder

Edited by

Keith M. Sturges
This book is dedicated to all the people who have committed themselves to improving education, not as a profit-making endeavour, but as an imperative to the production of a civic society.
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The fundamental tasks of educators is to make sure that the future points the way to a more socially just world, a world in which critique and possibility—in conjunction with the values of reason, freedom and equality—function to alter the grounds upon which life is lived. (Henry Giroux, 2010)

Over the last three decades, neoliberal policies and practices have deeply transformed the landscape of education in the United States and abroad. This has resulted in staggering changes to state and national educational policy debates regarding the curriculum, the preparation of teachers, educational leadership, and conditions of accountability under which all students are expected to achieve academically. The greatest consequence has been a crippling of the public educational system through a profound contempt for public education, culminating with the hostile takeover of schools deemed “failing,” according to matrices conveniently put in place by those leading the movement to privatize education. Yet, amid the wreckage of aggressive neoliberal policies and practices, there also has been an absence of a coherent political vision of struggle on the ground to counter the massive assault on public education.

True to neoliberal form, education has been further fragmented, ahistoricized, instrumentalized, and depoliticized by economistic logic that betrays the very essence of democratic life. Instead of a public good open to all, education has been transfigured into a private good—a market commodity that can easily be controlled, bartered, and sold, without transparency or substantive regulation. Underlying this political decimation of public education has been a ruthless aim to solidify the role of schools, in preparing workers to faithfully meet the demands of capital. Even more disconcerting, as E. Wayne Ross and Richard Gibson (2006) argue in *Education and Neoliberal Reform*, “Neoliberalism is embraced by parties across the political spectrum, from right to left, in that the interests of wealthy investors and large corporations define social and economic policy. The free market, private enterprise, consumer choice, entrepreneurial initiative, deleterious effects of government regulation, and so on, are the tenets of a neoliberalism. Indeed, the corporate-controlled media spin would have the public believe that the economic consequences of neoliberal economic policy, which serves the interests of the wealthy elite, is good for everyone” (p. 2).
NEOLIBERAL MULTICULTURALISM

In the “flat world” of neoliberal educational policies, issues of difference and democracy have been expediently whittled away, so that decades of civil rights efforts to confront racism, poverty, and other forms of material inequalities and social exclusions are now readily dismissed as irrelevant to the present educational enterprise. Instead, the emphasis is placed upon privatization schemes that have uncompromisingly turned education into a tool for profit, whether this be in the form of new educational entrepreneurs who have carved a place for themselves by establishing charter management organizations; private efforts to create non-traditional teacher preparation programs that promise quick movement through an already insufficient curriculum; superintendents whose primary function is that of corporatizing educational life; or market profiteers that benefit hugely from neoliberal educational reform measures by peddling course materials, testing paraphernalia, and textbooks that support these aims.

The current conservative encroachment into education, however, is not a new phenomenon, but rather the current face of the larger capitalist enterprise. As such, neoliberal educational reform must be properly understood as an extension of the greater hegemonic apparatus of the capitalist state. This to say, it is bred through what Antonio Gramsci (1971) termed hegemony, where “spontaneous consent is given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group.” In the educational arena, neoliberal policies immerged furiously and persistently on the heels of the 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report. In response to one of its basic tenets—schools should function as economic engines for the national economy—an unbridled process of educational privatization burst like hellfire on the scene, while mean-spirited rhetoric of failing public schools tore asunder progressive educational efforts that had barely begun to take hold. Accordingly, Reagan and his cronies went after public education with a vengeance, resurrecting exponentially past conservative accountability discourses of the 60s and 70s and former political tactics employed to disrupt the progress of the labor movement and other growing identity movements of the time.

Of course, rather than to attack progressive efforts by way of simply brute force, the power of the state apparatus was effectively deployed with the advancement of an economic Darwinism materialized through social reform measures that well-protected and bolstered neoliberal financial imperatives. In accordance, the safety net of the welfare state established by earlier Keynesian-inspired policies to contend with the downside of capitalism were quickly eroded, while simultaneously blatant corporate deregulation flourished. The result was the astonishing economic boom of the late 1990s that rivaled any previous economic era—a boom that simultaneously triggered a staggering wealth gap between the rich and the poor. In fact, lopsided wealth ratios today are the largest recorded, since the federal government began publishing such data a quarter century ago (Domhoff, 2013). Moreover, neoliberal financial antics of the mortgage industry, for instance, led to gross economic decline...
particularly among working class communities of color. The unprecedented loss of homes and property fueled by the foreclosure crisis sent black and brown net worth to an all-time low. The lack of jobs and other financial resources has made it that much harder for our communities to recover and economist predict that it will take at least a full generation before we can regain what was lost in the last decade (Henry et al., 2013).

Despite this devastation, community concerns related to cultural and economic difference have been readily disarticulated from educational debates, neutralized by a hard-hitting meritocracy of accountability. In the process, an entrenched instrumental ideology of achievement smugly justifies the neoliberal disregard for difference, ignoring larger historical concerns of class, culture, language, and educational inequalities. That is, unless these are in sync with the tenets of a neoliberal multiculturalism—where racialized differences are indeed acknowledged and even celebrated based on an ethos of self-reliance, individualism, and competition, yet devoid of any genuine opportunity for participation or decision-making power; while simultaneously discourses and social practices that call for collective social action and fundamental structural change are consistently undermined (Darder, 2012b).

NEOLIBERAL REFORM AND THE CAPITALIST STATE

In sync with aggressive financial policies to intensify the concentration of wealth, a slew of anti-progressive initiatives have emerged since the 1990s that, in particular, targeted workers’ rights, immigrant rights, language rights, and educational rights in the US. Through an unrelenting hegemonic culture of rampant greed and the indiscriminate delimiting of our humanity, a politics of social equality and public responsibility were systematically eroded away. The politics of privatization that undergird neoliberal reforms effectively maximized the power and control of health management organizations, supported voucher and charter school initiatives, opened the path to unprecedented public surveillance of the population, intensified military action abroad and recruiting efforts on school campuses, and established the largest prison industrial complex in the world. In fact from 1989 to 2010, the prison population increased by a staggering 77% (Mallik-Kane et al., 2012), which resulted in the overwhelming incarceration of poor working class men and women of color.

Neoliberal educational reforms are entrenched in the interests of the capitalist state and, more specifically, the political interests of the wealthy and powerful. With this in mind, it is not surprising that just as educational reform efforts of the civil rights era began to reap some promising outcomes in the late 1970s and early 80s, with improvement in educational outcomes for the most impoverished communities and an increase in college and university attendance by historically underrepresented student populations, the conservative antics of the Right revived their bitter campaign to discredit progressive educational efforts, advance the privatization movement, and usher in some of the most Draconian accountability measures in the history of
A. DARDER

US education. This, in turn, led to the most expansive national high-stakes testing campaign ever, aggressively solidified by the federal passage of *No Child Left Behind* by the Bush administration in 2001 and its transmutation to *Race to the Top* (RTTT) by the Obama administration in 2009.

These neoliberal educational reforms resulted in the pervasive commodification and instrumentalization of education, along with the unparalleled take-over of “low-performing” schools. This phenomenon was well illustrated by the brutal antagonism against public education by the privatization movement in New Orleans, following the widespread wreckage of hurricane Katrina. Today, the city is publically touted as the “home to the nation’s first all charter school district” (Mullins, 2014). This hostile takeover in New Orleans and a sea of schools across the country has placed the education of poor working class children of color on the neoliberal auction block, with little substantive concern for larger political questions of cultural difference, social equality, nor economic justice. The consequence has been the erosion of public education as a legitimate public space for democratic formation and genuine civic engagement. Similarly, the potential of public education as a legitimate site of struggle for the forging of culturally democratic life across the nation has been overwhelmingly trampled.

COUNTERING THE LOGIC OF THE MARKET PLACE

What has also been made glaringly obvious over the last several decades by the consequences of neoliberal policies in education—including the closing of schools in the most vulnerable neighborhoods, the mass firing of teachers, and growing reform efforts toward the rigid standardization of knowledge—is that educational justice cannot echo the logic of the market place and educational success cannot be reduced to an efficiency language of quantification and expediency, which strips away our humanity from the process of teaching and learning. As such, we cannot ignore that the logic of the marketplace has effectively normalized racialized and class stratifications, through the dominant values and beliefs proliferated fervently by the culture industry (Darder, 2012a)—the same values and beliefs that inform hegemonic schooling or what Paulo Freire (1971) called *banking education*. In the process, “dominated by pedagogies that are utterly instrumental, geared toward memorization, conformity and high-stakes test taking, public schools have become intellectual dead zones and punishment centers as far removed from teaching civic values and expanding the imaginations of students as one can imagine (Giroux, 2010).

Similarly, a bootstrap and victim-blaming ideology of deficit has been used to justify stripping away access to even a meager existence to the most vulnerable populations. Within neoliberal ideals, blatant failures of capitalism are ignored and even rewarded through the market driven politics of corporate welfare. Meanwhile, teachers, students, parents, and communities of modest means are blamed for the ills of society, as social reform policies deceptively function to disguise the inherent truth—in order for capitalism to function effectively, poverty is a necessity of the
system. To shroud this major contradiction in the discourse of liberal democracy, commonsensical myths about educational achievement, personal success, academic failure, poverty, and so on are perpetrated to deflect the responsibility for the nation’s systemic problems away from the wealthy and powerful. Instead, those with the least power or influence are held responsible through the use of debilitating measures sustained by conservative reforms. This has resulted in spiraling reform efforts within low-income communities of color.

This also signals a serious need to critically challenge the racializing consequences of neoliberal accountability. In its place, we must call for a systemic critique of accountability that holds the most wealthy and powerful both politically and morally responsible for the dire consequences we are facing today in every facet of our lives, including the education of our children. Also at issue here is the manner in which reform language obfuscates corporate interests, while denying community members, students, and teachers voice, decision-making power, and just democratic participation in the evolution of their own lives, as cultural citizens of the world. And so insidious is the logic of the neoliberal marketplace, that now everyone, irrespective of political inclination, uses the shorthand term of “stakeholders”—an economist term used for shareholders or investors—to speak about those who are considered to have “a stake” in education. In concert, these “stakeholders” are seen as consumers of education (as a product), rather than co-creators of knowledge or cultural citizens in the process of enacting their democratic rights. By so doing, education is reified and “stakeholders” are objectified in ways that delimit their choices—most which are directly linked to corporate interests and the needs of the labor market.

STEM EDUCATION IN, THE HUMANITIES OUT

As authority and power has become more and more concentrated in the hands of the wealthy and the purpose of education more heavily aligned to neoliberal imperatives, where market profiteers enjoy full rein within the evolving terrain of free-market education. Visionary educational leaders have become passé, while the educational entrepreneur and the corporate-inspired administrator, guided by so-called “evidence based” (or scientific) research that supports neoliberal claims, thrive. The consequence, of course, is that public education has suffered a frontal blow at the hands of neoliberal technocrats. In concert, public school teachers are put on the defensive, in ways that have dwindled their authority and autonomy, even within their own classrooms; bilingual children have lost the right to be taught in their own language; corporate-inspired curriculum has become commonplace; fast-track teacher education programs have drastically reduced the time spent in teacher formation; and state and federal mandates for teacher education and classroom practice have become more and more instrumentalized, placing greater attention to testing protocols and prescribed learning objectives.

Simultaneously, STEM (Science, Education, Engineering and Mathematics) education has quickly become the great panacea for countering the academic
disparities of the so called “achievement gap.” In turn, the humanities have come increasingly into disfavor, to the extent that even the new Common Core Standards prides itself in deemphasizing the pedagogical significance of literary fiction in the learning process. It is important to note that this is in direct correlation with the overall contempt with which the humanities have been treated during the last two decades within university education. Disturbing, of course, is that the humanities is generally that part of the educational curriculum most likely to raise critical questions related to human existence and social life, as well as ethical and moral questions linked to our practices as human beings in the world and the consequences of our actions upon individuals and society. Hence, as one might guess, funding for research in the humanities is today at an all-time low (Symes, 2011), while funding for STEM education and research is on the rise, despite the fact that “half of all STEM jobs are available to workers without a four-year degree” (Rothwell, 2013).

TOWARD A COHERENT POLITICAL VISION OF STRUGGLE

Since no form of oppression is ever complete and history remains, as Freire (1998) often reminded us, an unfinished affair, there are many who today work diligently to raise concerns and to struggle against the national and global impact of neoliberal policies on society and the environment. As is well documented in this volume, there have been demands for educational change made by both union and community activists. Immigrant rights groups have brought their concerns to the arena of educational debate. Student union organizations at various universities have launched important challenges to the neoliberal transformation of higher education. Unfortunately, at times, even these efforts have become inadvertently neoliberalized, in that they have remained often isolated from one another, focused on single issues, and more attentive to individual concerns. As a consequence, it has been tough to forge a larger political project for change, where collective solidarity and structural reinvention remain ever at the center, even when tending to particularistic concerns. In the absence of such a political vision, seldom can local efforts alone lead to systemic change of hegemonic structures that both reproduce and perpetuate gross inequalities. What this points to is the need for a coherent vision of social struggle in this country and internationally, where systemic changes are, indeed, the catalytic imperative that drives our various political efforts to reclaim collective control of our schools, our labor, our communities, and our lives.

Toward this end, Paulo Freire (1997) insisted that the oppressive system of capitalist production could not be altered without simultaneous collective efforts to democratize schools and the larger society—which, incidentally, is exactly what neoliberal reform strategies stifle through the logic of the marketplace and the quest for economic supremacy that inform the politics of neoliberal reformism. Not surprisingly, Freire argued, instead, that we fight against reformism and use “the contradictions of reformist practice to defeat it” (p. 74). To help counter these contradictions, Freire urged us to construct within schools and communities what
he called “advanced forms of social organizations … capable of surpassing this articulated chaos of corporate interests” (p. 36). This again points to the need to challenge coherently neoliberal policies that promote corporate deregulation, unjust practices of the free market, bootstrap accountability, and rampant individualism. Furthermore, the underlying focus of our work at every level must entail a critical challenge to the social and material structures of capitalism and the neoliberal adherence to the false notion that a free-market equals democracy.

The struggle for systemic social change is, indeed, made more difficult in the current climate, where neoliberalism has made a farce of the democratic ideal of “civic engagement,” subterfuging the public good and the strength of our differences. To counter this travesty, we must move in theory and practice beyond reformism, as Freire (1997) suggested, and embrace through our daily praxis a larger political project for educational and societal transformation. This demands from us a more profound sense of political affiliation and a reinvestment in the collective power of social movement. Toward this end, we can strive to become more politically conscious and vigilant in our responses to the world, so that we do not fall prey to the common contradictions of neoliberalism that easily betray our liberatory dreams.

This requires that we understanding, as did Freire, that no one exists outside the system (Darder, 2015); and as such, a purity of politics or sectarianism are not the answer. Rather, we must enter into critical engagement with the complexities and nuanced ways in which hegemony impacts our lives as educators and world citizens, as well as the many social differences that exist among us, as a consequence of our cultural histories and material conditions of survival.

Similarly, to prevent the structural reproduction of oppression, so common to our world, also necessitates an ideological and epistemological shift in how we make meaning, define problems, seek solutions, and enact institutional and communal change. And none of this can transpire outside of an ethical and moral commitment to democratic participation, the dignity of human rights, and the struggle for economic justice. Toward this end, our work in schools and communities requires the solid integration of critical democratic principles, in cultural, political, and economic terms. At the heart of such a concept is recognition that the process of liberation, whether in the classroom or the larger society, can only be enacted through a coherent political vision of struggle, where neither unity nor difference is sacrificed.

Further, our collective strategies of struggle must also fully reflect and correspond to the contemporary historical moment. Human emancipatory strategies are both longstanding and dynamic, defined by the historicity of their emergence. There can simply be no return to the good ole days even of the 60s, which were—if truth be told—often mired in a contradictory and Eurocentric epistemology of assimilation, white privilege, patriarchy, individualism, and authoritarianism, even within progressive organizational contexts (Darder, 2015). Yet, despite historical contradictions, we must nevertheless continue to forge collectively an emancipatory vision of education and society—one that can point the way toward a more socially just world.
A COURAGEOUS CONTRIBUTION TO THE EDUCATIONAL DEBATE

This fundamental purpose of this foreword is to extend an enduring message of solidarity and appreciation for the powerful analytical discourses provided in this book. Neoliberalizing Educational Reform: America's Quest for Profitable Market-colonies and the Undoing of the Public Good constitutes an impressive political contribution to a critical body of literature that courageously unveils the hidden curriculum of education in the current neoliberal era. More significantly, the volume encompasses both a rich language of critique and a passionate spirit of hope, as it contends substantively with many of the tough issues and concerns briefly engaged above. Furthermore, despite the educational crisis generated by the vulgar capriciousness of neoliberal reforms, Keith M. Sturges and his contributors have invested themselves in a formidable political vision for social transformation, not only within education and beyond. It is truly a brilliant example of how critical intellectuals can use the power of their scholarship to expose and undermine hegemonic discourses, when carefully examining and redefining the contours of educational debates, in ways that enhance our intellectual and political capacities to struggle more coherently in schools and communities.

Most importantly, what is made abundantly clear is that individual freedom must never trump our pursuit for the common good. Hence, the book offers a persuasive and powerful argument for building a broader base for political struggle, if we are to transform the philosophical foundations and practical intentions of public education. This requires that we ask new questions—questions profoundly driven by an emancipatory vision of society and the restoration of the public good. This timely volume provides educators, battling the consequences of neoliberal reforms, with hope and beckons us to recommit ourselves more fully to the struggle for a world where the values of reason, freedom and equality can function to alter the grounds upon which life is lived.

REFERENCES

FOREWORD


*Antonia Darder*

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1. EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN THE AGE OF NEOLIBERALISM

A Call for a Focused, Empirically-Supported, Collective Response

NEOLIBERALISM & EDUCATIONAL REFORM

When David Harvey published *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* nearly a decade ago, it quickly became one of the most cited social science works of all time. The book was important for a number of reasons. It advanced a coherent definition of a previously nebulous and abstruse economic term. His accessible analysis laid down a common language that helped unite diverse scholars grappling with issues of fast-paced globalization, forms and degrees of previously unimaginable privatization, the dismantling of public good institutions, the collapse of labor benefits, the escalation of temporary labor relations, extreme wealth polarization, and the deployment of austerity measures that reduced the capacity or redirected the essential functions of institutions that were created to serve the public good. Along with that definition, Harvey brought together previously separate literatures and economic data to chronicle the events that culminated in the economic calamity that currently prevails.

This volume’s central topic, educational reform, conveys both the seemingly straightforward and pragmatic activity of planned school change and, upon closer inspection, planned change that is deeply entrenched in political economic interests. It is linked directly to a notion of progress (Popkewitz, 1991; Tyack & Cuban, 1995)—progress in technologies, progress in structures and policies, progress in measurement, and progress in efficiency. Rightly so, Popkewitz (1991) defines educational reform as the perennial contestation and defining (and redefining) of public space. From revised formulas for federal and state funding, mandates for measurement and quality, academic supports, curricular design and development, teacher preservice, teacher and leader progress measures, professional development, community involvement, and so on, reform is the stuff of enduring contestations about who should be served, with whose input, and in what ways.

Educational reform “has been a means of conceiving and enacting visions of the collective good” for a very long time (Provenzo, 2008). When neoliberalism and educational reform are held under the same light, the theme of collective good is replaced with collection of goods. Neoliberalism’s “veiled pursuit to destroy any tacit notion that we in the United States may have once had about the importance of the common good and public education as a human right” (Darder, 2012, p. 412)
and its alleged promise to add value to planned change through privatization and calibration (Boyles, 2011; Lipman, 2011) open many opportunities for critical response and elaboration.

In her analysis of the transformation of Chicago’s public education system to one that supports wealth accumulation of the elite and that is supported by new forms of governance, Lipman (2011) makes a number of crucial points that have widespread applicability. Among these, she emphasizes the irony of how national priorities compel government intervention to salvage failing corporate interests while abandoning public education to the lucrative private market because of its purported failure. Perhaps worse is government’s active involvement in the commodification of public education through federal competitive initiatives such as Race to the Top. Fierce forms of privatized educational management, technical assistance, and reform experimentation target the most vulnerable schools (most particularly those serving large percentages of minority and poor children) and communities (Hill & Kumar, 2009; Lipman, 2011; Sturges, 2015) in the name of failure. This notion, failure, has been central to planned educational change since its inception (see early legislative debates during Reconstruction in Lee, 1949). But, more recently, it has been reinterpreted as a concept that is both faulted to the individual (Wilson, 2007) and to teachers, schools and districts (Ravitch, 2013), making intervention by private occupation a purported necessity and second-nature response.

Critical inquiry into the seemingly pragmatic and rational responses to the alleged failure of public education (and of underserved students, of teachers, and of principals) illustrates how commonsense serves as the mechanism that hastens public reaction to a perceived educational crisis (Apple, 2011; Lagotte & Wheeler-Bell, this volume; Lemke, this volume; Rosen, 2003; Smith, 2012). The discourse of crisis, articulated unremittingly in the media (e.g., ABC News’ 2013 interview with Arne Duncan in which the Secretary said, “The United States is in a real state of crisis” as he compared the US to other developed nations), glorifies action and criminalizes anything resembling inaction. However, action does not automatically take the form of collective engagement. Among consumers of education goods and services (as students, families, and communities are now conceived), it takes the forms of choice in schools, teachers, and in selecting from pre-packaged curricular reform options (Ravitch, 2013). For reformers, action concentrates on raising test scores, delivering sanctions, and promoting the crisis and its solution.

Most perverse, the tactics are deployed by some of the same people who are being disenfranchised the most, a new brand of freedom fighters. This deployment continues unabashed by concerted counter-measure or deeply-oppressive coercion in great part because of a neoliberal ideology that makes the tactics appear as common sense (Gramsci, 1971). Democratic ideals such as freedom and the translation of that ideal into widespread individualist demands for hyper-deregulation urge localized struggle. Indeed, freedom may, in this context, be “just another word for nothing
left to lose” (Kristofferson & Foster, 1969). This version of freedom is indicative of a deepening integration, socialization, into this more mature market economy (Apple, 2001; Menter, Muschamp, Nichols, Ozga, & Pollard, 1997). This is especially crucial to note since one of its more instructive implications is that the marketplace is an imaginary for action, not a blueprint (Apple, 2001). Thus, the tactics are often responses to immediate threats and take the form of oppositional, yet parallel, countermeasures. In a Foucauldian sense, such a struggle for freedom is doomed because it echoes the system logic that supports the new political economy (Foucault, 1980). Many assist the further conversion of educational systems into exploitable markets (Lakes & Carter, 2011).

In some manner, every decision related to educational reform—whether in the realm of funding, teacher education, what can and must be taught, hiring decisions, teacher performance, alternative actions to poor performing schools, how poor performance is measured, or curricular and material development—is now in the hands of corporations, entrepreneurs, and foundations (Kumashiro, 2012b; Lipman, 2011). For instance, as I write this chapter, breaking news describes the New Orleans public school system being taken over completely by ReNEW Schools Charter Management Organization. The move, which will allegedly enhance educational opportunities for historically-underserved students and reduce inefficiencies, comes at the price of community engagement (Washington Post, 2014). What was previously the key measure of success in educational reform is, under neoliberalism, a key indicator of its failure.

While it is not the purpose of this chapter to trace the origins of neoliberalism in educational reform (see Lipman, 2011 and Harvey, 2005), a little context may be helpful. The past 50 years have witnessed unprecedented national educational reform policy and action. The passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA I) solidified the federal government’s involvement in using education as one way to remedy gross inequities in US society. The Act drew from the Civil Rights movement’s call for civic engagement, inclusion, collectivism, support, and social justice. Ultimately, the appropriations were slow and slim—at best—and many of the interventions intended for historically underserved students were based on flagrant deficit models (Herriott & Gross, 1979). Less transparently, ESEA I laid the foundation for new kinds of public-private partnerships. 

Almost overnight, relationships between research and development consultants, the Office of Education, local public school districts, teacher unions, nonprofits, and community groups implemented a wide array of reform experiments. While the 1960s and 1970s may have seen the production of the fundamental organizational relationships that would ultimately permit a few to reap the benefits of neoliberal policies, the Reagan era’s federal government reduction and the resulting experiments in cost-cutting measures mark the most immediate rise of neoliberalism.

Since the 1980s, public education in the US has been guided by national policy that increasingly demands high-level monitoring systems, a “whitewashing”
(Darder, 2012; Urrieta, 2006) homogenization of classroom activity and curriculum design, high-stakes testing, and competition for funding basic school operations (Sturges, 2015). This is especially problematic along the lines of race, class, and gender, since neoliberal policies and their implementation in educational reforms tend to reintroduce and reproduce projects and discourses that normalize a white, middle-class, and male vision of education (Apple, 2001; Darder, 2012). This infusion of unwritten national aims for the education of all children is reinforced at every turn. Schools are becoming increasingly divided along these demographic lines as sites of differential access to civic education and preparation for political engagement (Journell, 2011; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). Neoliberal reform in education has also introduced an intensification—especially in schools attended primarily by low-income students of color—of curriculum narrowing, curricular dis-alignment as a means to maximize test scores, test-preparation in lieu of active engagement (Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Shiller, 2011; Watts & Walsh, 1997), and decreased access to experienced teachers who have decision-making authority and creativity in pedagogical and curricular decisions (Brewer, 2014).

This national policy and set of priorities have been accompanied by demands that corporation-like structures replace school districts, and that, with those structures, come a change in values (Lakes & Carter, 2011). Specifically, job security, decision-making authority, and professional learning is being replaced by efficiency, expediency, and payoff matrices. Because neoliberal practices seldom align neatly with one another (Harvey, 2005), it is not easy to parse out which aspects of this crisis represent new forms of domination and which are recycled. Likewise, the deployment of some tactics symptomatic of neoliberal capitalism appear to work against one another. The pressing matter is that neoliberalism constitutes a web of tactics directed at a common aim of wealth concentration by and for a very small portion of the world’s population (Lavine, 2012).

Neoliberalism’s commonsense conception of freedom constitutes a re-envisioning of citizens’ relationship to society: from a people with voice to consumers of services (Wilson, 2007). The notions of failure, external expert, and individual-in-system replace notions of educator professionalism, democratic engagement, and participatory democracy. Individual consumers of education services place individualistic faith in the progressive potential of charter schools, privatization of testing, teacher education (traditional and alternative), market-driven curricula, technological tutors and technology-based curricula, etc. Individually, this translates “very narrowly to define education as an individualistic enterprise in a market-based economy” (Kumashiro, 2012a). In this context, “education is a private good, an investment one makes in one’s child or oneself to ‘add value’ to better compete in the labor market” (Lipman, 2011, p. 15). This, in turn, reinforces the repurposing of sites of formal, public education to ones that serve the individual’s and society’s economic development. Deemphasized are democratic engagement, social justice, and other ideals of democracy (Apple, 2001; Apple & Beane, 2007; Goodlad, Soder, & McDaniel, 2008; Hart & Mullooly, this volume).
A closely connected theme is the wresting of decision making authority for educational policy and planned change from educational leaders and elected officials and their redistribution to organizational hybrids comprised of corporations and the elite (Deem, Hillyard, & Reed, 2007; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Kumashiro, 2012b, 2012; Journell, 2011). For instance, as Kumashiro (2012b) illustrates, companies, such as Pearson and ETS, which hold incredible amounts of power over education testing, test preparation, and disaggregated data sets, also have sway over which reforms are supported and funded to more widespread implementation. In addition, the dividing line between elected officials and neoliberal governance has become a hodgepodge of “mayoral control, appointed school boards, corporate CEOs running urban school districts, direct involvement of corporate actors and corporate philanthropies dictating school district policies” (Lipman, 2011, p. 47).

The research published thus far has raised important questions about contemporary educational reform and called for further scrutiny of both the specifics and cross-cutting characteristics of neoliberalism and schooling. The works have also offered a range of suggestions for addressing these political economic conditions. In the next section, I explore those solutions as counter-tactics and principal aims for action.

IMPLEMENT, PURPOSE, MOVEMENT
Public education in the US is in the midst of a crisis. It is not the oft-spun discourse flaunting America’s poor education performance in global comparisons. US academic quality is, despite characterizations to the contrary, admirable (Ravitch, 2013). The very real and more immediate crisis is the swift, mechanical undoing of a foundational institution of civic good—public education—and the hasty replacement of its core precepts for ones that are fleeting and profit-driven. Every profitable aspect of planned educational change is being commoditized and that which is not profitable is cast aside. Like never before, the policy domain holds the doors wide open for private marketeers. For instance, Race to the Top’s expansion of teacher evaluation systems and punitive measures permitted the private sector to profit from assisting state departments, districts, and schools (Howley & Howley, this volume; Ravitch, 2013). Profit-generating opportunities are developed and obtained through charter management, technology immersion, teacher retraining and support, and curriculum development. Some organizations, such as KIPP and Teach for America, are funded in part by the US elite and must, therefore, be seen as investments with expected profitable returns.

This crisis has direct consequences for teacher preparation, the ways in which reform programs are evaluated and the purpose of those evaluations, the development and use of new curricula, the hiring and employment terms of teachers and faculty, the quality of teacher work experiences, and the learning experiences and opportunities for students. It has enduring implications for all of society. The crisis has prompted a variety of reactions.
Demand for Social Change

When students march, faculty unite, and teachers strike to demonstrate opposition to the use of actions related to the new regime of educational reform, the acts index powerful localized victories. For instance, Giroux (2014) describes how New York University students learned from United Auto Workers how to unionize graduate teaching assistants. Kumashiro (2012a) illustrates a restrengthening of the Chicago Teachers Union. More recently, Puerto Rican teachers shut down Senate proceedings in response to a holiday vote that eliminated teacher pensions (Telenoticias, 2013). In Texas, the Community of Brothers in Revolutionary Alliance is promoting the academic and leadership development of underrepresented boys in Texas High Schools, so that they may thrive despite neoliberal influences. These victories complicate, problematize, and disrupt neoliberal activity. Taken together, they demonstrate that while neoliberal capitalism is far-reaching, it is far from totalizing and it has vulnerabilities.

However, localized actions that target neoliberalism’s discrete vulnerabilities are unlikely to alter the underlying structural conditions of gross injustice. They inconvenience. Countermeasures, big media, big data, the insertion of corporatist values into public institutions, the stripping away of bargaining power, and the obsession with measuring teacher outcome indicators (that purportedly link neatly to classroom practice) are but a few of the strategies that have matured and continue to mature. Their vulnerabilities are continuously assessed and repaired, and new exploitative opportunities are continuously identified.

The opposition to neoliberalism in the US has been largely fragmented, particularistic, discipline-bound, and insular. Concurrent with this fragmentation, the conception of activism for social justice has itself become neoliberalized (Darder, 2012). This “rampant individualism” serves the neoliberal project both directly in the service of protecting private interests (Darder 2012, p. 413) and symbolically by pedestaling a world free from individual restrictions. An opposition movement entails sharing common aims and sense of community. I organize the following discussion around Touraine’s (1966) definition of social movement as having three key features: (1) a vision for social change, (2) a collective identity, and (3) a definable adversary. I believe these features remain pertinent to exploring social movement vis-à-vis neoliberalism in educational reform.

A Vision for a Total Social Movement

Localized victories are encouraging. They may hold tremendous symbolic value. They are not, however, necessarily representative of a coherent social movement or total social movement (Touraine, Dubet, Wieviorka, & Strzelecki, 1983). Since localized acts do not usually encompass both national democratic aspirations and efforts to transform social class conditions, they seldom lead to changes in structural conditions. As Harvey contends, while a number of organizations, collectives, and
ideologies that stand against neoliberal efforts exist, their objectives “cannot be realized without challenging the fundamental power bases upon which neoliberalism has been built and to which the processes of neoliberalization have so lavishly contributed” (2005, p. 187). Anything short of intentionally and continuously chasing the shadows (Touraine, 1992) will invite the return of neoliberalism.

Diminishing neoliberalism will require working collectively toward a common vision. Conflicting aims and strategies between organizations make them susceptible to divide and rule. The crucial task is to coordinate and communicate across experiences to expand the movement’s breadth and depth. I agree that, strategically, “an alliance has to be built to regain popular control of the state apparatus and to thereby advance the deepening rather than the evisceration of democratic practices and values under the juggernaut of market power” (Harvey, 2005, p. 206). That alliance must not fall into a sort of populist nonconformity, but remain focused on the reinsertion of democratic practice in both economic terms and in political and politicized institutions.

In his analysis of the May 1968 movement in Logic of Failed Revolt (1995), Peter Starr (1995) describes the logic of structural repetition in which outwardly-appearing actions aimed at social justice, instead of changing conditions, reinforce established regimes by helping the rival system learn the movement’s tactics and strategies. Take, for instance, the rush of campus funding at public universities during the 1970s and 1980s to build beautifying features that broke up public spaces, thereby creating seemingly natural obstacles that impeded mass demonstrations. At a time of the now taken-for-granted existence of big data, surveillance apparatuses, and other forms of public monitoring, system learning and continuous improvement is particularly strong. Tactics become old quickly. They are also turned against the individuals who stand in opposition.

For decades, in my work as a program evaluator of Title I curricular reforms, I hoped that helping school personnel understand which aspects of curricular reforms worked and in what ways might help build school personnel capacity and, thereby, contribute to their self-sufficiency. In my recent research on program evaluator identity, I learned that many people turn to the program evaluation industry with hopes of contributing to social change from inside the institutions (Sturges, 2014). However, relatively recently, major curricular reforms have begun to come with pre-determined metrics, usually defined around teacher evaluations, high stakes tests, and predestined progress intervals. In many cases, a curricular reform’s value can be judged only to the extent that it raises test scores, representing a vast and immeasurable logical leap. This means bypassing any efforts related to self-sufficiency. Some evaluators have redoubled their change-minded efforts by increasing their use of participatory evaluation approaches (Ghorashi & Wels, 2009). But, as a whole, even with national association stances on the ethical wrongness of “evidence-mania” (Schwandt, 2005), contract awards favor those who are willing to play the neoliberal game by utilizing strategies that “quiet” local voice (Greene & Lee, 2006) and championing assessment indicators.
While the notion of reversing neoliberalism’s hold on public institutions is gaining momentum, less clear are the collective end-goals. Some critical knowledge workers and activists argue or insinuate that there must be a great return to conditions that existed before the onslaught of educational reform privatization. There is no return. Indeed, “there is no there there” (Stein, 1937, p. 289); the political economic situation that gave rise to and then supported the maturity of neoliberal capitalism has shifted several times over. If conditions could be reverted to something that resembled what once was, our relation to those conditions would be vastly different. That does not mean the dystopian conditions that public education has endured over the last few decades, with the perilous decline in education as a mode of civic engagement and public good, are beyond remedy.

The current economic mess presents incredible opportunities (Lipman, 2011; Harvey, 2005). The middle class’ loss of economic ground, in part exacerbated by student loan debt and the evaporation of professional and stable, well-paid skilled jobs (e.g., manufacturing), calls into question the neoliberalizing tendencies and forces this powerful segment of US society to explore radical alternatives. Multiregional and multinational organizing is taking shape. Lipman describes an emerging movement in which local stakeholders use public schools as spaces of participatory democratic discussion. Take, for instance, the Trinational Conference in Defense of Public Education, which brings together educators, students, and community activists from Mexico, Canada, and the US. A vision of public education that serves its liberatory potential by helping to change structured inequities is emerging. As Antonia Darder urges, such a social movement for public education must involve:

A coherent and revolutionary political vision that critically embraces universal human rights—a vision that privileges the needs of the many, in place of the few. Hence, our struggles against all forms of inequality must recognize that there is no liberation without a revolutionary transformation of the class society. (2012, p. 424)

This movement requires not individuals but people who share a vision and a movement-focused identity.

Identity Production and a Collective Movement

While not the specific definition of identity Alain Touraine had in mind, I am thinking of identity as that which is interwoven into everyday lived experience. It carries with it agency, a sense of belonging to a group, and lived expression (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). It conveys positionality and social position, and extends beyond posturing within circles to debating, informing, influencing, and learning; it is always in process, always learning, refining (Holland et al., 1998). Identity in the context of social movement specifies the actors who hold a common vision and who are committed to realizing it, thereby defining the sociocultural boundaries that permit what Kumashiro calls collectivization (2012a; 2012b).
The movement’s main actors are academicians, their students, and public educators. Higher education—a space that is enveloped in punishing austerity measures, diminishing faculty freedoms and bargaining power, a quest for return on investment, and the (ab)use of a revolving and disposable teaching force—is increasingly capable of leading the charge. The very socializing foundations of higher education have been corrupted and co-opted. Contemporarily, faculty members are being “conditioned into a culture of antidemocratic values that shape the expectations of their teaching, research, and tenure process” (Darder, 2012, p. 414). They are increasingly made responsible for the brokering and vetting of neoliberal mechanics and architects that continue to transform education to private enterprise. More established, even tenured, faculty face academic sanctions if they fail to conform to the new privatization-oriented provisions and requirements for newly determined forms of university success (Darder, 2012). Faculty in research departments, representatives of the grants culture, also must succumb to neoliberalizing pressures (Boyles, 2011; Daza et al., this volume). This has led many qualified, potential academicians to seek intellectual engagement outside the world of higher education (Sturges, 2014). As the academy’s foundations show signs of wear and weakening, prospects for collectivization are declining.

This fervor to do something about the effects of neoliberalism also coincides with tuition hikes, incredible competition for attention from faculty whose case loads are beyond reasonable capacity, and student loan debt that may carry into mid-life (see Howley & Howley, this volume). It also coincides with a structural disinvestment in student engagement in social debate and a concomitant deepening of individualistic aims (both of which are symptomatic of neoliberal endeavors). While many liberal students have engaged in forms of activism that mimic liberal rationalities, as Giroux notes, their emphasis has been “on consumerism, immediate gratification and the narcissistic ethic of privatization” (2014, p. 65). In his cogent analysis, The Erasure of Critical Formative Cultures, Giroux illustrates the withering of opportunities for open debate and evidence-supported argumentation (2014). In its place are narcissistic blogs and micro-messages (e.g., tweets). When Giroux’s analysis of the disappearance of formative cultures in institutions of higher education is combined with Harvey’s (2005) critique of the 1968 student movements—in which he contends that individual freedom prevailed over concerns of social justice—civic disengagement is neither taught, nor supported; it is an alien concept to many students.

Teachers are the most directly chastised and rebuked group of the lot. Public educators face sweeping rollbacks in work security, mandated dissolution of unions, and new forms of invasive (and misdirected) scrutiny. Like higher education faculty, they are increasingly treated as disposable labor and systems are in place to make them more easily replaceable. They are continuously reminded of these facts as they face concerted efforts to reduce their bargaining power as well as competition from graduates of alternative certification programs (see Nygreen et al., this volume) and from charter schools. Many are rightly attracted to and tempted by enticements
to join the scores of charters that promise better pay, reduced surveillance, and opportunity for advancement (Ravitch, 2013).

A transformation of class society requires working across sectors on projects that bring together a broad base of stakeholders (and their cultural tools and methods). Some of these stakeholders are likely to have not always been seen as pertinent. From a collectivist standpoint, not only should the public education movement join together faculty, teachers, other educators, and students, but it must have a broader base of advocates, supporters, and activists. There is room to expand because of the crippling effects neoliberalism has had on so many people and institutions. This is not to suggest that there should be less voice for the workers and children who are the most immediately victimized. Because of neoliberalism’s wide reach, both materially and ideologically, threats to the future of public education are threats to the whole of society. I agree with the spirit of Dan Laitsch’s statement that:

If educators want to regain control of their profession and initiate positive change, as well as respond to current Neoliberal reform proposals, we will need to engage with economists, political scientists, and other intellectuals who have alternative frameworks to offer. Unless we can present the public and our political leaders with an alternative vision to Neoliberalism, we will continue to cede the context of the debate and fail to change the nature of the conversation. (2013, p. 24)

This engagement entails embracing a broader concept of public education. As community activists, museum curators, park naturalists, program evaluators, and public servants, many outside academia and school district systems also have stakes in this struggle. Some are the underpaid legions of adjunct faculty whose voices are quietened during their brief contract stints. An enormous force of Masters and Ph.Ds. stand ready to share their thoughts, experiences, and feelings as engaged intellectuals outside the bastions of the academy. All are experiencing in familiar ways the grip of neoliberalism in their institutions. While some have steered or been steered away from the universities that promised offices in the ivory halls and space at the podia, their ideals, their desires to change the world, to protect democratic ideals, are very much intact. This corps of scholars located outside the academy is sometimes described as a facet of society that has already been co-opted and that is, possibly, irrelevant to such a movement.

That expansion may require acknowledging that prospective proponents are likely to be, whether unwitting, acquiescent, or active, servants and functionaries of neoliberal interests and projects. I have a hunch that most readers have participated in the neoliberalization of educational reform in some ways. In order to continue working in the arenas of higher education and public schooling, some educators and educational researchers engage in acts that may seem like necessary concessions, selective acceptances, or, when sufficiently repurposed, tools that benefit students (see Chang, this volume). For most, perhaps, it is impossible not to be, in some ways, socialized into this political economy.
Reductionistic and invective characterizations that paint the neoliberal reformer in broad strokes are not really advantageous. In addition to the clear proponents and staunchest advocates of neoliberalism’s project to dismantle public education, such as Michelle Rhee and Bill Gates, who have done a phenomenal job of producing fervor in the absence of evidence, are the many who are positioned somewhere in between public schooling and privatization. Manifestations of the system logic that promotes conjecture about public education’s purported propensity for ineffectiveness, inefficiency, and ineptitude. This logic carries with it the effectual belief that only through privatization will the US be able to bring about the educational reforms capable of saving the country’s youth.

This is a matter of education; not only formal classroom education, but as an action of civic engagement and of opening dialogue around evidence. University administrators, charter school teachers, testing and tutoring company staff, and reform consultants are increasingly ready to hear alternatives to the current regime of educational reform. So is the general public, especially those whose children are caught in the crossfire and who pay both a figurative and literal price.

Shades of Antagonism

The adversary is less black and white than is often imagined. The inclination among some critical scholars and activists to oversimplify the antagonist by equating neoliberalism with the powerful politicians and business elite whose interests are served directly by neoliberalism’s established ideological hegemony is compelling. However, oversimplifying the matter bypasses important complexities. Starr (1995) describes the logic of specular doubling in which the failure of a social movement may be more likely when its core advocates and leaders envisage and depict its rival as a simple binary opposite or “mirror image” of itself. In addition to what Starr identifies as particularly problematic in this—the reductionistic “vis-à-vis”-ness that leaves the movement vulnerable to co-optation—is that it oversimplifies people and their beliefs.

Left in the fuzzy middle are the uncertain (e.g., liberals who believe the technology solutions will alleviate growing social inequities and soft activists who believe that they contribute to social justice from inside institutions). As Lipman (2011) and Rosen (2003) note, consent is secured for neoliberal educational reforms not only by the elite and those they are able to influence directly, but also by parents, teachers, tenured and adjunct faculty, university students, and others who are caught up in this new political economy. It is, thus, being constructed by those who may gain in the short run, but who are likely to be its sufferers in the longer term. Many have joined forces with neoliberal projects for reasons of professional survival and others because it has been sold as a viable, concerted option for improving an education system that is suffering. See, for instance, the recent publication generated in a partnership between the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, The Boston Consulting Group, and Harvard Business School that targets business leaders to become local activists and
sponsors of neoliberal projects. The *Brink of Renewal: A Business Leader’s Guide to Progress in America’s Schools* (2014) touts the values of choice, efficiency, and accountability that, with the involvement of business leaders, promise to culminate in “helping to accelerate change.”

Nonetheless, the adversarial struggle is not with all the individuals who manifest values that align with neoliberalism. It is, foremost, a struggle of ideas and discourses. It is a struggle with powerful blocs; ones that are bipartisan, complex, and dynamic. The set includes the people who believe they are doing what is best for themselves and their children through educational reform, as well as those who have found ways to use new forms of reform to bring about academic change. I suspect the former may be ready for viable alternatives. The latter, though diverse in their interests and their reasons for participating in the neoliberal project of educational reform, share the aims of disassembling public education and redistributing its profitable pieces to a variety of entrepreneurs and corporations.

Collectivism, Empiricism, and Participatory Democracy

Let us remap the social field, reconsider the set of people who have a stake, attempt to better understand the potential actors and role groups, and decide where we are going and with what resolve. There is no return to what was. However, our aims certainly embrace elements that have been valued and continue to be valued most. The tactics need updating, the strategies need to be more inclusive, and the aims need to be clearer. But, the common threads of valuing and enacting collectivism and empirical reflection are vital to what Lemke (this volume) refers to as “(un)making the neoliberal agenda.” Kevin Kumashiro (2012a) calls for shifting the public conversation about educational change by reframing the debate, by drawing on research, and by working across sectors. To do this, we need to amplify the voices of those who have not been heard quite as much, especially from those whose day-to-day lives involve neoliberal educational reform.

**RATIONALE FOR THE BOOK**

The collection of chapters in this volume is not limited to the ways in which neoliberal strategies and their associated tactics are linked to what happens in classrooms or schools. Educational reform, as a concept and a discourse, spans a wide range of interest groups and institutions. It is also a topic of philosophical and moral struggle. As most of the chapters demonstrate, with neoliberalism’s envelopment of public space, it is a topic that is closely linked to power and wealth accumulation, as well as personal accommodation and adaptations to survive economically in the world of education. Thus, the chapters explore the phenomena from multiple angles and stages of reform, including legislative decisions, funding, state support, teacher preparation, implementation and deployment, and community engagement.
The volume develops intersecting threads of inquiry that explore responses to three important questions about educational reform in the current political economy: (1) How does neoliberal policy create spaces and demand for commercialization?; (2) What is the relationship between increased commercialization in educational reform and new forms of racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and gender inequity?; and (3) Are there substantial examples of successful, localized struggles against or appropriations of commercialized reform to suit the needs of faculty, teachers, students, and communities? Using empirical studies and a kaleidoscopic lens of disciplines (cultural studies in education, curriculum studies, educational anthropology, sociology of education, philosophy, policy studies, and teacher education), the chapters take aim at understanding how forces tied to neoliberalization and communities unfold in the many facets of educational reform in the US.

The chapters were selected to illustrate the complexity of a post-Keynesian, more mature, form of capitalism, as well as the contradictions that are inherent in its deployment. The volume has three interwoven intents: (1) to deepen our understanding of neoliberal educational reform; (2) to illustrate the complexity of the neoliberal crisis, and, as an expression of that complexity; and (3) to express ourselves reflexively not as neutral researchers, but as professionals whose work and professional identities intersect with new kinds of oppressive reform tactics. The authors offer convincing arguments that update, extend, and challenge our understanding of the ways in which ideology and power influence educational reforms. Their work offers a collective insight into how neoliberal reform has, in radically different ways from previous reform eras, created new markets and, with them, new forms of exploitation. Indeed, faculty tenure, the quality and freedom of scholarly research, college student experiences and aspirations, teacher education, community engagement, and K-12 student prospects are inextricably linked in this political economic transformation.

The work represented in this volume is complex, sometimes contradictory, and unapologetically devoid of simple answers to the problems observed, described, and interpreted. The reasons for this are twofold. First, the subject matter is complex and contradictory. Instead of providing a blueprint for action, the volume is intended to serve as an impetus for reflection and to help broaden awareness of the impact neoliberalism is having on so many facets of educational reform.

Second, the contributing authors represent not only a broad spectrum of disciplines, but are situated in various ways in the practice of educational reform. Through their chapters, they communicate how they are involved in some form or fashion in the educational reform activities that intersect with neoliberalism. Some have worked for charter schools, corporations that perform education reform contract work, program evaluation firms, and university-based research centers (as part of the grants culture). Some have served as tenure-track faculty in traditional and alternative teacher preparation programs, adjunct instructors, community college faculty, and public school teachers. This breadth of positions is intentional, since the
volume is intended to stimulate discussion across disciplines and thereby amplify our collective voice.

While the volume honors the disciplinary traditions of contributing authors, each chapter contains a section that discusses author positionality and how her, his, or their work intersects with neoliberalization in educational reform. Situating themselves reflexively not only boosts the credibility of the studies, but offers us insights into how that voice took shape and why the topics resonate with them. I hope this addition will inspire readers to reflect on how their work might be defined and directed, at least in part, by this political economy. We all must accept some responsibility for this neoliberal contraption, and to both complicate and further establish credibility by intertwining the intersubjectivities of personal voice and scholarship. This crisis is not “out there” it is everywhere.

VOLUME’S ORGANIZATION

The volume is organized into four sections. The first of these, Manifestations of Neoliberal Ideology in Education Policy, is devoted to exploring neoliberalism’s grip on power through policy, state intervention, and the production of accountability data. The section presents a cross-section of work from education policy analysis, educational anthropology, and sociology of education to explore implications of current major reform policy primarily at the state and federal levels. In “Farming the Poor,” Caitlin and Craig Howley survey the many innovative mechanisms that create tremendous profit for neoliberal investors in the public education sector to argue that, although touted as the remedy for poverty, education is a major source of profit. As they explore topics such as the roles of sponsored education research, school closure, charter schools, federally-mandated supplemental education services, student education debt, and for-profit colleges, their major concern is with the ways in which these mechanisms have become intensified, systematized, and work in tandem to further disenfranchise the poor both directly and indirectly.

In chapter 3, Melinda Lemke draws on critical discourse analysis to scrutinize the ways in which ideological aspects of neoliberalism play out in the educational policy arena. Her contribution, “(Un)Making the Neoliberal Agenda in Public Education,” traces a set of struggles in curriculum policy processes and high school social studies standards in Texas, which ultimately privilege the male, whitestream status quo. In this context, exploration, critique, intellectual searching, and democratic engagement are exchanged for a narrowed and limited conception of truth.

Brian Lagotte and Quentin Wheeler-Bell explore how the practice of military recruitment in schools exemplifies a particular kind of bureaucratic domination that helps shape educational policy and that manipulates privacy. In “Dominating Educational Policy,” the authors find that, much like corporations that use big data to flood the market with ads, the military uses student data to target recruiting messages. Their detailed analysis uncovers how parents’ ability to protect how their children’s data are used is limited and how district-level actions are blocked, even
threatened by the likely prospect of sanctions. The authors demonstrate the inherent tension between democratic deliberation and radical free-marketization of schools.

Section 2, Profiting from Higher Learning & Teacher Education, provides an in-depth look at how neoliberalism has reconceived higher education as a place of job skills acquisition and, since the economy’s needs are ever-shifting, a promise for money-making in perpetuity for the controllers of the means of privatized education. The three chapters articulate multifaceted problems in higher education, while also demonstrating that higher education has tremendous hope for survival as an institution of public good. Kysa Nygreen, Barbara Madeloni, and Jennifer Cannon offer a powerful critique of fast-track, alternative teacher certification—or as they refer to it, the “Boot Camp Teacher Certification”—especially as it relates to preparing teachers to be social justice-oriented. Drawing on their own experiences working as teacher educators in a variety of institutions and programs, including a boot camp, the contributors effectively demonstrate how alternative certification programs tend to reproduce a neoliberal logic and a white, middle class orientation to serving the other. They argue that this set of orientations restricts the extent to which teachers who graduate from these programs are equipped to combat inequities. In “From Student to Steward of Democracy,” Steven M. Hart and James Mullooly explore the ways in which emerging public school teachers may develop a sense of personal agency to construct and enact a transformative educator identity. By highlighting the experiences of two teachers in a model teacher education program, the authors illustrate a stewarded approach to the cultural production of civically engaged educators. The stories highlight how the novice teachers came to identify broad social and political forces that create inequities. They also demonstrate, conversely, that deeply-entrenched self-perceptions prevented the participants from engaging in practices in their communities and classrooms that align with their transformative pedagogical beliefs.

In chapter 7, Stephanie Daza, Jeong-eun Rhee, Sharon Subreenduth, and Michelle Proctor employ a combination of critical race theory, decolonizing and social justice frameworks, and anthropology of policy practice to illustrate how neoliberal dynamics of power function in higher education externally-sponsored knowledge work. In their chapter, “Funding as (Re)Form in Higher Education,” the authors describe and analyze the restrictions placed on academically-situated scholars who work within and against what they refer to as “the re/de/form industry of neoliberal scientism.”

The third section, Neoliberalizing Sites of Public Education, offers an in-depth look into some of the ways neoliberalism impacts the learning opportunities of students who are already marginalized. While neoliberal strategies are employed in all public schools in the US, students from culturally-marginalized and economically-disenfranchised groups are experiencing particularly brutal forms of structured stratification. In “Give Me a 3, Tell Me I’m Effective, and Leave Me Alone,” Jeanne Cameron uses a portraiture approach to illustrate one teacher’s professional life history experiences in public education. She explores the damages
left by neoliberalism’s competitive approach to curriculum reforms, especially those inflicted on teacher motivation and, ultimately, turnover. The chapter traces the de-professionalization and de-intellectualization that teachers have endured.

Jean Patterson presents a qualitative case study of a high school that recently deployed a schoolwide large-scale, federally-funded reform, the 21st Century Learning Initiative. In “High School 21st Century Learning Initiatives as a Manifestation of Neoliberalism,” she offers a cogent analysis of the numerous ways in which the neoliberal discourse is expressed and observed throughout the school. Among these, for instance, is the mismatch between the widely-dispersed rhetoric of college and career readiness and the everyday classroom practices associated with the reform. As Patterson convincingly argues, the prioritized practices that surround this rift exemplify the supremacy of beliefs about educational reform over facts.

In chapter 10, “Cultures of Collaboration and Blame,” Mary Roaf offers an ethnographic critique of the complex and contradictory character of charter school operation. Drawing on a combination of anthropology, organizational research, and critical race theory to conceptualize the study, Roaf describes the tenuous nature of charter school staff employment, charter management organization responses to accountability mandates, and charter branding and marketing. In addition to her depiction of the business of chartering, she illustrates how what appears to be (and what is touted as an example of) community and staff voice is achieved through undemocratic means.

In the final section, Community and School Responses to Neoliberal Reforms, contributing authors consider some of the ways local response from communities, parent groups, and school personnel are sometimes dismissed as irrelevant to educational reform initiatives and aims. Through ethnographic research at the school and community level, the authors explore adaptations of educational reforms to fit with school and community needs. In her ethnographic case study, “Flatlands Charter School and the Common Core,” Aurora Chang problematizes the critique of charter schools by demonstrating how school leaders may strategically appropriate neoliberal trappings, such as Common Core State Standards, to serve students. Drawing on Freire’s notion of pedagogical love, and Darder’s elaboration on that notion (2003), Chang describes how a charter school’s leadership retained considerable autonomy and decision-making authority. The case is demonstrative of the need to help educators become better equipped to decide ethically and collaboratively about how to negotiate the many educational reforms that come their way.

Liza she presents findings from a critical ethnographic study of school closings in New York City. In chapter 12, “From Alternative Policies to Alternative Ideologies,” she explores a series of educational reforms that laid the foundation for school closings, as well as the formation of powerful community-based organizations that promoted alternatives and a “counter-imaginary” to the neoliberal regime that attempted to dominate the city’s public education system. Her research chronicles the formation of this new imaginary, the school district’s concerted efforts to silence community voices, and the ensuing (and ongoing) struggle.
Finally, in her ethnographic study of the potential for young people to impact neoliberal school reform policies from their positions in funded non-profit social movement organizations, Hava Gordon explores youth activists’ social movement organizations in the context of educational reform. In her chapter, “Shaping and Challenging Neoliberal School Reform,” Gordon discusses how the blurring of activity between elites and students of color complicates any assessment of the extent to which the movement is meeting its aims. This blurring contains both possibility and an undermining quality. By examining four activist groups whose struggle is to ensure student voice in educational reform decisions, she demonstrates how the social movements’ messages are toned down and reframed as they enter into longer-term partnerships with elite reformers.

NOTES

1 The passage of ESEA I was an incredible feat of interest convergence that would permit the Federal government to establish long-term contract relationships with selected external experts, enhance the quality and access to assessment data to enable parents to monitor the performance of their schools, and lead to curricular experimentation (House, 1993).

2 In anthropology, for instance, more than half of doctorates now work outside of academia (AAA, ND).

REFERENCES


SECTION 1
MANIFESTATIONS OF NEOLIBERAL IDEOLOGY
IN EDUCATION POLICY
CAITLIN HOWLEY AND CRAIG HOWLEY

2. FARMING THE POOR

Cultivating Profit at the Schoolhouse Door

INTRODUCTION

The comfort of the rich depends upon an abundant supply of the poor. (Voltaire)

Because the US is, for the moment, among the wealthiest of global powers, its poor confront “unique” opportunities to serve national purposes—not so much as citizens, but more as revenue sources and consumers. In international context, the poor in this wealthy nation possess comparatively more disposable income, generating revenue streams throughout American society. Furthermore, contemporary neoliberal policy has transformed public institutions serving the poor into sources of profit for private enterprise (Harvey, 2005). We argue that the schooling of the poor provides many such opportunities for wealth creation, eagerly seized upon by education entrepreneurs and the well-financed reformers who wrought such transformations (Ball, 2012). Our chapter theorizes the operation of schooling for the poor on neoliberal terms and demonstrates the main points with empirical illustrations. We begin by disclosing our understanding of neoliberalism in general.

In our reading, neoliberalism is the ideology of globally ascendant advanced capitalism; that is, the ideology of globalization (A. Howley & C.B. Howley, 2007). In this schema, globalization is the postindustrial worldwide manifestation of free trade under neoliberal economic rules, which emphasize market liberalization, strong private property rights, deregulation, privatization of public enterprises (such as public education), and reduction of public funding for social services (Bauman, 1998; De Blij, 2009; Harvey, 2005). Neoliberalism provides support and warrant for globalization with its themes of individual liberty; the rule of law (insofar as it protects individual rights and unfettered commerce); distrust of state economic intervention; and above all, the market understood as the guarantor of overall prosperity (Harvey, 2005; Turner, 2008). In this conception, wealth represents the common good (regardless of maldistribution).

We approach this work in part from our rural West Virginia background and in part from our involvement with rural education internationally. We see rural ways of living and knowing as harboring purposes alternative to those promoted by neoliberal rhetoric and with immense practical importance for the troubled century ahead (see, e.g., C. B. Howley, A. Howley, & Johnson, 2014;
These alternative purposes have a great deal to do with domesticity (see Jackson, 1996, for a statement of education that involves making a homeplace); kinship, family, and community (see Theobald, 1997, for a relevant rural education classic); and involvement with the land (see Leopold, 1949, for the classic formulation of the construct of “land ethic” and Orr, 1996, for assertion of the need to re-ruralize education).

Appalachia—where we live and work—is infamous for its history of depredations in the name of extractive profit-making (Eller, 2008; Gaventa, 1982; Williams, 2001). We do not, therefore, see neoliberalism or globalization as representing any species of postmodern rupture. Rather, it seems to us an old war, fought on much the same terms. We find the emergence of neoliberalism as a bona fide ideology for globalized capitalism curious overall. Although it is used principally to justify exploitation and resource extraction across the globe, our concern here is a sort of intensification, and internalization, in the US of such extractive enterprises—a wicked sort of innovation.

From this outlook, grounded in our understanding of neoliberalism and globalization, and in our experiences and work in Appalachia, we discuss (1) education research about branded interventions, (2) cycles of school closure and replacement with charter schools, (3) federally-mandated supplemental education services, (4) credentialism, (5) the explosion of student education debt, and the (6) rapid growth of for-profit colleges. We argue that these measures are manifestations of the ideology of globalization (aka “neoliberalism”), and that they represent varied improvisations of neoliberal influence on education policy and practice. Throughout the discussion we give examples and revisit our building argument and evidence.

The question is endlessly complex, but we think there are two very different answers in play, both fairly simple. The most popular and self-evident answer in the US (Bénabou & Tirole, 2006) is that the poor cause poverty (Lerner, 1980; Smith, 1985). Eliminate them and you eliminate poverty. According to this view, the poor are increasingly abundant because they breed ferociously and thereby propagate the
vices that make their children poor in the future (see Angus & Butler, 2011, for the upshot under neoliberal rules).

Far less acceptable in the US is the explanation that the rich cause poverty (see the French economist Thomas Piketty, 2014, for a compatible explanation). This account, a systemic one, is by no means so self-evident as the first. But we find it more believable and—as an explanation rather than a tautology—in fact simpler (Occam’s razor). From this perspective, poverty is socially arranged, and the impoverished do not make the arrangements. This essay takes up one feature of these social arrangements: how “the rich” in the US today use schooling to enlarge their profit stream.

There is room for debate on these interpretations, of course. The parties of the debate are easy to identify, and the middle ground is very narrow. Note, though, that the popular theory (e.g., Ruby Payne’s 1996 *The framework for understanding poverty*)—that the poor cause poverty—implies that training the children of the impoverished to good habits will eliminate poverty, precisely by eliminating impoverishment from the succeeding generation (i.e., with the new prevalence of virtuous habits). And this theory is now the reactionary path chosen for schooling the poor in the US (Ravitch, 2013). It seems to us, however, that good morals, and even ethical thinking itself, do not, and never have, ensured a fair distribution of resources or of life-chances.

From another vantage point, however, we can see plainly that the popular strategy is doomed. (It has been tried repeatedly, of course: that is why it is so appealing in the present, modernized with scientism; see our consideration of contemporary education research, below.) But the strategy’s effectiveness hardly matters—because culturally and economically it so clearly fits the US jurisdiction. There is profit to be made from the poor; we do not actually want them to vanish. A proven doomed strategy is perfect for the purpose of profit making.

We call this program of exploitation “farming the poor” after the 18th-century English practice of letting private contracts for the operation of workhouses—and allowing operators to keep any income generated from inhabitants’ work. Justified by an ideology of personal entrepreneurial responsibility in which the marketplace is the natural framework for human interaction, the contemporary “farming” program ensures that the schooling of poor students at once broadcasts their alleged failures and also demonstrates well their “need” for market-based interventions. In the neoliberal scheme of things, the poor are a different kind of “social capital”—that is, as a social group, they are a source of income for entrepreneurial do-gooders.

What distinguishes 18th-century “farming” from the 21st-century version? Just about everything: the two metaphorical farming operations are as different as actual 18th century agriculture and 21st century agribusiness. We explain, below, an industrial (postindustrial, if you must) phenomenon of capitalist (not pre-capitalist) wealth accumulation. And more than that, of course: with capitalist business models dominating public school administration for at least 100 years (Callahan, 1962) and curriculum for at least 50 (Kliebard, 2000), private enterprise has determined it
can profitably assume day-to-day control of publically funded schools and districts (see, e.g., Berliner & Glass, 2014). It is an amazing development for “the world’s oldest democracy.” Indeed, we imagine such development means that democracy is moribund … for the time being.¹

We begin, perhaps perversely, with a consideration of education research and development (R&D). It might seem that education research has little to do with the sordid reality of processes of impoverishment, but here we attempt to demonstrate its deep implication in farming the poor. Next, we examine the neoliberal nitty-gritty of K-12 schooling: charter schools, education management organizations, and supplemental services—all of which are features of privatization under the corporate practice of “outsourcing.” The State (as distinct from a real public or any particular government) retains nominal authority over these practices, but it is useful to remember that “nominal” means in name only. Next follows a parallel treatment of higher learning in America: rather, the very low-down on its higher learning—the elimination of working-class alternatives to college, easy credit and hard debt for the working poor, and expansion of the for-profit postsecondary education sector. With much regret, we suspect that “liberal learning” is today far more likely to oppress the poor than to liberate.

Farming the Poor with R&D

In this section we consider (1) the redirection of education R&D toward corporate purpose; (2) the privatization of government education contracts; (3) the utilization of the medical model for establishing effective “interventions” and (4) the branding of “what-works” curricula. These topics, because they represent a level of systemic oversight, and authoritative and comparatively prestigious direction, suggest a comprehensive critique of neoliberal intrusions into schooling. We do not have sufficient space to articulate such an analysis, but we do observe privatization and neoliberal ideology have not only invaded school operations (Molnar, 1996), they have more recently come to dominate education research itself (Baez & Boyles, 2009). Illustrations are easy to find. Xerox (2013), for instance, offers the following hint to its devotion to education “research and development” (R&D):

Researchers at the Xerox Research Center Webster in New York, invented the Xerox Ignite™ Educator Support System, a one-of-a-kind workflow and software solution that pushes hand-marked student work (on paper today or on tablets tomorrow) into the digital analytics domain—making it faster for teachers to evaluate student work and easier to address the reality that students learn concepts at different paces and in different ways.

The Xerox site includes (1) requisite praise from the superintendent of an affluent district and (2) testimony from one of Xerox’s “principal scientists.”

Science is a key word here. The districts for which improvement is shrilly demanded are not at all like the one guided by the superintendent who permitted
Xerox to quote and name him. Districts said to be in need of improvement are far more likely to serve very impoverished communities (e.g., Olsen & Sexton, 2009; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009). Holding impoverished districts “accountable” means they have a seemingly desperate need for the transformative scientific power of Xerox. No Child Left Behind (PL 107-110, 2001) (NCLB) and Race to the Top (funded by PL 111-5, 2009) demand it of them: they must improve, and they must use scientifically correct products to do so. It’s the law.

The appearance of the “scientist” is thus among other things a Xerox marketing ploy that ties educators to the language of NCLB, Race to the Top, and the Education Sciences Reform Act (PL 107-279) (ESRA). Of course, the new research regime provides the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) to find and encourage the more rigorous (scientifically correct) research that might belie inflated corporate claims (see Schoenfeld, 2006; and WWC, 2013). We address this misguided saving grace later in our discussion of branded products, near the end of this section.

Brief R&D background. A little background about the business of American education research seems in order. Americans do a lot of it (for a European contrast, see Rey, 2011). For one, we train nearly all education doctoral students to conduct studies—and 6,500 education-school candidates earn terminal degrees each year by completing dissertations (Snyder & Dillow, 2011). Thereafter, many take tenure-track positions in colleges of education that impose research expectations, and as a result hundreds of education research journals publish many thousands of research articles annually. This training enterprise is famously uneven and decentralized (Eisenhardt & DeHaan, 2005), and it is therefore difficult to control from any federal or national center. The conservative regime nonetheless already exerts effective influence with two principal extant policy instruments.

First, well-funded research is literally the most valuable to contemporary universities (Baez & Boyles, 2009; Giroux, 2007). Large federal awards not only swell an institution’s total revenue stream, but universities seize 50% or more to administer the work. Competition is intense, and proposals too often make inflated claims—about closing achievement gaps, ensuring transformation, or sustaining systemic change. The promises cannot ever be fulfilled (Scott, 1998), and the funded efforts typically fail to deliver (Ravitch, 2000, 2011).

Second, through the mandates of ESRA, the regime has already remade in its own image the progressive research infrastructure it inherited from what Bickel (2013) calls “the era of the Social Contract.” Federal research centers, regional educational labs, comprehensive technical assistance centers, the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) system—all have been repurposed and privatized. And the repurposing includes the WWC—which advertises and brands commercial materials as scientifically good (see below).

The State has effectively intruded, on behalf of corporate power, into the domain responsible for conceptualizing and understanding what “education” is, how it might work, and does work; and evades publicly funded schooling on behalf of the common
good (or, now, arguably on behalf of the public good). A fox (capital) in sheep’s clothing (scientism) rules the hen house: this is the ruse this section illustrates.

Redirecting the focus of education R&D toward corporate purpose. The fundamental condition needed by a more corporate R&D effort is a schooling purpose that is more corporate. This has already happened:

The [Common Core] standards are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers. With American students fully prepared for the future, our communities will be best positioned to compete successfully in the global economy. (Common Core, 2013, ¶ 1)

This is momentously hideous language, according to some observers (e.g., Ravitch, 2013; Theobald, 2009), but few educators object because it is now so commonplace. It was different in the past. Studies (e.g., Downey, 1960; Taggart, 1980) actually asked ordinary Americans what they wanted from their schools, across four broad domains: (1) intellectual and academic, (2) instrumental and productive, (3) social and political, and (4) esthetic or spiritual. The list now seems breathtaking and even transgressive. In fact, since 1983 (the year in which President Ronald Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education’s report, *A Nation at Risk*, was published, claiming widespread educational failure and launching a new era of education reform) hardly any researcher has published peer-reviewed work asking such questions of ordinary people (Emery, 2002; C. B. Howley, Picket, Brown, & Kay, 2011). But the language of contemporary content standards (e.g., the Common Core), philanthropic education agendas (e.g., The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014), federal education law (e.g., NCLB), finds warrant in corporate aims.

We conclude that Paul Theobald’s claim is correct: corporate experts and politicians have arrogated to themselves the exclusive right to define educational purpose (Theobald, 2009). Again, this development is relatively new, and it is “hegemonic” in the startling way characteristic of neoliberal intrusions. That is, corporate power and needs predominate, horizontally (all schools) and vertically (from supply closet to White House). Massively repurposed education needs a repurposed R&D effort, and since 2002 ESRA has provided the federal authority and the means for creating “newly professionalized education scientists,” as Baez and Boyle (2009, KL 283) call them. A vast R&D enterprise thus comes under the direct and indirect sway of neoliberal purpose, with federal dollars and neoliberal ideology leading the way, assisted, of course, by impatient philanthropists like Bill Gates (see, e.g., Ball, 2012; Klonsky, 2011). Redirecting federal education R&D funds to corporate ledgers has proven very easy: the State need simply allow a larger proportion of private firms to bid on education R&D contracts—and this is precisely what has happened within the past decade.
**Privatizing Government Education Contracts.** During the era of the Social Contract (Bickel, 2013), the federal government assumed a progressive stance in education. *Brown v. Board* (1954) brought the nastiness of American schooling to center stage, and Sputnik (in 1957) upset American leaders in a different way. In the mid-1960s, the federal government established the technical assistance infrastructure mentioned previously (centers, laboratories, ERIC). Grants and contracts went to non-profit entities, organizations whose official raison d’être was the public good, an arrangement that fostered critique and thoughtfulness. Notable resulting contributions include the Coleman Report (Coleman, Campbell, Hobson, McPartland, Weinfeld, & York, 1966)—which discovered that schooling systematically reinforced social inequality, and Jerome Bruner’s social studies curriculum (Bruner, 1965).

This kind of intellectual independence is not of interest to the Institute for Education Sciences (IES), the successor to the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (IES, 2013), which oversees contemporary federally-funded education research. Thus today, the non-profit provision is gone, and large for-profit research firms have received contracts to operate much of the infrastructure (in many cases providing fewer services and engaging practitioners hardly at all).

At the very outset of the new R&D regime in 2002 (the year in which ESRA was enacted), a prominent psychologist observed:

> It will be difficult to enlist the current generation of self-styled educational evaluators behind a banner promoting more experimentation. Fortunately or unfortunately, they are not needed for this task. They are not part of the current flurry of controlled experimentation now underway. And while the future demand for experiments cannot be predicted accurately, it may well be possible to meet all this demand with staff from contract research firms and university faculty in the policy sciences. (Cook, 2002, pp. 195–196)

Cook’s implication that the government would look more kindly on corporations than on colleges of education proved correct. We explain the purposes and outcomes of all these experiments (“branding”) under the next two headings.

**Using the pharmaceutical model for establishing effective “Interventions.”** The experiments Cook championed in the quoted passage turn out, under IES leadership, to concern product testing on the model of drug testing. The question is: will the drug (education material) work to cure the disease (low test scores)?

Though predictable, adoption of the pharmaceutical model for education research is truly odd. Education—even the regimented form known as schooling—does not involve, and is not at base, the treatment of disease. Even teaching is not administration of a treatment, except in the jargon of experimentation (teachers deliver “interventions” cf. Cook, 2002). Experiments can certainly be useful, but they are by no means the best forms of education research (Phillips, 2006). Neither the capacity to read nor to do arithmetic (let alone to pursue wisdom) cures anything,
especially not ignorance, which remains pervasive because it is an existential condition. Education is quite literally “lifelong learning” it is a regimen of varying purposes, qualities, and forms. One lives and learns variously.

To stick with the tiresome pharmaceutical metaphor, then, “education” is more like diet than like disease. Alas, medical research about the effects of diet would not be so promising as drug testing. Taubes (2007) gives a detailed and nuanced account of the distortions provided by medical science in the name of dietary advice: it is a tale of good intentions and bad counsel, replete with large sums that education researchers can only dream of. In any case, the complexities of diet, its systemic character, and the many variants that are both culturally possible and healthy, seem a far better metaphor for education (even for schooling) than the administration of drugs.

Indeed, growing and learning humans—via healthy diets (whatever they might prove to be)—become increasingly circumspect and better able, in at least one formulation (e.g., Freire & Macedo, 1987), to “read the world and the word” in its assorted guises. This alternative outlook on a continuous and enlarging view of education purpose and process foregrounds the oddness of the regime’s utilitarian choice. Theirs is said to be a conservative outlook, but a truly conservative outlook consistently commends a liberal education (e.g., Barzun, 1959; Finn, Ravitch, & Fancher, 1984; Kirk, 1996)—one that used to promise intellectual enlargement. Apparently, the State and its backers now intend something else—something other than education proper—for the schooling they are prepared to fund.

Where does this impoverished form of schooling come from? It comes from poor schooling, directly from the example of the State’s own poor stewardship of schools for the poor—especially those in collapsing cities dominated by huge and largely dysfunctional school bureaucracies (see Anyon, 1980, for a classic study of this impoverished outlook on schooling). The inspiration for private enterprise is clear: business should be able to do marginally better, but for still less money. After all, the postindustrial mantra for public service actually is more for less—the very opposite of Ted Sizer’s famous “more is less” (Sizer, 1984).

The plan for impoverished schooling, then, hardly aims to educate the poor. Indeed, curing the poor through administration of marginally effective treatments will devolve to a disappointing formulaic exercise because, as Ravitch (2011) suggests, the overall plan is punitive. The reformers cannot imagine that the qualities of places and students not only remain relevant, but that they are the educative point: communities, families, and ways of living on earth. Though so far the evidence is obscure and contradictory, it is possible that with cheaper, smaller, privatized schools, entrepreneurs might be able to tweak test scores a bit higher overall. Such a plan is not the “game-changer” so frequently advertised.

Finally, one might observe that although medical treatment of disease with drugs is sometimes richly effective (with pharmaceutical firms posting durable profits thereby), the treatment cannot actually eliminate disease. In fact, excessive attention to pharmacy distracts medicine as a whole from addressing health. We imagine,
then, that this oversight is the part of the metaphor that does apply: with education representing the process of health, and educational impoverishment the process of disease. The industry needs the disease: health reduces the profit stream, just as an actual cure for diabetes would do.  

What-works branded curricula. Some good, if not much, can come from comparing Everyday Math to Saxon Math—even though neither is a drug nor ignorance of mathematics a disease. It is reasonable, we think, to know how such products compare overall, though the knowledge cannot say if your school should use either with your students, in your community, in your place, and in your culture.

Exactly that presumption, though, is behind the mandate (it is an official order in law via various federal education programs) that educators use only scientifically correct products: those for which experiments have developed some (not very much) evidence of (partial) effectiveness. The research branch that synthesizes this knowledge (and has displaced the ERIC system as the principal collection of relevant education information) is the WWC. One of us has concluded that the What Works Clearinghouse has found “not much that works and that what does work does not work all that much” (C. B. Howley, 2009, p. 7). The results are as disappointing as ever, as they must be given the nature of reality (see e.g., Patton, 2011; Ravitch, 2011; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Walters & Lareau, 2009).

Like many educators, and some neoliberally-oppressed scholars, we ourselves are certain that schooling in impoverished places could be better. But decreeing that educators in those places use well-branded products (PL 107–110, 2001) will not come close to supplying the want. When the disappointment sets in, however, we predict it will not be the regime that will be rightly held to account: it will be the educators, the families, the communities, and the entire cultures (including children themselves).

One of the most famously branded “interventions” is the highly-scripted Success For All effort. The WWC (2009) deploys its approval in its characteristic formulaic language:

The WWC considers the extent of evidence for SFA® to be medium to large for alphabolics, comprehension, and general reading achievement. No studies that meet WWC evidence standards with or without reservations addressed fluency. (WWC, 2009, p. 1)

Success For All, the corporation, however, is predictably enthusiastic:

With two decades of research, hundreds of testimonials, and results from forty-seven states, Success for All is proven to achieve results .... Central Elementary School in Pennsylvania went from failing to thriving in one year with Success for All — showing remarkable gains in reading and math. Read how they did it. (SFA, 2014, ¶ 3, ¶ 1)
As the WWC branding parties know, substantiating positive (causal) effects in past “implementations” are only a first step to securing effects in the future, in additional locations. Brining to scale an innovation known to cause gains means that new sites (e.g., for SFA) must exhibit a high level of “fidelity of implementation.” That is: they have to do it right. No improvisation, no innovation, and few changes at all are allowed—that work is reserved for the experts. These causal affirmations arising from RCTs mean, in fact, that failure of gains to materialize indicates that the causal factor has somehow been subverted. And who will be blamed for such subversion? Teachers and administrators, and perhaps students and families.

But what is education research, really? The doing of education is difficult, after all, because conducting human and social life is difficult and complex. In this light, anticipating and actually planning to invent, test, and prescribe effective and efficient methods that educators must ape with high fidelity is not just intellectually myopic, it is educationally deceptive (see, e.g., Baez & Boyles, 2009, and Phillips, 2006, for somewhat similar perspectives). In our experience of teaching and watching teachers teach, we are fairly sure that teaching requires continual innovation and improvisation. It seems to us good when it involves the active collaboration of students and teachers, and that insight means teachers need to respond to their students in ways that cannot be predicted (see Cohen, 1988, for a compatible interpretation).

On this view, the neoliberally-reformed research regime seems purposively short-sighted to normalize myopia among education researchers. Thus we tend to agree with observers like Bruner (1996) that the work of education research, in particular among other types of inquiry, is thoughtfulness itself. Yes, practicality is required, because education research is indeed an applied science—but the vision propagated by IES is both impractical and thoughtless. A pluralistic research enterprise is essential to teaching and learning, to schooling, to education, and to the project of thoughtfulness itself. Without thoughtfulness, practicality is not, we think, possible. The relationship between practicality and thoughtfulness can be seen in the improvisations that good teachers take as they respond to their students. To support this enterprise a variety of research forms seems advisable.9

Divestment, Displacement, Replacement and Misplacement

This section considers policies that render country and city neighborhoods and their schools as useful zones for educational profiteers: (1) identification of “failing” schools and the federally-mandated provision of private tutoring; (2) cycles of school closure as part of the State’s divestment of public responsibilities in city neighborhoods and country places; (3) the introduction of charter schools to divested spaces, many of them led by education management organizations (EMOs); and (4) tightened relationships between home valuation and the advertised quality of schools (see Lipman, 2011, for an excellent autopsy of such cycles).
Helping the Poor to Buy Tutoring. Federally-mandated private tutoring services (known as “supplemental education services” or SES) divert public education dollars to private entities, as a stop-gap to avoiding NCLB-mandated school closure. Section 1116(e) of NCLB stipulates that Title I schools (with 40% or more of students eligible for subsidized meals) identified as “in need of improvement” must (1) offer low-income parents a list of tutoring organizations approved by the state (for-profit, non-profit, and district entities); (2) pay for services selected by parents; and (3) continue to support tutoring services from approved vendors until the schools are no longer categorized as in need of improvement.

Immediately upon this mandate, private tutoring companies rushed to qualify as providers. One team of investigators reported revenue growth on the order of 100% to 500% (Burch, Steinberg & Donovan, 2007). As larger firms capture more market share, of course, they enlarge class sizes (Burch et al., 2007): profit depends on efficiency. Burch and colleagues also found that fees correlated with firm size: individual tutors cannot exploit the market presence of a Kaplan or Sylvan. Said the president of one large provider, “We’re in business to make money” (Walsh, 2002).

Clearly, the SES mandate was a neoliberal windfall for tutoring companies; whereas wealthy and middle-class families had been their primary consumers, vendors now had federally-mandated access to students from impoverished families (Burch, Steinberg & Donovan, 2007). Vergari (2007) observed, however, that the SES “policy reflects the tenet that public education dollars belong to families rather than to school districts” (pp. 316–17). Two propositions, then, are legitimized here: (1) redirecting public funds to private hands makes sense and (2) the State supports parents in the disestablishment of public schooling. The latter proposition is less evident, more nuanced, more important, and very functional as a subtext: it is arguably one way to help colonize the public mind to the desired end—the fully colonized public mind is neoliberalism’s best defense (see Scott, 1998, on a prostate civil society, and Gaventa, 1980, for an Appalachian example).

With the introduction in 2011 of federal waivers of certain NCLB requirements in exchange for the implementation of other accountability measures, some states have chosen to continue supporting supplemental education services although not required to do so (McNeil, 2012). Not surprisingly, vendors expressed dismay at the loss of revenue but are positioning themselves to take advantage of school, district, and state relationships developed via SES provision to identify new business opportunities (Molnar, 2013).

So, how has SES been of help to children from “failing” schools? The large size and “market share” of the leading providers hardly guarantees success with their new clientele. SES diverts public funds to private contractors; the whole school may or may not benefit; and suppliers do not, after all, have to be “highly qualified” like the teachers whose failed efforts they are supplementing (Public Education Network, 2013). One recent study of NCLB-mandated supplemental education services suggests that students are more likely to perform better after receiving a minimum
threshold of approximately 40 hours of tutoring—but the gains are predictably small and not significant (Heinrich & Burch, 2011). Moreover, accumulating 40 hours was difficult, the researchers found: school funds were limited and hourly rates high. And in fact, the US Department of Education’s own study of the impact of SES found that students who got services did not perform statistically significantly better than their peers who did not receive tutoring (Deke, Dragoset, Bogen & Gill, 2012).

Displacing the poor and their schools. Neoliberal urban renewal, ironically enough, recommends school closure to improve neighborhoods. School and district consolidation has already been a blunt policy instrument in rural places across the entire 20th century (C. B. Howley, Johnson & Petrie, 2011). The logical result, long confirmed in rural regions, is larger schools designed to exact a greater achievement cost from impoverished students (Bickel & C.B. Howley, 2000).

But as the neoliberal school closure argument apparently goes, persistently struggling schools require dramatic intervention to improve—and what is more dramatic than death? Particularly after the Great Recession of 2008, policymakers increasingly called for the closure of neighborhood schools by the hundreds, in neighborhoods more segregated than they had been in 1954 (see, e.g., Orfield, 2001). Coupled with a new recessionary economic urgency, state and local authorities deployed the “saving money” argument widely used in other school closure enterprises (Howley et al., 2011). Unfortunately, studies find that closing urban schools contributes almost nothing to resolving cities' fiscal crises (e.g., Dowdall, 2011; Farmer, Pulido, Konkol, Phillippo, Stovall & Klonsky, 2013).

Predictably, school closure is followed by displacement and destabilization as public investments decline, neighbors leave, and businesses shutter. But what was once “blight” becomes real estate newly available for gentrification, as public neighborhood schools are replaced with charter schools (along with selective enrollment and magnet schools) to attract middle-class and wealthy families (Lipman, 2011).

We need to be clear that this sort of enterprise reinforces the class- and race-based segregation of American neighborhoods and schools. White flight, for instance, is one expression of this tendency. Although that flight is largely over because whites have massively sorted themselves out of many cities, when the racial proportions do change, small flights often ensue, as Volk (2014) observed in comparatively rural Garden City, Kansas. It is a vicious, de facto, and effective version of “school improvement”—and a common one, as the Detroit, Philadelphia, and Chicago experiences attest.

Like the rural Appalachian coalfields, some of America’s great cities have also become national sacrifice zones. Orr (2009) has observed that permanent destruction of land and water, theft of property value, and decimation of community in Appalachia are ignored nationally (and embraced locally by the powerful). Perhaps the reason is that the poor are supposed to serve this sacrificial purpose. According to Orr (2009, p. 113), the coalfields “are a third-world colony within the United States,
a national sacrifice zone in which fairness, decency, and the rights of old and young alike are discarded as unnecessary on behalf of the national obsession with ‘cheap’ electricity.” On this logic, Detroit has outlived its purpose: who now needs it since the auto industry has declined? The answer might be Kaplan, Sylvan, and for-profit education management organizations (EMOs) … for the moment.

The privatized school displacing the government school. Neoliberal renewal efforts suggest replacing now-closed neighborhood schools with “public” charter schools, of which more than a third (Miron, Urschel, Aguilar & Dailey, 2011) are run by for-profit EMOs. Originally imagined as models of innovation (Budde, 1988) with the cooperation of teacher unions, they have now become big business—a Big Enchilada in Jonathan Kozol’s (2007) telling, and they have helped keep union membership low and falling—from about 16% in 2009 to about 11% in 2012 (Rebarber & Zgainer, 2014).

The narrative in support of charter schools increasingly argues that chartering provides an important source of entrepreneurial competition among so-called “traditional” public schools, which will in turn be inspired to produce better student outcomes for fear of losing market share to charters. Charter schools are said to empower parents with consumer choice: if dissatisfied with their government school, they can turn to the marketplace for immediate improvement. Once this principle is established—as it already is—advocates can “advance their ideas in moral terms by appealing directly to a parent’s presumed right to choose” (Lubienski, 2001, p. 9; see Smarick, 2014, for a recent display of this assumption). The Council of Chief State School Officers (2013, p. 4), with feigned neutrality, has also listed reasons for the phenomenal growth of choice options: “to increase the availability of high-quality options in communities without equal access; to drive improvement through marketplace competition; or to promote individual liberty.” Such provisions reflect the neoliberal infatuation with, for instance, world-class performance (“high-quality options”), the appropriateness of marketing metaphors to every human domain, and, of course, the elevation of liberty well above the other democratic virtues (fraternity and equality).

The future of the charter school movement will have to be led by school management companies like Concept Schools. It's not just their concentration on science, technology, engineering and math; it's their persistent and determined focus on student achievement and the end goal of career and college-ready graduates. (Williams Sims, Concept Schools CEO; as cited by Phillis, 2014)

In place of a social project that accrues benefits to the commons and is open to all, the conversion to the consumer-choice model remakes education as shopping: pulling from the shelf what one prefers for one’s own private reasons. The public system now being dismantled in this way is the prize for generations of struggle. Consider that the US has never been able to construct a healthcare system on a similar basis—as the furor over the recent Affordable Care Act changes makes very clear. To imagine the neoliberal end-game for schooling, think of a system
of schooling that looks more like American health care. Education on this model would be a sort of risk management. Insurance companies—society’s professional risk-management experts—could help, no doubt. Risk-management, indeed, is the neoliberal idea behind the model of district administration dubbed “portfolio management.” Just as one seeks profits from a variety of investment holdings (the “portfolio”), the education management scheme known as “portfolio management” seeks to maximize test scores by manipulating districts’ varied holdings: “traditional,” chartered, specialized, vocational, residential—the possible variety could be wide, especially for large and very large districts. But the large, consolidated, rural-county districts in West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia could be places the portfolio model might be “brought to scale.” As Berliner and Glass (2014, pp. 193–198) note, portfolio management is a way to manage the investment one brings to exploiting the poor: “In the spirit of refusing to invest in, protect, or care for schools that produce uncompetitive test scores, [portfolio-managed districts] divest themselves of such schools.”

Charter schools farm the poor, rather than students generally, because they are frequently authorized to replace existing, non-charter public schools with low student achievement—schools that, because of the very strong association of achievement and poverty, tend to serve large proportions of impoverished students (Palardy, 2013). As such, charter schools are presented by education reformers and neoliberal advocates as an innovative public-private market solution to bad schools in impoverished neighborhoods and communities. Let private enterprise farm the poor for (inevitably) better results. It makes sense that the charter-school industry will seek to operate, not just schools, but entire public-school districts: industry lobbying for this predictable agenda is indeed underway, targeting impoverished urban and rural areas (see, e.g., Hill, 2006; Smarick, 2014).

As of this writing, 5,997 charters are in operation, representing 6.3% of all public schools in the nation (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2013). Their number has grown by roughly 7% each year since 2008; only eight states do not permit charter schools. In terms of total expenditures, charter school districts spend 19% less per pupil than regular public schools, allocating proportionately fewer dollars toward instruction, teacher pay, and student support services and more toward administrative costs (Miron & Urschel, 2010). Some sources (e.g., Rebarber & Zgainer, 2014, p. 10) report that charter schools augment their public resources via private fund-raising.

Support, both ideological and financial, comes from the highest levels of power. For instance, charter schools receive monies from state and local sources, but may also be funded by competitive grants from the US Department of Education’s multi-million dollar Charter Schools Program. The federal Race to the Top competition also included considerable incentives for applicant states to enact new charter school legislation or expand the number of charters authorized each year. Charters also receive munificent funding from private foundations such as Albertson, Gates, and Walton (see, e.g., Whittinghill, 2011).
Despite the enormous investment of public and private funds in this venture, the effectiveness of charter schools is mixed—even when using the neoliberal advocates’ preferred unitary metric of test scores (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2006; Miron, Evergreen & Urschel, 2008). In one large and widely-cited study across 27 states and approximately 1.5 million charter and traditional public school matched pairs of students, charter school students had an average of 0.01 to 0.03 standard deviations higher growth scores on state math and reading tests than their matched counterparts at traditional public schools (Center for Research on Educational Outcomes, 2013). More than a quarter (29%) of charters in the study had higher achievement than traditional public schools, nearly a third (31%) had lower scores, and the remainder (40%) performed similarly. A meta-analysis of charter school research likewise finds that charter schools do not consistently outperform traditional public schools (Betts & Tang, 2011).

Closely linked with charter schools are the private entities (EMOs) that operate charter schools under contract, often for profit. In other words, public funds are provided to EMOs to run and sometimes establish new charter schools. For-profit EMOs run in 33 states, and non-profit EMOs in 29 (Miron et al., 2011). In 2010–11, 35% (n=758) of all charter schools were managed by for-profit EMOs, 79 of which are “virtual” schools (Miron et al., 2011).

As with charter schools in general, the test-score effectiveness of those operated by EMOs varies widely (Furgeson et al., 2012; MacIver & Maclver, 2007; Mathis, 2009). EMO-run schools tend to be less diverse than the local public school districts in which they are situated (Miron et al., 2011) and employ teachers with less experience (MacIver & Maclver, 2007). EMOs have also used profits to advance the interests of privatization through lobbying, political campaign contributions, and the development of model legislation (Davis, 2013).

The high profile that comes with market share is not always welcomed by EMOs. For example, White Hat Management, an EMO that received hundreds of millions in funding to operate charter schools in Ohio, was sued by 10 school boards and the Ohio Department of Education; just two percent of its students demonstrated “adequate yearly progress” per NCLB requirements. The attorney representing White Hat, though, was adamant that public funds became private once they entered White Hat’s coffers: “If I’m Coca-Cola, and you’re a Coca-Cola distributor or a Coca-Cola purchaser,” said the attorney, “that doesn’t entitle you to know the Coke formula or find any financial information you’d be interested in learning from the Coca-Cola company. And that’s kind of what they’re [the Ohio Department of Education] demanding” (quoted by Coutts, 2011, ¶11).

Poor schools sell houses. The common school is a hallowed idea in the ideology of American schooling, and at one time it seemed consistent with the American dream of a classless society. In America we still pretend social class does not exist, but the poor are nonetheless getting poorer and the rich much, much richer. Schooling helps here, too.
The comparatively affluent, with abundant fiscal free will, can shop even for public schools; they do not really need chartering as do the poor (to parrot the industry rationale of “need”). The affluent shop simply by purchasing houses in reputedly good attendance areas, or newly gentrified and “renewed” neighborhoods: it is that simple—for them. The poor enjoy this choice, of course, much more weakly, but overall, their existence serves another purpose entirely in this phase of the schooling game.

Although the common school was a bold (outrageous) ideal, it withered across the course of the industrializing 20th century. Residential zones were segregated by class and race, and the developing national education system settled into place on that basis—there was little enough “commonality.” Buy the right house, and homeowners inherited the right school, and they still do: only the rich enjoy fiscal free will. But how does one exercise such freedom in judging the right school?

The troubled schools of the poor establish the applicable baseline. In the past, home buyers acted on common sense and insider information. Expensive housing probably indicated good schools, and lovely school buildings were an adornment to lovely neighborhoods. But it was all still only a rough guide. Today, “state report cards” provide a scientifically correct guide. An affluent home buyer can now go further than previously possible and compare neighborhoods at a finer grain by comparing the varied test-score metrics. Are the schools in Bryn Mawr, PA, better or worse than those in Radnor, four miles distant? Both are fabulously affluent places on Philadelphia’s “mainline” with the sort of homes and neighborhoods that many Americans envy. But which is objectively better?

Is there an empirical link between test scores and the domestic real estate market (all else equal)? Haurin and Brasington (1996) studied the relationship in nearly 30,000 households from a variety of metropolitan neighborhoods; the regression explained an adjusted $R^2$ of 70%. This is very high for any study relevant to schooling. Of the 44 independent variables, 34 were significant at $p < .01$: and two of these reflected local schools’ test scores. The authors conclude, “We find that a measure of student achievement is very important in explaining spatial variations in real constant-quality house prices” (p. 335). If you must think conventionally, go with Radnor’s A- over Bryn Mawr’s B+, or look for the real winner somewhere nearby—the one sporting an actual A. Wealthy housing buyers apparently do look.

So where do the poor come into the calculation? Radnor and Bryn Mawr are at the top of the heap because accountability provisions gather the goods on the really bad schools, for instance, right next door in Philadelphia (F!!). Schooling for the poor demonstrates the putative excellence of the schools in places where the affluent buy housing. The poor add value in this way to the housing of the rich (and, of course, those who trade in such housing).

To summarize the argument thus far, and going backwards toward the beginning, we have suggested that under neoliberal rules, everyone (even those impoverished under such rules) and every organization is a customer: those who buy into A+ catchment areas by purchasing houses in them; districts that acquire portfolios of
school types as an investment strategy; administrators who supply their own local customers with branded education products; the parents who confront whatever choices on offer in the market thus arranged—and the government (to end at the beginning) that buys research shorn of critical capacity and intellectual breadth. More particularly, in all of this “liberalization” the poor—as Gans (1994) brilliantly suggested—have myriad productive functions. Part of the productivity is symbolic (as in providing justification for corporate intrusions into urban and rural schooling, or as the anchor to educational value scales), but the poor also play an active role by continuing to exist. To a certain unknown point of imbalance (where their anger cannot be contained), their numbers can (as they do) grow, a growth that redounds to the benefit of the marketplace.

The poor, however, also have a useful role, a quite literal one, in themselves making money. Readers may not realize that debt is money in economic terms (Heilbroner & Thurow, 1998). For example, the credit-card debt that the poor accrue with interest rates up to 20% or so—much higher than inflation, and much higher than that applied to the affluent. When the poor go into debt, then, they literally make money. A good source of such money-making on the backs of the poor is, in fact, higher education. The neoliberal cant about schooling purposes insists (nearly) everyone be prepared for college, which has become enormously expensive in the US.

Farming the Poor through Credentialism

In this section, we examine policies and practices that encourage the impoverished to seek ever-higher levels of postsecondary education, regardless of the dubious connection between such training and the functional knowledge and skills required for work. We discuss (1) the contemporary emphasis, in the teeth of rising income inequality, on higher education for all; (2) resultant increases in student debt, particularly among the young and poor; and (3) the growth of for-profit institutions of higher education, which rely largely on monies students acquire through federal education loans.

Banking on college for all. Many nations have made the mistake of over-stressing higher education. In the US, the sheer number of students enrolled in college has increased nearly ten-fold, from 2,338,226 in 1947 to 21,016,126 in 2010 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012): this represents a 799% increase, compared to an increase of 104% in the total United States population during roughly the same period (1950 – 2010) (United States Census Bureau, 2014). Perhaps more revealingly, the percentage of young people enrolling in postsecondary institutions has grown substantially. In 1967, 25.5% of the 18-24 population was enrolled in college; by 2010, the proportion had risen to 41.2% (Snyder & Dillow, 2011). Interestingly, the overall increase between 1990 and 2000 was 11%, but between 2000 and 2010 it was 35% (Snyder & Dillow, 2011)—a likely effect of the Great Recession.
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Such growth in college attendance is not really a matter of rational choice; there are other, more proximate antecedents. In the contemporary US, all high school students hear the message that they should get a four-year degree to earn bigger salaries (Kirwan, 2009). This simplistic message embeds several missteps especially dubious for students from impoverished families. First is debt (Pascarelli & Terenzini, 2005). College tuition, like medical prices, have outstripped inflation for decades (The College Board, 2013). Second, the value of the college degree has slipped over this period, as more and more students complete the experience (Collins, 1979; 2002). Third, even when children from impoverished families complete degrees, they earn less than children from affluent families (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Wright, 1979; 2005). Finally, their odds of completing degrees are substantially less (Pascarella et al., 2004). These conditions act jointly, of course: on average for the poor, the odds of completion, returns to investment, and debt are worse—for a credential that really is only a pre-requisite today to still further study.

Many people, even from affluent families, do not fancy academic work, are not engaged by ideas for their own sake, and do not enjoy reading and writing (e.g., Willis, 1977). What keeps them from pursuing vocational training and careers in skilled trades, where the qualifying route involves activities that would engage them more fully?

Much of the reason lies with the hubris and vanity of American culture (Crawford, 2009)—together with the systematic credentialism described by Collins (1979, 2002). Credentialism, as characterized by Collins, indicates a “bull market” for credentials themselves in which possession imparts status (irrespective of accomplishment). Such a market deflates the value of the degree obtained—as it becomes ever more common. Under this sort of market, the sought-for status is accessible only via more schooling. For the neoliberal agenda, this is a perfect scheme.

On this view, academic degrees and credentials are adornments and vanities that the poor, especially (and on average) can ill-afford; in constant dollars, college tuition has more than doubled since 1980 (NCES, 2012), consistently outstripping the overall inflation rate (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). But students from poverty are enrolling, dropping out, and acquiring debt that cannot be easily forgiven (Pascarella et al., 2004; United States Department of Education, 2013). The result is that the difference in entry and completion rates between affluent and low-income students has widened substantially (Bailey & Dynarsky, 2011). And yet the insistence that everyone needs a four-year degree to be someone becomes more shrill with each passing year.

*Easy education credit and hard debt.* The average amount of education debt (both federal and private) held by college graduates has increased by 65% just since 2006. Among students graduating from college in 2006, 59% carried student loan debt, with an average debt amount of $18,976 (Reed, Shireman, Asher & Irons, 2008). Just six years later, in 2012, nearly three-quarters (71%) of the graduating class of 2012 had student loan debt, at an average of $29,400 (Reed & Cochrane, 2013).
Debt among college noncompleters (roughly a third of students who enrolled in college in 2003-04 had not completed their program of study and were no longer attending six year later) is even more troubling. The percentage of noncompleters who had received federal student loans between 2003 and 2009 ranged from 25% for students who first enrolled at a public two-year college to 86% among students who first enrolled at a for-profit college, compared to 54% at public 4-year institutions and 66% at private nonprofit 4-year institutions (Nguyen, 2012).

Students attending for-profit institutions are even more likely to be saddled with education debt. According to the College Board, 96% of graduates at 4-year for-profit schools took out loans (higher even than Nguyen’s estimate above) (Baum & Steele, 2010). And much of the credit extended to students at for-profit institutions comes from the federal government: nearly a quarter of Pell grants and federal education loans go to for-profit schools, totaling roughly $23.9 billion in 2009 (United States Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, 2010).

Moreover, noncompleters borrow more money per credit hour than graduates. For instance, noncompleters from for-profit schools borrowed an average of $350 per credit earned, compared with $220 per credit earned by completers, a difference of $130, but disparities characterize all institution types—from $70 at private, non-profit four-year schools to a low of $10 in public two-year schools (Wei & Horn, 2013). This farming operation leaves college dropouts with a disproportionate share of education debt, and less to show for it.

The US Department of Education is explicit about the injunction to repay student loans: “You must repay your loans even if you don’t complete your education, can’t find a job related to your program of study, or are unhappy with the education you paid for with your loan” (United States Department of Education, 2013, ¶3). This is sobering language: it sounds as though pursuing social mobility through higher education can be dangerous. Of course, a liberal education is not principally about money, right? That is correct—for anyone to whom it is supremely important, especially those who can afford curiosity and culture as a luxury good. For the rest of us, one must wonder. One can read Dostoyevsky and Homer very well without tuition: many engaged students of our acquaintance say better.

Clearly, lenders and universities are generating revenue from the poor. And they want to keep them on campus with retention and remediation programs. But these very measures also source employment to the middle-classes: a win-win situation. Complaints about the volume of students taking remediation courses are disingenuous: the cultural problem is much deeper than lack of access to higher education and deeper even than prison-like city high schools for the poor. In America, most higher education institutions are not selective, and a great many are virtually open access.

Our position may at first strike readers as ungenerous and even reactionary. But we are not happy with the many children of the upper reaches of the middle class who have no place in higher education, at least at age 18-22: because privilege has convinced them they are owed degrees that confer high status and an easy life. They
are, by our lights, the central problem with respect to the over-valuing of higher education in America. They are the foot soldiers of credentialism: the ones who make it work. Without them, the poor could not be farmed on this acreage. It is worth observing that a shrinking middle class may not have the capacity to absorb these misguided students, who, along with the originally impoverished, confront increasing levels of underemployment (Abel, Deitz & Su, 2014).

Meanwhile, important trades and occupations are maligned as unworthy (Berry, 1990; Crawford, 2009). The American education system has never embraced the apprenticeship model, as prevails for instance in Germany. The rewarding work of construction, manufacture, and repair is, in effect, left to good people the culture maligns as losers. Prospects for good income in skilled vocations and trades—work that engagingly combines head and hand—are nonetheless excellent (e.g., Crawford, 2009; Kraybill & Olshan, 1994; Rosenbaum, Stephan, & Rosenbaum, 2010). The commonly heard rationale that the Globally Enhanced Information Age requires at least a bachelor’s degree is cant, but the marketplace in credentials requires it. One must also observe that bull markets, when fevered, create bubbles—Alan Greenspan’s famous “irrational exuberance.” The college-frenzy seems like just such exuberance: and shoddy online degree programs for adults employed fulltime—and run by for-profit “universities”—are perhaps the schooling version of junk bonds. Observe, though, that most universities—private non-profit and state-sponsored—also operate such programs. With an adequate customer base, developed programs can be outsourced; universities now receive bids from companies looking to secure provenance for their online operations (Parry, 2010).

A new sector arises from easy education credit. As state funding for higher education eroded over the past decade, and public institutions struggled to accommodate Great Recession-inspired college-going, for-profit college enrollments accelerated dramatically. While postsecondary enrollments in general grew by 31% between 1998 and 2008, enrollments at for-profit colleges grew by a frightful 225% (United States Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, 2012). This is a sector that thrives on exploiting the lack of public options for technical education, and the working class is their market. Nearly 2.5 million students enrolled in for-profit colleges in 2010, representing approximately 12% of all postsecondary students (Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Education and Employment, 2013).

Neoliberal arguments championing this growth in enrollment (and revenue) suggest that for-profit entities fill gaps in the education “market” and allow students who might not otherwise have postsecondary options to earn degrees. But the cost of such “opportunities” is enormous. For one, the literal cost of attending a for-profit institution is much higher than that of attending a public college: Associate’s degree and certificate programs cost an average of four times more than tuition for similar programs at community colleges (United States Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, 2012).
Another cost associated with for-profit colleges is an explosion in the debt carried by students. Much of the recent growth in student loan debt comes from students attending for-profit institutions. Eighty-seven percent (87%) of students attending 4-year for-profit colleges and 86% attending less than 4-year for-profit colleges borrowed money to cover tuition in 2009 (Nguyen, 2012). Other estimates are even higher: the College Board reports that 96% of graduates at 4-year for-profit schools took out loans, 53% with a cumulative debt of more than $30,500 (Baum & Steele, 2010). And much of the credit extended to students at for-profit institutions comes from the federal government: nearly a quarter of Pell grants and federal education loans go to for-profit schools, totaling roughly $23.9 billion in 2009 (United States Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, 2010).

Such debt is especially untenable for students who drop out of school without earning a degree—a third pernicious cost of attending a for-profit college. In 2009, the majority (54%) of students who borrowed money to pursue a bachelor’s degree at a for-profit, four-year institution had dropped out (Nguyen, 2012). Among noncompleters at for-profit colleges, nearly one third (31%) had federal loan debt equal to or exceeding 100 percent of their annual income compared to 21% for 4-year private nonprofits, 13% for public 4-year institutions, and 7% at public 2-year institutions (Wei & Horn, 2013). Lacking a degree and facing large debts, students who drop out have higher unemployment rates and lower incomes than those who complete their degrees (Nguyen, 2012; Wei & Horn, 2013). Because their debt is unsustainable, fully 29.4% of students who dropped out of less than 4-year for-profit schools defaulted on their loans (Nguyen, 2012).

Unfortunately, even students who complete their degrees at for-profit schools default on their loans at extremely high rates. Although students at for-profit colleges account for only 13% of federal education loan borrowers, they constitute nearly half (47%) of all federal defaults (United States Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, 2012).

Under neoliberal rules, not only is everyone a customer, but everything is necessarily for sale: everything has its price when the market determines all values and functions, and when the purpose of everything is to enter the marketplace. Ideas, Marx’s “hands,” and Bourdieu’s cultural capital: all represent sources of accumulation, and all turn into trash. Such a vision is surely horrific, and we hope we are very wrong. The best refuse is recyclable, of course, and poverty (the idea, and the process) seems positioned to play this role in the neo-liberalized version of schooling.

Ravitch (2013) reminds us that education research has demonstrated (since at least the Coleman report) that poverty is very closely (i.e., causally) associated with depressed test scores. We cannot be sure in the gold-standard sort of way about “causation,” but the association is so widespread, so strong, and so durable across
the generations that it merits the attention it does not—and cannot—receive when the poor function as an essential part of the economy.

In this light, when a society blames the poor for “their” poverty, as the US does, a great deal of money can be made in the name of doing the impossible—from education R&D purportedly aimed at finding a cure for poverty, to charter schools taking over education in impoverished neighborhoods, to expensive higher education’s claiming to guarantee social mobility. Indeed, the impossibility of these efforts renders the whole enterprise of farming the poor sustainable. In our society, the “social capital” constituted by poverty (i.e., the poor themselves) self-reproduces—profitably so, and in ways that Karl Marx could not have imagined. This is one explanation for why the relentless American education reformism appears not to work. We keep the poor well enough to profit from them, and neoliberalism has discovered therein a rich vein to mine.

Officially, however, education is both the advertised cure for poverty and a source of cash flow for educational operators. Education is reputed to remedy poverty by instilling the needed virtues that overcome the laziness, poor planning, unreliability, and dissipation said to characterize the poor. It is hard work, however, and the promise of this sort of education is (luckily for neoliberalism) compromised at every turn by institutional vices that so conveniently mirror those ascribed to the poor. From the perspective of profit, it is a win-win situation. For the poor, and for society, however, it is a cultural disaster.

NOTES

1 The market for and over-reliance upon credentials as such, especially as unmoored from accomplishment; see Collins (1979) for the classic treatment.
2 As for the narrow middle ground, we agree that habits like frugality and restraint help one to live a better life. However, as Tolstoy (1898) observed, the very same phenomenon (e.g., poverty) looks quite different from one’s own social location (as rich or poor) as compared to a vantage on the great stochastic processes of society: economies, culture, history, and social geography.
3 The days of the nation-state—democratic or not—may be numbered under the ideological regime (neoliberalism) established for the planet by trans-national business firms (see, e.g., Gilman, Goldhaber, & Weber, 2011; Sassen, 1996). Sassen, in particular, has suggested that citizens of this new world-order are those firms, and not individual humans.
4 For instance: responsiveness to ERSA, a bid for corporate authority, a sign of conservative rectitude, assertion of the link between corporate and educational R&D work, and so forth.
5 Most tellingly, perhaps, is Taubes’s claim that hugely expensive, large-scale, randomized-control trials (RCTs) costing hundreds of millions of dollars have repeatedly failed to identify the actual risk factors for heart disease, diabetes, and cancer. Such failures have not prevented the profession and the State from jointly misleading the public (see Taubes, 2011, for the argument).
6 Even this accomplishment (with about 6,000 charter schools on the ground) has not yet materialized (Center for Research on Educational Outcomes, 2013). Charter schooling does not produce higher test scores, even with much smaller schools and often the ability to exclude some students.
7 Obesity is a particular challenge in our Appalachian home, where the medical industry is rapidly establishing diabetes centers to service the disease. In southeast Ohio, where one of us lives, we see medical firms celebrating newly established diabetes treatment centers and the chartering industry called in to service the “disease” of urban schooling.
We indicate the regime as bi-partisan: the Obama administration has pursued largely the same policies as the Bush and Clinton administrations before it.

The quality of research is always an issue, and it is perhaps easier to organize good-to-excellent quality in the formulaic mode of normal science. Myopia works if one restricts one’s vision to a very small field!

The acronym should seem familiar: it is also used for *socioeconomic status* (i.e., SES).

The course of factory schooling constitutes a veritable cult of efficiency (Callahan, 1962). Educationists, however, hardly ever acknowledge that the *process of education* is inherently inefficient: missteps and diversions are more important than easy success and direct attack. It is refreshing, therefore, to know that wise observers like Jane Jacobs (2004) and Diane Ravitch (2013) do acknowledge the fact.

Charter schools are publicly-funded schools operating under a “charter,” an authorization. For-profit entities, non-profit entities, or districts may operate them. Statute provisions vary by state, but charter schools usually must offer open enrollment, must not charge tuition, and must accept state and federal accountability policies. But the point of chartering, in the beginning and now, has been to relieve the “chartered” schools from state and local education regulations—particularly for staffing, curriculum, and budget management. The reported abuses (e.g., Coutts, 2011) are predictable in the circumstances.

Data on the average total debt—from both federal and other sources—carried by noncompleters is difficult to come by.

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