

Neoliberalism, Social Darwinism, and Consumerism Masquerading as School Reform

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Abstract Education reform policies harvested from neoliberalism, social Darwinism, consumerism, and free-market ideologies have begun to replace the pragmatic progressivism of the pre-World War II era. In this article, I use three federal and state education reform policies and programs—No Child Left Behind Act, Common Core State Standards Initiative, and national standardized testing—as examples of market-oriented ideologies embedded in the reforms. Further, I rely on Critical Social Theory, following Freire, as a framework to examine how the education policies and programs intersect to potentially impede access to quality education opportunities for children from impoverished backgrounds. I use Freire’s conception of Critical Social Theory because of his focus on how education should be used as a transformational mechanism to improve lives rather than a tool to train and inculcate children to imitate and be subservient to the dominant culture. I argue that some federal education policies enacted since 2002 provide examples of the confluence of ideologies that are creating a new meritocracy-based system. The meritocracy-based system will disproportionately penalize poorer students who have less access to out of school experiences that prepare them for formal schooling. Based on punishment triggers embedded in state and federal education policies, a cycle of educational austerity ensues when a student does not achieve a mandatory achievement benchmark. The cycle of austerity can doom some students to underachievement in the short term and to becoming under-educated in the long term.

Keywords Neoliberal networks · Social Darwinism · Education austerity · Democratic public school · Unitary school system

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Current national and state education policies and program initiatives in the United States (US) are moving the public education system in a new direction. The country's locally controlled unitary system, based on egalitarian principles, is being reshaped and cast toward a meritocracy-based system of education. Policies and programs in the US born out of neoliberalism, consumerism, and social Darwinian ideologies, including the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) initiative, and national high-stakes standardized testing as represented by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), overwhelm the evidence-based progressivist-experimentalist knowledge dynamic (English 2010; Foley 2006; Spring 2008). Scientific evidence of how to best educate children is seemingly cast asunder in favor of ideology in the evolving system of public education.

My perspective rests on the argument that some provisions in the NCLB Act, the CCSS initiative, and operationalization of national standardized testing are examples of the confluence of ideological policies that create a new meritocracy-based system. The policies and programs not only perpetuate but also entrench a legally mandated *banking model* of education (Freire 2000). I contend that it is the intersection of policies and programs born from neoliberalism, consumerism, and social Darwinism that potentially bludgeon the unitary system and put the essence of egalitarianism and equality of educational opportunities out of reach for many children from impoverished backgrounds.

Theoretical Framework

I draw upon Critical Social Theory (CST) as described by Paulo Freire (2000) as the lens from which to view the topic of ideological school reform. I use CST as a theoretical framework to examine three high profile education policies in the US and their influences on the ability of some children to access quality education programs and investigate whether the policies lead to intended or unintended consequences that foster inequality of education opportunity. A characteristic of CST is that it provides a mechanism from which to critique policies and practices through multiple theoretical lenses (Leonardo 2004).

Critical Social Theory is an amalgam of theories such as Marxist theory, race theory and sociological theory, among others (Adams 1970; Lemert 1993). I rely primarily on Freire's conception of CST because of his focus on how education should be used as a transformational mechanism to improve lives rather than a tool to train and inculcate people to imitate and be subservient to the dominant culture. Imitation of static curricular knowledge, described as the transmission model by Freire (2000), breeds compliance and conformity with the societal status quo, whereas creativity and innovation of knowledge used to study the challenges faced by society can transform it. Freire coined the transformational type of curriculum and schooling as problem-posing education.

Freire's banking model is a framework that captures the essence of CST and it provides a structure from which to situate and critique education policies. Those not well versed in policy analysis can use the banking model as part of a basic

continuum from which to gauge policy trajectory. For example, an education administrator can create a simple continuum with end points starting at passive/receptive/imitative and ending at active/creative/socially conscious to describe the overall influence that an education policy will have on students down stream. Educators and bureaucrats can begin to predetermine if a proposed policy will lead more toward active construction of meaning and the transformation of knowledge to action on the part of students or result in regurgitation and imitation of existing knowledge?

A Focused Lens

The use of CST as a lens for exploring education policies and programs requires that I examine the formal education structures that exist in society and view them with a bit of skepticism unless evidence demonstrates that the structures and policies facilitate upward mobility and equity for all children; especially children impoverished and dispossessed in the neoliberal world. Freire's (2000) concept of the banking model describes education policies, programs, and practices that educators use to deposit information from the dominant group or class into the minds of children from the non-ruling classes as a method to control them and maintain the current societal class system.

State mandated, standardized, socially-unconscious curriculum standards enforced with high stakes, standardized tests is one way that education bureaucrats and policy makers apply the banking model to children in the public education system. The use of standardization in education to forward neoliberal agendas is an increasing policy lever in countries around the globe including the US, England, and Australia. Ironically, the countries that originally had public education systems built primarily on local control and diversity of knowledge now implement policies based on the corporate control and homogenization of knowledge (Karier 1972; Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith 2012; Zhao 2012).

To discuss all the influences of the major education reform legislation and programs is beyond the scope of this article. My aim here is to use CST as a mechanism to critique and provide some illustrations of how portions of the NCLB Act, CCSS Initiative, and national standardized testing are examples of policies and programs that operationalize neoliberalism, social Darwinism, and consumerism in the US public education arena. I provide select examples of how such policies and programs decrease opportunities for children from poverty to participate in the education process within an egalitarian system.

Egalitarianism

In its most basic sense, egalitarianism is an ideology that everyone should be afforded equal treatment to a society's social mobility apparatus in order to lead a productive and sustaining life (Roemer 1998). A comprehensive public education system is part of that apparatus. Egalitarian ethos is exemplified in the phrase from

the US Declaration of Independence (1776) “that all men [sic] are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness” (para. 2).

An egalitarian system of public education received support early on in the US. Proponents like President Thomas Jefferson and Horace Mann advocated for a public education system that, within the social confines of the times, unified diverse peoples, in the spirit of all people being created equal; the beginnings of an egalitarian system. Both advocates realized that for a participative democracy to sustain itself, there must be a unitary public education system that served all students, regardless of class. Others, including philosopher-educator John Dewey, supported the concept of a unitary system and its connection to egalitarian principles and democracy. Dewey advocated for a public school system built upon a curricular foundation of socially-conscious problem solving aimed at strengthening democracy; the basis to Freire’s problem-posing education.

Dewey (1915, 1916) wrote that all citizens should participate actively in the democratic governing of the nation. Like Jefferson and Mann, Dewey (1916) was concerned about the transformation of democracy into a plutocracy in which a wealthy and powerful minority controls the majority through policies and programs drawn from social Darwinism and meritocracy. The devolution of democracy into plutocracy was one concern of Dewey’s. He and others such as Jefferson and Mann advocated that the US should have public structures, including a unitary public school system, to help prepare children for a participative democracy and guard against plutocracy. They supported a thriving public school system where the privileged and less privileged worked and learned side-by-side, just as they would have to do after they entered into adult life (Tanner and Tanner 2007).

Egalitarianism at Work

Education and broader social policies based on egalitarian constructs might include provisions for structures, policies, and programs aimed at widening participation in quality education experiences as a means to increase broad democratic and economic participation and upward social mobility for all citizens. Likewise, an egalitarian policy framework would seek to decrease or revise policies and practices that favor elite segments of a population such as the wealthiest citizens. Take, for example, the practice in some states that allows publicly funded specialty academic high schools, including magnet schools, charter schools, or vocational-technical academies to use entrance criteria to select students for enrollment, or retention in the schools. Wealthier students most often meet the criteria for enrollment whereas the poorest students or students with special needs are more often not enrolled. Even in cases in which specialty-school bureaucrats use lotteries for random selection, many charter schools and magnet schools have more homogenous student populations than their neighborhood schools, based on socioeconomics, race, prior academic achievement, or special needs categories (Frankenberg 2011; Miron et al. 2010).

Entrance and/or retention criteria are hallmarks of meritocracy. The criteria help education bureaucrats and school administrators control the types of students who

receive access to the various education opportunities. The students who are better off socioeconomically and academically receive the better education opportunities, whereas those in most need receive limited access to quality education opportunities. It is the Matthew Effect in action: The academically and socially rich get richer (Stanovich 1986).

An education system based on egalitarian policies and programs seeks to provide quality opportunities for all children and helps to reduce the Matthew Effect. Regardless of race or social class membership, policies and programs based on egalitarian principles provide for equal treatment and equal education opportunities (Condon 2011). Curriculum, instruction, and assessment policies and practices in an egalitarian unitary system would be developed and structured according to research-based principles (e.g. Dewey 1902; Tanner and Tanner 2007; Tyler 1949) such as

- what has been demonstrated empirically and through evidence-based practice to best facilitate student academic, cognitive, and social development;
- the ways in which more students learn best based on democratic principles, and;
- students, teachers, parents, and the larger community having collective input and involvement in curriculum development so that it reflects the current society and prepares students for an unknown future.

Egalitarian policies can help educators provide students access to quality education opportunities and facilitate the removal of obstacles to achieve universal education quality. It stands to reason that the aims of egalitarian education policies can only be fully realized if supported by wider egalitarian social policies, due to the close link between socioeconomic status and student achievement in the US (Sirin 2005). Just as the flower needs the rain, education policy needs broader participation by other societal supports, tax policy included, to facilitate upward economic growth for those students most displaced in an economy (Atkinson and Leigh 2008; Hungerford 2012).

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is born out of an economic ideology that free-market competition and privatization of state social services is a more efficient way to increase economic growth (Steger and Roy 2010). The ideology is guided partially by Theory of Pareto Efficiency (as cited in Adler 2011, pp. 9–12). Pareto Efficiency posits that there is a possibility that any form of economic redistribution hurts the wealthy more than it assists those in poverty. According to Pareto Efficiency, redistribution should not occur because of the potential negative effect on the rich (as cited in Adler 2011, pp. 12–13). Neoliberals view services provided by the state as a form of wealth redistribution and an overall drag on economic development.

Proponents of neoliberal policies in the US and worldwide opine that the ideology provides a framework for more efficient means to guide the management of society and sustain an ever-growing economy (Steger and Roy 2010) than do policies that seek to lessen income inequality between the richest and poorest

citizens. Policy makers and bureaucrats in the US like congressman Paul Ryan, former Massachusetts Governor, 2012 Presidential candidate Mitt Romney, and New Jersey Governor Christopher Christie advocate limiting the role of the State in providing social services, such as traditional public education. They and other bureaucrats who hold neoliberal worldviews advocate for education service-delivery models derived from free market structures, including charter schools, private and non-profit agencies, for-profit universities, and online for-profit schools. Neoliberals believe that social services, including education, should be part of the free-market system and open to market competition (Apple 2011; Ball 2012).

Neoliberal Networks

A network of neoliberal think tanks and organizations support policy makers and other bureaucrats to ensure market-friendly legislation permeates the halls of federal and state governments (Rhodes 1994). In the US well-funded organizations and think tanks lobby legislators and bureaucrats at all levels of government for policies that will forward neoliberal agendas. For instance, the Business Roundtable, the US Chamber of Commerce, National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, Americans for Prosperity, the American Bankers Association (ABA), and the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) contributed over 90 million dollars to US congressmen and senators in 2011 to forward the big business agenda of liberalizing the economy (Open Secrets 2012). International organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, the European Commission, and the World Trade Organization (WTO) forward neoliberal agendas around the world through efforts to deregulate and denationalize industries, destabilize unions, and globalize trade and labor to lower wage costs to multinational corporations.

Actors within neoliberal networks are not accountable to sovereign governments for the negative consequences of their actions, yet many of them gather their power from government funding and legislation. For example, the World Bank and IMF receive large sums of money from the US taxpayers. According to the IMF, the US provided over \$42 billion dollars to the fund in 2011 (IMF 2012) and it is the largest contributor accounting for over 17 % of all IMF funds. IMF loans are contingent upon countries making structural changes to their social systems and liberalizing their economies. The changes often include social austerity with cuts to health care, pensions, and other social welfare programs, lower wages, increased outsourcing of industry, and increases in imports from lower wage countries. Some researchers linked IMF funding to higher mortality rates and increases in tuberculosis cases in former eastern block Soviet Union countries (Stuckler et al. 2008).

Neoliberal Welfare for the Rich

The US banking industry profited immensely from the 1999 repeal of the Banking Act of 1933, known as the Glass–Steagall Act. President Bill Clinton signed the Gramm–Leach–Bliley Act of 1999 and set in motion the liberalizing of the American banking industry. Provisions within the legislation allowed large banks to create subsidiary companies to engage in high-risk securities trading. Prior to 1999,

traditional banking operations and securities trading were separated and that separation helped to insulate the taxpayer from irresponsible investing strategies of the largest US banks. Five years after the passage of the Gramm–Leach–Bliley Act, the US Securities and Exchange Commission changed another set of banking rules and allowed banks to increase their leverage for securities trading operations. The change in regulations increased the amount banks could “bet” on financial positions, without requiring the banks to have the money on hand to cover their bets (McLean and Nocera 2010). Some of the net affects of liberalizing the banking industry through legislation and deregulation were that the large banking institutions were allowed to increase risky operations in order to increase the potential for immense financial gain. The six largest multinational banks in the US reported 63 billion dollars in profits between October 2011 and October 2012; the most since 2006 (Abelson 2012).

The confluence of weak federal and state regulations, liberalizing legislation, and increased risk taking and financial betting behaviors on the part of big bank leadership helped lead to the financial crisis of 2008 and the taxpayer funded multi-trillion dollar financial bailouts of those banking bets and the bets of other financial institutions (McLean and Nocera 2010). As of October 2012 the total taxpayer funded bailout of direct and indirect funds to banks totaled more than \$29 trillion dollars. Neither the networks that lobbied for the legislative changes on behalf of the banks and financial institutions nor have the bankers themselves that took the risks and the taxpayer money been held accountable (Carney 2011).

Global Influences

Neoliberal policy-making is not limited to the US. Legislators and other government bureaucrats in European countries such as England and France have put forth a succession of neoliberal policies since the 1980s. Bourdieu (1999) and Rhodes (1994) explained how the French and English governments steadily increased the outsourcing of traditional governmental services to private companies and associations. British and French citizens have endured increasing privatization of services such as prisons, policing functions, defense contracting, teacher and school administrator preparation, health services, and the increase use of hiring temporary faculty at universities.

Shaping the Narrative

Policymakers and bureaucrats around the globe who make decisions based on a neoliberal worldview narrate a consistent message that social services are a form of wealth redistribution and they espouse that the state should not be involved in redistributing wealth to the poor, although they do advocate for redistribution of wealth upward to the wealthy (Stiglitz 2012). Some examples of upward wealth redistribution in the US include tax cuts to the wealthiest citizens, corporate welfare via bank bailouts and lower central bank borrowing rates to large financial institutions, low dividend and capital gains taxes, low estate taxes on the wealthiest citizens, and tax loopholes that allow the richest Americans to hide their money in

offshore accounts and pay lower tax rates than most middle class citizens (Adler 2011; Reed 2005).

The consistent global message of the supposed scourge of social services fits within the larger neoliberal theoretical framework built upon Pareto Efficiency. The theory of Pareto Efficiency suggests that a dollar given to the rich does more good for society than a dollar given to the poor because rich people and poor people are fundamentally different. Pareto postulated that rich people have more utility than poor people and that the elite wealthy class makes use of the resources provided in more effective ways (as cited in Adler 2011, p. 10). The efficacy of Pareto Efficiency has not been demonstrated empirically yet it is an influential force in education reform policy.

Non-Social Servicing

Neoliberals view social services as a negative drag on the growth of the economy and marketplace (Kaplan 2012) because many of the dollars spent on social services do not go directly to the wealthiest citizens. In essence, proponents of neoliberal systems believe that the state's role should be limited to the organization of outsourcing social services to private companies run by the elite: Take citizens' tax money and divert it to private companies for profit is the underlying motive (Chomsky 1999). In the education sphere, one can see neoliberalism at work in the expansion of charter schools. President Clinton signed the New Markets legislation that allowed the big banks and other corporations to receive large tax credits to enter the charter school and education management businesses. The legislation accelerated neoliberal influence in the charter arena. Neoliberalism crosses political party lines. Therefore, the concerned public should not expect a change in political administrations to bring about a change in the reliance on neoliberal policies. The rhetoric might change but the underlying policies do not.

Charter schools in the US exemplify neoliberal policy making in education. Deregulation, privatizing, outsourcing, opposition to collective bargaining, unrestrained capitalism, and creating work insecurity to lower overall labor costs are some hallmarks of the neoliberal philosophy (Bourdieu 1999). In education, neoliberal policies exemplified in the charter school arena include the following characteristics:

- The use of public tax dollars to fund private school tuition through school vouchers or tax credits to families that send their students to private schools.
- The creation by the state of semi-private selective schools known as charter schools in the US, managed by private companies or education management organizations (EMO) funded by public tax dollars.
- Cuts to state funding of public schools and other social service in order to increase privatization of those services.
- Encourage the elimination of teachers' unions in order to subvert the collective bargaining process.
- Use of merit pay based on the results from one mandated standardized test as a decision-making tool from which to lower teacher salaries and destabilize the teacher job market.

A general goal of neoliberal education policies is to open the public school sector to free-market forces and privatization to transfer public monies into private coffers where neoliberals say they will be used more effectively. Between 2005 and 2011, venture capital investment interest in education from Silicon Valley businesses rose from \$13 million dollars to almost \$400 million dollars (Simon 2012). Those investors are not entering the education sector to act as charity institutions. They are there to make a profit. Education is now big business and big business is expecting large profits from the implementation of the CCSS Initiative and national standardized testing in the US (Simon 2012). Unintended or intended negative consequences of neoliberal policies to impoverished children and the majority of society are not considered because the Theory of Pareto Efficiency only applies to the rich elites.

Consumerism

Veblen (1994) described consumerism as a social-economic orientation that values the purchase of goods and services as part of an overall accumulation of possessions. Consumerism links to materialism in that both place an emphasis on amassing goods and personal affects (Foster 2000) but consumerism also values unrestrained choice. Advocates of a consumerist ideology suggest that consumption of goods and services relates positively to the overall well being of a society. The more goods and services that people in a society consume, the more developed that society must be. In the US, bureaucrats measure national consumption prowess through various economic indices such as the gross domestic product (GDP), durable goods orders, and various living standards calculations.

Some US government bureaucrats tell citizens that as long as consumption and GDP are rising, then all is well in the economic world. American citizens are told that consumption is a measure of development and personal standing in society. Former President Bush (2001) went so far as to say that consumption was patriotic. Freire (2000) cautioned that consumerism has severe limitations. Consumerist worldviews masquerade as development but might be nothing more than modernization and not an actual improvement in quality of life.

In the US one can see Freire's caution play out in the personal debt levels and number of personal bankruptcies of citizens. One might possess many things but still be accountable to increasing debt payments. Television advertisements promise easy credit to the poor and help fan the consumerist flames. In modern America no money is no problem.

Consuming Education

Overall, the average US citizen has more choices for material possessions and services than s/he did 50 years ago. Cars, televisions, telephones, larger homes, and other consumer items can be obtained on credit to satisfy the felt needs brought on by unrestrained choice. But society is not more developed according to indicators like the percentage of children living in poverty, child suicide rates, and percentage

of children living in lone parent households (US Census Bureau 2012). In terms of education policy, bureaucrats at the US Department of Education (USDOE), including Arne Duncan (2009), and special interest lobby groups such as the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2012), communicate to parents that they should be able to choose their preferred education delivery mode from a corporatized market.

Education consumerism proponents allude that parents should be able to select their child's education delivery model as they see fit, regardless of the potential unintended consequences to democracy such as economic and racial balkanization or segregation (Frankenberg 2011). In my opinion the message being sent is similar to telling parents that they should have the right to choose their schooling option like they can choose their fast food.

Choice Without Quality

Consumption of education based on choice of delivery system somehow equates to quality when viewing the choice through the consumerism and neoliberal lenses. Parents are told that the consumption of education via non-traditional, corporatized delivery systems demonstrates modernization of the public school system. Bush (1999) used charter schools as an example of how choice equates to quality:

Charter schools encourage educational entrepreneurs to try innovative methods. They break up the monopoly of one-size-fits-all education. These diverse, creative schools are proof that parents from all walks of life are willing to challenge the status quo if it means a better education for their children. More competition and more choices for parents and students will raise the bar for everyone. (pp. 233–234)

Freire (2000) delineated between modernization via choice and societal development, stating that “The basic, elementary criterion is whether or not the society is a being for itself. If not, the other criteria indicate modernization rather than development” (p. 162). Choice does not automatically beget quality of life improvements. In the education sector, choice neither guarantees quality nor does it guarantee participation in decision making.

The act of choosing or consuming a commodity does not equate to involving oneself in the decision making about the design, development, leadership, or management of that commodity. In the consumerist arena, education is a commodity and parents are reduced to purchasers or users, not decision makers or contributors to the quality of the product. Private schools and charter schools usually do not have democratically elected boards of education. Many non-public schools and charters have appointed boards of directors. Parent involvement is relegated to superficial activities such as fund raising, signing student homework folders, or attending school events. There is no involvement in the actual decision making about programs, policies, or procedures because there is no democratic mechanism for involvement—there is only choice. Parents have the “choice” to comply with the policies or leave the school.

Social Darwinism

Social Darwinism is an ideology that suggests only the strongest and best-adapted humans should excel in society (Bannister 1989). It is the human equivalent of survival of the fittest and proponents believe that only the perceived strong deserve to thrive. It is the opposite of “liberty and justice for all” as recited by millions of public school children daily. In US politics, social Darwinism relates closely with neoliberalism because of the confidence in the unrestrained free market to choose winners and losers and to determine value.

In education policy social Darwinism is visible through the use of one-size-fits-all mandated curricula standards and the use of results from mandated standardized testing to make important decisions about children and teachers. For example, national and state education policies require the use of test results to judge the effectiveness of schools, students, teachers, and principals. For children, poor performance on a single state test can result in being (a) denied entrance into quality academic program tracks, (b) retained in grade, (c) placed in low academic tracks, or (d) denied the opportunity to graduate high school. Students who do not perform as expected on one state mandated test do not merit higher quality opportunities. Based on their test results, they are not the academically strongest.

Teachers can be penalized with a salary reduction, loss of tenure, or denial of merit pay if their students do not score well enough on the mandated tests. The logic holds that the teacher of a student who struggles academically must be weak, and therefore does not deserve to have the same rights or provisions to salary and tenure provisions as teachers whose students score higher on the tests. The teachers of the students deemed not worthy of academic survival based on test results are deemed not worthy of professional survival.

Socioeconomic Meritocracy and Darwin

Social Darwinism and socioeconomic meritocracy collide when students who perform poorly on state mandated testing receive impoverished education opportunities narrowly focused on only those topics most likely to be tested. Their chances of receiving an enriching education or performing better in the future on such tests decrease the longer they are in the system because they continue to receive educationally austere opportunities (Booher-Jennings 2005). The cycle of education austerity destines many struggling students to failure. But that is what the “market” has decided is appropriate.

The current system based on the use of high stakes testing ensures the cycle of education austerity will continue. Due to their design, large-scale standardized test results advantage students from middle class and wealthy environments who come to school with middle class vocabularies and life experiences. The test questions usually represent middle class topics and experiences. There is a strong correlation between the family wealth of the students in a particular school and those students’ test results (Rothstein 2004; Tienken 2008, 2011). In effect, a social Darwinian system is being constructed that could ensure unequal access to education opportunities and inequitable access to quality education for students from poverty

because the mandated tests the students take favor students who come from less impoverished backgrounds.

Darwinian Foundation

The testing provisions of NCLB set up the structure for a system in which perceived effectiveness of students, teachers and school administrators was judged by the results from yearly summative state standardized tests (Penfield 2010). Teachers and school administrators in some school districts now feel compelled to focus school goals and a larger share of limited resources on raising test scores in the areas tested (Au 2011). The teachers and administrators become part of the education austerity cycle and actively work to keep it turning. Students who do not achieve proficiency on those same tests are often remanded to academic programs with narrow curricula scopes that resemble procedural training programs populated with test-besting manuals from corporate publishers.

The fittest students, in this case more often the students who come from wealthier backgrounds and environments, and who more frequently score proficient on state-mandated tests, receive the benefits of access to more education opportunities. They are more often able to access higher quality academic tracks, gifted and talented programs, and do not have to spend as much time in lower-level basic skills test preparation classes. In contrast, those deemed unfit by the current education market forces receive substandard education. The longer students are kept in the system, the greater the education achievement differences between students of wealth and those from poverty become, and they further entrench two classes of educated persons—the educated and the “under-educated.”

The more educated students will move on to higher levels of education, for example, university studies and advanced degrees, wider range of job opportunities, and access to better health care. The under-educated will be relegated to a high school diploma or less, and a life destined to labor for the educated. It is known that education level is correlated to personal wealth and life expectancy (Denney et al. 2012). Therefore, the Darwinian theory of natural selection will play out in the end, as the life expectancy of the wealthy educated citizenry will continue to rise and that of the poor and those dispossessed by the new education system will stagnate. The difference in life expectancy in America between rich and poor is now almost 5 years, favoring the rich (Denney et al. 2012). The life expectancy gap has almost doubled in the last 30 years and the difference correlates to the increasing wealth gap in the US (Pampel et al. 2010). It seems as if “the market” decided that some people do not merit longer lives.

Multiple Policies Leads to Multiple Problems (Alternatively, NCLB + CCSS + PARCC + SBAC = Problems for Poor Children)

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, signed into law by Bush in 2002, begins with the preamble, “An act to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility and choice, so that no child is left

behind” (NCLB, 115 STAT. 1425). The legislation’s accountability mandates demonstrate how the bureaucrats and legislators in the US, supported by most education associations, began to generate reforms that either overtly or covertly attempted to fracture the public school system into two tiers: the “haves” and “have nots” of society. The NCLB accountability demands were based on various conditions, outlined in the legislation, and marked by

- standardized academic content and student achievement standards for each state (Sec. 1111.b.1.A–F);
- all students tested in mathematics and reading/language arts in grades 3–8 and one time in high school. Additional testing in science, usually during grades 4, 8, and one time in high school (Sec. 1111.b.1.A–F; Sec. 1111b.3.A–C);
- adequate yearly progress (AYP) on standardized test results must be demonstrated so that by 2014 all students meet proficiency on all tested standards (Sec. 1111.b.2.A–K);
- separate measure to be reported for (a) all K-12 children, (b) the economically disadvantaged, (c) students from major racial and ethnic groups, (d) students with disabilities, and (e) students with limited English proficiency (Sec. 1111.b.2.A–K);
- mandated use of public tax dollars to pay private tutoring corporations for supplemental educational services (SES) programs for students in schools deemed as in need of improvement based on the results from the yearly mandated tests (Sec. 1114.b.8.A); and
- automatic triggers that provide for school takeovers and outsourcing to private EMO, charter schools, or other corporately supported entities regardless of local governance decisions to the contrary (Sec. 1114.b.8.A–C)

NCLB and Critical Social Theory

Peering through the lens of Critical Social Theory, the policy provisions in the NCLB Act begin to create a picture of a vice squeezing public school children on all sides. Neoliberalism becomes visible with legal and statutory mandates to reconstitute public schools into schools managed by non-elected boards, corporations, or other organizations outside of the traditional state-sponsored, locally controlled, social system (Hursh 2007). The education outsourcing foundation of the NCLB Act was also operationalized through the mandated use of Title I funds to pay private companies to tutor children through the Supplementary-Education-Services requirements in the law. The outsourcing of teacher and school administration preparation was increased through provisions that supported programs including Teach for America and school administrator preparation programs run by corporations and for-profit organizations masquerading as non-profit, like some state school administrator associations (NCLB Sec. 2113.c). Despite empirical evidence uncovering the ineffectiveness of such programs, they persist in the neoliberal policy environment (Laczko-Kerr and Berliner 2002). Evidence derived from science is disregarded in the pre-Enlightenment, neoliberal age. The sun seemingly revolves around the Earth.

Built for Destruction

Former appointees in the USDOE of the Bush administration stated publically that the NCLB Act was not created to strengthen and grow the public education system. It was created to do just what it did—manufacture a neoliberal, social Darwinian, consumer driven market place that marginalized students along socioeconomic lines based on a score from a standardized test. A goal of the NCLB Act for some in the Bush II administration was to break the public schools so that the rhetoric of failing schools would finally become a reality. Former Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education Susan Nueman stated in an interview that some in the Bush administration and USDOE viewed the NCLB Act as a way to destroy public education so that the populace would support school choice, vouchers, privatization, and marketization (cited in Wallis 2008).

Testing the System

The standardized testing provisions in the NCLB Act had the effect of stripping control of assessment away from the local education agencies and placing it in the boardrooms of large corporations such as McGraw-Hill and Pearson. Karier (1972) predicted such a situation almost 30 years prior to the signing of NCLB. The outsourcing of assessment and other aspects of schooling to big business align to the neoliberal model of shifting public funds and decision-making to private entities and out of the public sphere. The outsourcing of assessment from school personnel to corporate personnel acts to deskill educators and lessen the in-house capacity of school personnel and further weaken local control. The entire process of assessment, aside from the actual proctoring, is outsourced. Educators do not need to know or understand assessment design. Over time the deskilling of the in-house capacity creates a reliance on outsourcing. Educators become mere assessment implementers and imitators, not decision makers or creators. The educators come to rely on prepackaged corporate education programs; many of which are never fully vetted or demonstrated effective on the populations for which they are marketed (Tanner and Tanner 2007).

The NCLB-driven focus on results from high-stakes tests to judge the effectiveness of teachers, administrators and students works to neuter local decision-making and lead to social-Darwinian judgments about what services students receive based on their test scores (Booher-Jennings 2005). In some cases, those students who demonstrate the best chances of scoring proficient on the tests receive extra services from school personnel, whereas those students far from the proficiency cut-score are left to wither on the vine (Booher-Jennings 2005; Burch 2005). School administrators are either encouraged or mandated by their state education bureaucrats to use the data from state tests to make decisions about the quality of teachers and programs, and about student academic aptitude. School administrators routinely use the scores from the mandated NCLB tests to place students in academic programs or de facto tracks that can enhance or limit their education opportunities (Penfield 2010; Tienken 2008). Students and teachers are

rewarded or punished based on the results from state tests: social Darwinism and meritocracy in action.

Cementing the New Caste System

The introduction of a national standardized testing system operationalized through the Common Core State Standards, PARCC, and the SBAC will entrench meritocracy and social Darwinism in the system camouflaged as fairness. Who can argue with an “objective” quantitative measure of a student’s ability? The Orwellian doublespeak grows larger in the latest installment of corporatizing public education. Is it possible for the results from one assessment to determine whether a child is ready for all of the 4,400 colleges in the US and the thousands of possible career opportunities? Can one assessment, given on a spring day in April, really provide a smart and balanced perspective of academic achievement in all its forms?

Social-Darwinian meritocracy exerts its strongest influence on the subgroup of students known as economically disadvantaged. This group of impoverished children never achieves a higher mean score than non-economically disadvantaged students on any state test, in any subject, at any grade level (Ladd 2012; Sirin 2005; Tienken 2011). The achievement differences on state-mandated high school tests of mathematics and language arts between economically disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students ranged from 12 to 36 scale-score points in 2010. That is the difference between scoring at the 50th percentile and the 62nd percentile, or scoring at the 50th percentile and the 86th percentile, respectively (Tienken 2011).

Chartering Consumers

Consumerism is operationalized in the NCLB Act and through the 2012 round of NCLB waivers granted by the USDOE via school choice programs. Provisions in NCLB and the waivers allow parents the option of transferring their children to a charter school in their district if their neighborhood school was stigmatized as in need of improvement for two consecutive years. Given the multitude of subgroup accountability requirements in the original NCLB Act and the fact that economically disadvantaged students, students with special needs, and English language learners, as groups, score lower and achieve proficiency less frequently than non-disadvantaged counterparts it is not difficult for schools that serve more of those populations to need improvement based on standardized test scores (Tienken 2011).

The social-Darwinian use of test results intersect with the choice provisions to create a system designed to force consumerism upon the population. Unfortunately, the choice system manufactured via NCLB and supported through Race to The Top grants and NCLB waiver programs continues to grow through the government-sponsored proliferation of charter schools. It is documented that charter schools fail to serve the neediest populations to the same degree as the traditional public schools (see the article in this special issue by Mullen et al. 2013). Overall, there are fewer students with special needs in charter schools, especially those with intense therapeutic needs, fewer students eligible for free lunch, and students in charter schools are more highly segregated by race than traditional public schools

(Frankenberg 2011; Frankenberg and Lee 2003; Skinner 2009). As a group, charter schools do not produce the same levels of positive academic achievement as traditional public schools (McEwan 2009). The majority of students in charter schools do not achieve as well as similar peers in comparable traditional public schools (Miron et al. 2010; Mishel and Roy 2005). Yet the marketing and consumerism rhetoric proceed unabated.

The Bush administration spent approximately 500 million dollars between 2001 and 2008 to support the birth of new charter schools through the Charter Schools Program State Educational Agencies Grants (US Department of Education 2012). The administration spent, on average, over 200 million a year on a range of programs to increase the number of charter schools in order to expand the size of the choice market. According to the National Center of Education Statistics, 1,456 charter schools operated during the 1999–2000 school year serving approximately 333,000 students and 4,891 schools operated during the 2009–2010 school year serving approximately 1.6 million students. The growth in the market was almost a four-fold increase in the number of schools and more than a five-fold increase in students entering the market (National Center for Education Statistics 2010).

Standardized Children

As of December 2012, Chief State School Officers from 45 states volunteered their taxpayer funded education systems to take part in what might be one of the largest social and political experiments in the recent history of the US. There was no voting by the public. The state education bureaucrats in effect nationalized public school curriculum and assessment in language arts and mathematics through the adoption of a universal set of core curriculum standards and a national standardized testing program. The final version of the CCSS was released in 2010. The concept of national curriculum standards and nationalized testing for education violates some core principles of local control. Furthermore, the vendors of the initiative seemingly did not take into account the empirical literature that exposes the practice as educationally bankrupt (e.g., Mathis 2010; McCluskey 2010; Wang et al. 1993).

The subjects prescribed currently by the CCSS, language arts and mathematics, and eventually science, will become the most important subjects in terms of time and resources allotted to teachers. Other subjects such as the social sciences and arts will be deemphasized, intensifying the current situation across the country. Curriculum reductionism was already underway as one reaction by public school personnel to NCLB accountability requirements (Au 2011). Students who do not meet what I see as the arbitrary levels of prescribed achievement on the national assessments will continue to be considered “at risk” and forced to do more work in those narrow curricular areas, depriving them of the opportunities to participate in other educational opportunities in the sciences, arts, co-curricular options, or athletics (Booher-Jennings 2005; Tienken 2008). Those students are more likely to be poor and non-white.

Teachers and principals in US schools whose students do well on the national mathematics and language arts tests will be rewarded, whereas teachers in schools

in which students do less well will be punished. The punitive nature of the policies leads to a nation of schools whose personnel are coerced to focus only on two or three subject areas. The narrow interpretation of public education will further embed the creation of two groups of children: those who pass the tests and are allowed to access higher levels of education and those who do not pass and are remanded to a mechanistic, rudimentary version of schooling, much like that of the Lancaster model of the 1800s. The bifurcation of the student population and curricular reductionism have been playing out in urban districts across the country since the advent of the NCLB Act and will continue (Srikantaiah and Kober 2009). The social-Darwinian die is cast with standardized meritocracy.

Curricular Mismatch

Standardized curriculum that does not align with the cognitive developmental stages of some of the students in each grade level can promote social Darwinian decisions by education bureaucrats and school personnel. When the curriculum content is monitored with a standardized test in which the questions do not align to the cognitive levels of the students subjected to the testing scheme, the results from the tests can be an inaccurate and unfair measure of achievement. Cognitive misalignment among standards, test questions, and human development is potentially troublesome to historically lower achieving students when the curriculum standards, test questions, and corresponding proficiency cut-scores point toward higher levels of cognition that require rich and extensive prior life and learning experiences.

For example, parts of the Grade 1 CCSS mathematics standards require mastery at the advanced concrete or early formal operations levels of cognition (Piaget 1983), yet upwards of 70 % of the children in Grade 1 operate at content mastery in the early concrete or intuition cognitive levels (Orlich 2006; Wei et al. 1971). This does mean that Grade 1 students cannot be taught challenging content. They most certainly can and they should learn to grapple with important concepts. However, there is a difference between the process of learning and the process of demonstrating mastery of concepts on a single test administered on a single spring day. In fact, the national tests that education bureaucrats propose to use to monitor the CCSS define mastery as being able to achieve the correct answer to myriad questions on a specific date and specific time, determined by distally located bureaucrats. Are we as a nation now treating children as if they were circus animals and expecting them to perform academic tricks on cue?

The potential mismatch between cognitive mastery expectations and cognitive reality can result in policy favoritism for more economically well-off children when the national standardized test is used to make important decisions about students. It is documented that students from poverty go to school less ready to master their states' standards than non-economically disadvantaged students and students from poverty lose academic ground during the summer months (Cooper et al. 2000; Hart and Risely 1995); they regress academically during the summer whereas students from non-impooverished backgrounds can gain academically (Cooper et al. 2000). It is not surprising that students living in poverty achieve lower scale scores, and

lower rates of proficiency than non-disadvantaged peers. Likewise, it will not be surprising when the graduation rates for students of poverty are markedly lower in 10 years than they are now if the policy landscape does not change. The Darwinian, neoliberal policy apparatus is set up to ensure that it happens.

Refusing to Play in the Corporate Boardroom

The CCSS and national testing policies and practices simply extend those begun with the NCLB Act. One can see the intersection of neoliberalism, social Darwinism, consumerism, and meritocracy in cases in which education bureaucrats and school administrators or other policy makers use results from mandated standardized tests of standardized curriculum as triggers to make life-influencing decisions about public school children, teachers, or the structure of public schooling. For students, those decisions include the academic opportunities they can access, grade retention, or the withholding of high school graduation. The decisions influence whether a student's school offers a vibrant arts program, or an arts program at all.

Future life opportunities shrink quickly for students who become placed in a reductionist academic track upon entering high school because the school administration or state education policies tie academic placement in high school to grade eight national test results. Because historically the lower academic tracks do not adequately prepare students for the upcoming national high school exit exam in grade 11, the prophecy becomes self-fulfilling. It is the Golem Effect encrusted in policy (Babad et al. 1982; Rowe and O'Brien 2002). This is due in part to curricular stenosis caused by high stakes testing, lower expectations, and the student makeup of the classes that enhances the negative influence of peer effects via higher concentration of students of poverty with less academic life experiences. There becomes no way out, no policy safety valve. Similar to the story of sisyphus, impoverished students can push the rock of standardization all they want, but few will be able to move it over the top of the policy hill.

The policy shifts described in this essay already produced changes in the system that affected children negatively. For example, over 100,000 high school students per year have been denied high school graduation because they did not pass state mandated exit exams in either language arts or mathematics (Tienken 2011). Many of these students are poor and non-white. Enough is already known about the policy initiatives currently used in the US policies conceived from neo-liberalism, social Darwinism, consumerism, and meritocracy have no place in a democratic system of public education. Years of evidence demonstrate the policy ineffectiveness and divisive characteristics.

Educators, parents, and students need to make their voices heard. They must demand that policymakers shift course and develop policies that respect and assist children instead of perpetuating the interests of the market and marketeers. Diverting public dollars from the public school space to the corporate boardroom is not in the best interest of children or democracy.

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