TERTIARY EDUCATION AND MANAGEMENT
VOL. 24, NO. 3, 242–253
https://doi.org/10.1080/13583883.2018.1440417

College for All in capitalist America: the post-secondary emphasis in the neoliberal age

Suneal Kolluri and William Tierney

Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, USA

ABSTRACT

College for All approaches to secondary education have gained prominence over recent decades. This trend has resulted in scholarly criticism. College is inappropriate for many students, and insisting that all students attend ensures failure, frustration and debt. The College for All policy, intended to enhance democratic equality and undermine human vulnerability, may thus achieve neither of its goals. However, the alternative to College for All, which the authors label College for Some, is equally wrought with challenges. Approaches that emphasize tracking, for example, inevitably stratify students along capitalist hierarchies. Ultimately, the authors argue that neither College for All nor College for Some practices will enhance social equity as currently applied. Instead, the authors put forward a 'Justice for All' approach that borrows from critical pedagogy and suggests college preparatory practices elevate concerns of social justice to prepare students to advocate for democratic equity regardless of postsecondary pursuits.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 1 February 2018
Accepted 2 February 2018

KEYWORDS
Higher education; College for All; vulnerability; critical pedagogy

Introduction

Our argument is that far too often corporate culture trumps liberal values in the twenty-first century university. Our approach, then, is generally framed in terms of social equality. However, rather than looking at governance, we shall focus on access to higher education, and locate the discussion in the United States. College for All cultures in United States high schools assume that everyone should participate in higher education. If College for All policies encourage more students from underrepresented backgrounds to attend college, the argument goes, schools will enhance equality of opportunity. Some schools thus include college-going as a central component of their mission statement. They develop robust College for All cultures with overt and subtle messages encouraging college going. Over the past few decades, high schools across the United States have scaled back vocational programs in the hope of directing more, if not all, students towards college (Levesque, Lauen, Teitelbaum, Alt, & Librera, 2000; Phillips, 2012). The assumption has been that all students who graduate from high school should be accorded entry into a postsecondary institution, just as they have been accorded access to high school when they graduate from middle school.

CONTACT Suneal Kolluri kolluri@usc.edu

© 2018 European Higher Education Society

College for All intends to serve as a counterweight to the forces of social stratification. Given the disparities in college attendance by race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status, as well as the substantial economic value of a college degree, many schools serving low-income student populations have adopted variations of College for All. Charter schools name themselves 'college prep academies' and imbue their programs with intricate college going cultures consisting of college-going mission statements, college decorations and college chants wherein student rhythmically extol the virtues of a college education. Public school districts also convey College for All ideologies. Students hoping to graduate from the Los Angeles Unified School District, for example, must have taken and passed all the required courses for acceptance to a public institution. At a national level, the Common Core State Standards aim to prepare all students for 'college and career'. Each policy rests, in part, on the notion that preparing all students for college can close racial, ethnic and socioeconomic gaps in educational attainment.

Despite being couched in the language of equity, we suggest that the recent expansion of College for All practices is likely to result in the perpetuation of existing social hierarchies. In particular, the rise in College for All practices over the past few decades has corresponded with a neoliberal turn in educational policy (Lipman, 2013). Accordingly, we ask: Are College for All policies associated with neoliberalism? As such, might they reify capitalistic institutions that will continue to marginalize low-income communities? Is College for Some an appropriate alternative? We first address the abundant literature on the challenges of what we call College for Some practices, in which only students deemed most academically capable are exposed to college preparatory curriculum. By college for some we are suggesting that public policies assume that not everyone necessarily should attend a postsecondary institution. Next, we argue that College for All policies improve upon the problematic practices of academic tracking but remain embedded in capitalist structures and are thus doomed to reproduce class stratification. We close by suggesting that schools adopt neither College for All nor College for Some policies; instead, we suggest a 'Justice for All' approach. Such a stance aligns college readiness practices with democratic education. The idea, while taking college preparation seriously, also borrows heavily from frameworks of critical pedagogy. We define critical pedagogy as curricula that engage students in questions of social justice and explicitly prepare them to push for equity through democratic means. Ultimately, we suggest, educational institutions can most effectively impact social equity by simultaneously preparing students for their academic and democratic futures.

College for Some

The evolution of college access in the United States

In response to the movement towards universal schooling, the influx of poor European immigrant students, and the spread of Social Darwinist dogmas, schools developed stratified curricula to meet the practical and ideological priorities of the era (Oakes, 2005). The legal establishment of universal schooling led to the concept of the comprehensive high school. The comprehensive high school was organized around stratification systems to placate critics who asserted that schooling was not for everyone (Glass & Nygreen, 2011). As such, a vocational component of schooling was elevated for particular students for whom schooling was

mandatory, but whose non-elite status precluded the likelihood of a college degree. Aligned with the industrial ethos of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, schools were conceived from a factory model, wherein students were produced to serve distinct but useful purposes in capitalist production.

Processes of stratification also emerged as university access expanded in the United States. The Morrill Act of 1862 sought the benefits of higher education for 'the laboring men' who had heretofore been mostly excluded from the nation's colleges and universities. The Morrill Act established universities via land grants. These new colleges were to focus on agricultural and industrial arts in contradistinction to the more traditional, liberal arts curricula of the established institutions. Morrill made the case on the House floor for his bill arguing its merits for the nations' farmers – 'to enable the farmer to raise two blades of grass instead of one' (cited in Florer, 1968, p. 467). A second version of the bill, passed in 1890, emphasized the inclusion of African American students by establishing an array of Historically Black Colleges and Universities. However, the Act insisted upon their exclusion from white land grant colleges, confining many African Americans to more poorly funded and exclusively vocational university experiences (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). While the expansion of postsecondary opportunity during the late nineteenth century was unprecedented, the opportunities remained embedded in the longstanding educational logic of race and class stratification.

After World War II, the political context was ripe for the federal government to promote the expansion of college going. Upon returning from war, Franklin D. Roosevelt, among other political leaders, feared soldiers might fail to adequately integrate into the post-war economy arguing, 'We have taught our youth how to wage war; we must also teach them how to live useful and happy lives in freedom, justice, and decency' (cited in Murray, 2008, p. 971). The G.I. Bill offered returning servicemen from World War II college tuition payments, among other benefits. While the G.I. Bill exemplified the potential of the United States Government to expand college going for otherwise neglected segments of the population, the short-lived nature of its implementation called into question the capacity for sustained college-going expansion in the United States.

Throughout history, progress towards educational equity has been made in stutter-steps where the overarching framework of inequity has remained. Even as education expanded through policies like compulsory schooling and the G.I. Bill, equity-oriented practices either petered out or were subsumed by new stratifications. The history of educational stratification suggests a near inevitability of educational hierarchies. Educational policy is deeply embedded in the capitalist economic system, and policies are framed as instrumentalist practices to enhance economic efficiency. In what follows, we address how capitalism – beholden to social stratification – shapes schools in its own image.

Capitalism and academic stratification

In their influential text, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, Bowles and Gintis (1976) expose in expansive detail the fundamental alignment between schooling and capitalist production. They label this tendency the 'correspondence principle' in that the social interactions of schools correspond with the experiences structured by the capitalist division of labor. First, schools, predominantly those in low-income neighborhoods, mimic authority structures of the capitalist workplace. Students are subservient to teachers and administrators, they

endure a curriculum over which they have no influence, and they are ensnared in competition amongst peers for extrinsic rewards that further stratify and fragment them. In the process, schools present an internal logic that reifies capitalism and inculcates among students the meritocratic ideology that their ultimate social position is of their own making. Amidst this system, however, students from wealthy families are walled off in schools or academic tracks that prepare them to be bosses rather than workers. Indeed, research has illuminated how pedagogical approaches – whether emphasizing creative freedom or authoritarian control – depend on the socioeconomic location of the schools in which they are implemented (Anyon, 2011; Mickelson, 1980).

Historically, the school as sorting mechanism has been a prominent feature of the United States educational system. In 1985, Oakes' *Keeping Track* uncovered the inequitable nature of academic tracking in schools. Building on the work of Bowles and Gintis (1976), Oakes (2005) illustrated how different tracks in high schools offer students very different preparation that likely impacts future economic prospects. While students in high track classrooms are allowed to engage in self-directed inquiry and critical thinking, low-track teachers emphasize conformity and basic skills. Further, high-track classrooms empower students to take leadership, whereas low-track students are expected to submit to strict classroom rules. Academic tracking, Oakes argues, is a fundamental mechanism through which schools reproduce inequality.

Thus, schools historically have offered college economic opportunity to some, but denied it to others. Again, however, such an approach corresponds with the economic stratifications inherent in capitalism. From an instrumentalist perspective, college is unnecessary for a majority of students. Despite an economy increasingly dependent on postsecondary training, Carnevale, Smith and Stohl of the Georgetown University Policy Institute predict that only 35% of jobs in 2020 will require a bachelor's degree (2013). If significantly more students successfully graduate from college with a bachelor's degree, many will likely find their degrees inapplicable to the jobs available in the market.

Reframing the conversation from an instrumental lens to an equity lens, however, underscores the dangers of only preparing some students for college. Of particular concern is the way in which College for Some practices stratify students by race, ethnicity and class. Oakes (2005) finds track placements within schools to be patterned along racial lines. Interactions between teachers, counselors, students and families compel inequitable course taking practices at school sites (Oakes & Guiton, 1995; Tyson, 2011; Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002). Lucas and Berends (2007) demonstrate that, at schools with more White students, Black students are less likely to enroll in advanced courses than they would be at schools that were predominantly Black. Nationally, low-income students whose parents have a college degree are nearly twice as likely to take an Advanced Placement course – a course that allows high school students the opportunity to earn college credit in high school – than students whose parents did not graduate high school (Malkus, 2016). When schools ensure that only some students have access to college preparatory course work, race, ethnicity and class become powerful determinants of a student's curricular trajectory.

The College for Some practice has long-range implications. It starts with stratified K-12 schooling experiences, continues into stratified college going experiences, and culminates in stratified job opportunities. Adelman (1999, 2006) demonstrates that rigorous learning experiences in high school are the strongest predictor of postsecondary outcomes. Perhaps connected to

uneven K-12 learning opportunities, college attainment is stratified by race, ethnicity and class. Among adults 25 and older, White people are nearly 2.5 times as likely as Latinas/os and more than 1.5 times as likely as African Americans to have earned bachelor's degrees (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017). The discrepancies in bachelor's degree attainment have been persistent since 1940 but have been closing somewhat modestly (see Table 1). For instance, Black Americans earned bachelor's degrees at less than a third the rate of White students in 1940, but by 2000 earned degrees at greater than half the rate of White students.

These educational attainment gaps are salient in a capitalist economy. The financial impacts of disparate educational levels are profound, as scholars estimate that the excess earnings associated with a bachelor's degree can be worth up to hundreds of thousands of dollars over a lifetime (Webber, 2016). The economic value of a college degree has also been increasing. In the decades following World War II, a high school graduate could reasonably expect employment that did not require a college degree but provided a route to the middle class. A robust manufacturing sector buttressed by strong labor unions ensured that high school graduates could support their families on a single income (Warren, 2007). Overseas competition and mechanization of factory jobs beginning in the 1970s, as well as tenacious union busting during the Reagan administration, steadily undermined the capacity of manufacturing industry to provide US workers with adequate purchasing power (Pierson, 1995). Today, the economic arteries that, for decades, steadily pumped high school graduates into the American middle class have calcified amidst the capitalist restructuring of the global economy.

College for Some practices inevitably leave some students ill-prepared for a rapidly changing labor economy, and they may also fail to adequately ready all youth for meaningful engagement in their communities. Perna (2005) finds that those who earn a bachelor's degree are almost twice as likely to vote than high school graduates with no postsecondary education. The civic benefits of a college education appear to be greater for Black and Latina/o students than they are for White students. Also, bachelor degree attainment is positively associated with volunteering, attending plays or concerts, reading books daily, and staying off public assistance. While the economic ramifications of College for Some practices deserve intense scrutiny, its non-pecuniary ramifications are also an important consideration when determining whether students should attend college.

College for All

The fundamental challenge of the College for All approach is that it fails to disrupt the capitalist underpinnings of social inequality. Stratification is inherent to capitalism, and capitalistic enterprise, in assessing labor by its exchange value, seeks low wages. In his early analyses of capitalist production, Marx theorized that the persistent existence of surplus labor was capable of maintaining an inexpensive and expedient means of capitalist expansion. Such

Table 1. Percent of population with bachelor degree (25 years and older).

Year	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
White	4.9	6.6	8.1	11.3	17.1	21.5	26.1
Black	1.3	2.2	3.5	4.4	8.4	11.4	14.3
Latina/o	(no data)	(no data)	(no data)	(no data)	7.6	9.2	10.4

Source: Census Bureau (2015).

a surplus is the 'condition of existence of the capitalist mode of production … a disposable reserve army, that belongs to capital quite as absolutely as if the latter had bred it at its own cost' (Marx, 1973, p. 108). Regardless of whether schools prepare students for college, the owners of the means of production pull economic levers to ensure a 'reserve army' that can maintain low wages despite rising educational certifications. In line with Marxist predictions, some studies have demonstrated that, even though historically marginalized groups like African Americans and Latinas/os have narrowed gaps in terms of educational attainment, their wages have failed to keep pace with the wages of White workers (Anyon, 2011).

Capitalism not only constrains the capacity of the College for All approach but gains further legitimacy via its implementation. Messaging to students that a college degree is essential to one's ability to lead a productive and satisfying existence runs up against the fact that not all students will go to college. The framing conveys a meritocratic individualism such that when some students inevitably fail to earn a bachelor degree, they have no one to blame but themselves. As Glass and Nygreen (2011) argue, College for All 'provides an ideological velvet to soften the education policy talk that actually carries big sticks that punish the very students proclaimed to be the beneficiaries' (p. 4).

Additionally, the push for more students to attend college is a form of corporate stimulus. Banks can expect increased profits from an expansion of students who take out loans to pay for the ever-increasing cost of college attendance (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). The College Board (2017) reports that 60% of 2016 college graduates from public and private nonprofit four-year institutions had debt, and the average debt was $28,400. As the debt loads of college graduates continue to grow and government support for postsecondary education erodes, private loan agencies see their profits rise.

A final challenge posed by capitalistic processes to the equity-producing capacity of College for All is the tendency of privileged groups to engage in practices that maintain their social position. Lucas (2001) names this process 'effectively maintained inequality', wherein access to educational opportunity expands for marginalized populations, and inequality persists as dominant groups seek new distinctions to maintain their advantages. The resulting attainment outcomes are described by Posselt, Jaquette, Bielby, and Bastedo (2012) as 'access without equity'. They find that since 1972, despite increasing college access, stratification has worsened for African American and Latina/o students who are now less likely to attend selective institutions than they were in the 1970s. Problematically, College for All practices may do little to offset this inequity. Cipollone and Stich (2017) argue that college-going policies in inner-city schools may be a form of 'shadow capital' – providing the appearance of usefulness towards college success, but little actual value to students who face barriers to college access that require more substantial interventions. Shadow capital ultimately does little more than disappoint inner-city students who are excited, but unprepared for college. These findings suggest that even amidst pressures to expand college going, those with privilege will 'effectively maintain inequality' by maintaining exclusive access to elite institutions and the cultural capital necessary to succeed there.

Thus, College for All has collided with capitalistic inequalities much in the same way that College for Some has done since the beginning of schooling in the United States. Given the stubborn challenges of educational equity, we propose a new framework that aims to reframe the conversation about College for All. We outline a 'Justice for All' framework that elevates democratic education and prepares students academically in ways that chip away at the capitalistic tendency towards persistent inequality.

Justice for all

The subsequent discussion is grounded in concerns of justice for all students. In our definition of justice, we borrow from the framing of the competing goals of education as articulated by Labaree (1997). Labaree argues that an often overlooked educational objective is that of 'democratic equality', generally overruled in US schools concerned with economic efficiency and social mobility. Labaree describes three components of democratic equality. First, democratic equality hinges on concerns of equal access. Educational practices necessitate an emphasis on creating opportunities for all students to achieve any level of education. Relatedly, education for democratic equality emphasizes equal treatment of students. This particular frame of education has provided the impetus for equity movements such as desegregation and compulsory schooling. A final objective of democratic equality is the development of students as democratic citizens. Thus, schools are called upon to provide a justice-oriented education that prepares students to pursue equity by democratic means. Here, we aim to transcend instrumentalist analyses of College for All versus College for Some. Instead we frame college-going practices in terms of their capacity to enhance equal treatment, equal access and democratic citizenship. In short, we ask, how might a more justice-oriented vision for educational attainment be implemented in schools?

Equal treatment and access: college preparation and vocational education

Given the concerns about College for All, a number of scholars have called for the abolition of universal college preparation and the reinvigoration of vocational education (Noddings, 2011; Tucker, 2012). Vocational education, a centerpiece in the development of the comprehensive high school, has been extensively criticized by researchers concerned with educational stratification (e.g. Gamoran, 1987; Oakes, 2005). Vocational educational programs have been on the decline recently though more recent scholarship has sought to resuscitate their role in schools. Indeed, vocational education lies at the heart of questions about college preparation in high school. If all students should not go to college, vocational education can adequately ready them for life after high school. Indeed, an abundance of 'linked learning' programs that provide students with professional experience in high school have proliferated in recent years (Lanford & Tierney, 2015). However, concerns about justice have been peripheral to the conversation on vocational education; we aim to center them here.

Two perspectives on vocational education are worth noting. First, from an instrumentalist perspective Hanushek, Schwerdt, Woessmann, and Zhang (2017) evaluate the wage effects of vocational education in Germany, Denmark and Switzerland on the short and long-term career trajectories for vocational education participants. Employing a difference in differences model and propensity scoring, they find that in early career years, vocational education has clear financial benefits that are undermined or even reversed by a decrease in later career earnings. In Germany and Denmark, lifetime earnings of vocational students were negative while they were slightly positive in Switzerland. The authors postulate that in dynamic, high-growth economies like Germany and Denmark, the narrowness of a vocational education is detrimental to lifetime earnings potential.

Second, Noddings (2011) approaches the question of vocational education from a different perspective. She suggests that well-funded, sophisticated vocational programs should serve students uninterested in college preparatory curricula. She emphasizes that vocational

learning is an intellectual and moral pursuit and argues schools would be wise to frame it as such. A motorcycle mechanic, for example, considers a multitude of technical approaches to the repair as well as ethical considerations for appropriately interacting with customers. Ultimately, she argues that schools should be tracked, and students should engage with their parents and counselors in careful conversations about which of the available tracks would be most appropriate for them. Hanushek and colleagues engage the economic ramifications of vocational education while Noddings engages its intellectual and moral components.

One approach that has incorporated concerns of justice into a curricular practice of college readiness and vocational training is a 'multiple pathways' approach articulated by Oakes and Saunders (2008). The approach borrows from some of the tenets of vocational education – in particular the urgency around preparing students for jobs after high school and offering curricular choice – but maintains that all students must also be prepared for success at rigorous universities. The authors urge schools to be deliberate in designing pathways that harness student interest in a non-hierarchical manner. Unfortunately, despite an explicit social justice orientation, the approach likely remains beholden to the rules of capitalism. As Lucas (2008) argues, the pathways will have the propensity to stratify such that those associated with more highly valued capitalistic pursuits will draw students from more elite backgrounds.

Lanford and Tierney (2015) also call into question the prohibitive cost of such programs as well as the scheduling challenges presented by an attempt to train students for college and vocation. Ultimately, curricular practices, whether emphasizing College for All or College for Some, will likely fall short of equity amidst neoliberal political realities indelibly linked to the experience of schooling.

Education for democracy: beyond college and workforce preparation

Perhaps the best hope for the capacity of schools to enhance equity lies in their engagement in education for democracy. In *Democracy and Education* (2004), Dewey describes the entanglement of educational practices with the fate of democratic institutions:

> The devotion of education to democracy is a familiar fact … a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity. (p. 20)

We agree with Dewey's progressive agenda where in a democracy education is central – and it is not simply training for jobs, but instead focused on readying individuals for civic participation. In conversations about College for All, Dewey's theories of education remain on the periphery. Civic and college-ready capacities are often discussed in isolation of one another. To become 'college and career ready' is a decidedly individualist endeavor, won amidst stacks of worksheets and textbooks in preparation for standardized tests of college proficiency. Lost in the conversations of College for All are questions of democratic justice; we aim to reunite the two ideas here.

Achieving educational equity through job or college preparation in high school faces substantial statistical hurdles. First, greater employment does not necessarily imply greater

equity. Despite steady job growth after the 2008 recession, working class wages have remained stubbornly low and economic inequality has remained stubbornly high (Mishel, Gould, & Bivens, 2015). In addition, regardless of educational levels, African American and Latina/o workers earn less than similarly educated Whites. United States capitalism has a demonstrated propensity for unequal income distribution and an entanglement with structural racism. Even the best college preparatory or vocational practices will do little to undermine these troubling sociopolitical realities.

As such, we advocate for a more critical pedagogical approach to postsecondary preparation that prepares students to advocate for a more just and democratic society. Critical approaches draw heavily upon the theories of Freire, whose *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* aims to develops a critical consciousness amongst marginalized groups (2000). Freire argues that a pedagogy of social justice requires a praxis-oriented interrogation of social inequities, wherein students simultaneously learn about theories relevant to their marginalization and use those theories to strategize direct action within their communities. Critical scholars contend that such an approach is underutilized in schools. Giroux (2011, Chapter 1), for example, laments the tendency of schools to reward students who behave as 'cheerful robots' who buy into ideas that are designed exclusively to advance private enterprise. McLaren (1998, Chapters 4 and 5) argues that this passive mode of learning reinforces a false meritocracy, wherein students' ability is determined only by whether they submit to the dominant culture. Critical theorists thus argue for a pedagogy of liberation that endows students with the tools to actively resist institutions that render them vulnerable to marginalization.

Critical approaches may be essential to democracy

For example, in addition to the 'college and career ready' mantra prevalent in district mission statements, the Oakland Unified School District added an emphasis on 'community readiness' to direct teachers to also pursue more democratic aims (Kahne, Evans, Hodgin, & Choi, 2018). The importance of democratic deliberation to encourage civic engagement has been articulated in a number of scholarly arguments (McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Parker, 2010). Giroux (2011, Chapter 1) argues that only critical pedagogy 'can promote the modes of solidarity and collective action capable of defending the public good and the symbolic and institutional power relations necessary for sustainable democracy' (p. 9). While such pedagogies veer away from the 'college and career' fixation of current educational discourse, they may do substantially more to produce equitable social outcomes.

In addition, a 'Justice for All' approach – even without any explicit college-going orientation – may have the ancillary benefit of more equitable college-going outcomes. Critical, culturally relevant pedagogies have been shown to engage students typically underserved by traditional pedagogies. Ladson-Billings demonstrated that successful teachers of African American students develop 'culturally relevant' pedagogies that emphasize critical consciousness and elevate the cultural realities of their students (1995). Dee and Penner (2017), using a regression discontinuity design, find strong positive effects of a district-wide ethnic studies program on student academic performance. Also, when a social justice component is included in a college access program, Howard, Tunstall, and Flennaugh (2016) find that the program is highly effective at engaging students and families from marginalized backgrounds in the college going process. As Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) argue, 'a schooling environment that foregrounds the relationship between education and the most pressing

conditions in the community, an education with relevance, is most likely to produce notable increases in college eligibility' (p. 11). In short, educating for justice might pave the way for a more equitable college-going landscape.

Conclusion

We have sought here not solely to outline shortcomings of both College for All and College for Some approaches, but to reframe the conversation and suggest a new way forward. In particular, the insights of critical pedagogy may provide a useful lens through which to reframe the debate around College for All. Transforming a conversation entrenched in educational discourse since the establishment of the first United States schools, however, is well beyond the reach of one scholarly text. Capitalism is not only resilient, it has expanded to the deepest reaches of what in previous generations were institutions founded on collectivist principles – schools, city governments and labor unions. As with our colleagues in this issue, we have investigated policies and practices that breed the corporate abuse in neoliberal universities, but rather than focus on governance we have looked at the broad topic of college access and considered how to make the approach more democratic. We do not intend here to feign optimism. However, if any institution has the potential to slow long-standing historical processes of increasing inequity and vulnerability, it is the school. As Bowles and Gintis (1976) argued, the educational system is at the center of the capitalistic suppression of democratic equality. Schools are thus uniquely positioned to undermine capitalism at its core.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

Adelman, C. (1999). *Answers in the tool box: Academic intensity, attendance patterns, and Bachelor's degree attainment*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

Adelman, C. (2006). *The toolbox revisited: Paths to degree completion from high school through college*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

Anyon, J. (2011). *Marx and education*. London: Taylor & Francis.

Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in capitalist America* (Vol. 57). New York, NY: Basic Books.

Carnevale, A. P., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. (2013). *Recovery: Job growth and education requirements through 2020*. Washington DC: Center for the Education Workforce.

Cipollone, K., & Stich, A. E. (2017). Shadow capital: The democratization of college preparatory education. *Sociology of Education, 90*(4), 333–354.

College Board. (2017). Retrieved from https://trends.collegeboard.org/student-aid/figures-tables/loans#Average%20Cumulative%20Debt

Dee, T. S., & Penner, E. K. (2017). The causal effects of cultural relevance: Evidence from an ethnic studies curriculum. *American Educational Research Journal, 54*(1), 127–166.

Dewey, J. (2004). *Democracy and education*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications.

Duncan-Andrade, J. M. R., & Morrell, E. (2008). *The art of critical pedagogy: Possibilities for moving from theory to practice in urban schools* (Vol. 285). New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Florer, J. H. (1968). Major issues in the congressional debate of the Morrill Act of 1862. *History of Education Quarterly, 8*(4), 459–478.

Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. London: Bloomsbury.
Gamoran, A. (1987). The stratification of high school learning opportunities. *Sociology of Education, 60*, 135–155.
Giroux, H. A. (2011). *On critical pedagogy* (pp. 3–15). New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group.
Glass, R. D., & Nygreen, K. (2011). Class, race, and the discourse of "College for All." A response to "Schooling for Democracy". *Democracy and Education, 19*(1), 7–00.
Hanushek, E. A., Schwerdt, G., Woessmann, L., & Zhang, L. (2017). General education, vocational education, and labor-market outcomes over the lifecycle. *Journal of Human Resources, 52*(1), 48–87.
Harper, S. R., Patton, L. D., & Wooden, O. S. (2009). Access and equity for African American students in higher education: A critical race historical analysis of policy efforts. *The Journal of Higher Education, 80*(4), 389–414.
Howard, T. C., Tunstall, J., & Flennaugh, T. K. (Eds.). (2016). *Expanding college access for urban youth: What schools and colleges can do*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
Kahne, J., Hodgin, E., Evans, C., & Choi, Y. W. (2018). Expanding the opportunity structure of civic education in the digital age: A Strategy for Reform. In W. G. Tierney, Z. B. Corwin, & A. Ochsner (Eds.), *Digital equity and educational opportunity*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
Labaree, D. F. (1997). Public goods, private goods: The American struggle over educational goals. *American Educational Research Journal, 34*(1), 39–81.
Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal, 32*(3), 465–491.
Lanford, M., & Tierney, W. G. (2015). From vocational education to linked learning. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Michael_Lanford/publication/315760035_From_Vocational_Education_to_Linked_Learning_The_Ongoing_Transformation_of_Career-Oriented_Education_in_the_US/links/58e2955c4585154eb71231f6/From-Vocational-Education-to-Linked-Learning-The-Ongoing-Transformation-of-Career-Oriented-Education-in-the-US.pdf
Levesque, K., Lauen, D., Teitelbaum, P., Alt, M., & Librera, S. (2000). *Vocational education in the United States: Toward the year 2000*. Statistical analysis report. Jessup, MD: ED Pubs.
Lipman, P. (2013). *The new political economy of urban education: Neoliberalism, race, and the right to the city*. London: Taylor & Francis.
Lucas, S. (2001). Effectively maintained inequality: Education transitions, track mobility, and social background effects. *American Journal of Sociology, 106*(6), 1642–1690.
Lucas, S. (2008). Constructing equal pathways in and effectively maintained inequality society. In J. Oakes & M. Saunders (Eds.), *Beyond tracking: Multiple pathways to college, career, and civic participation* (pp. 233–250). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Lucas, S. R., & Berends, M. (2007). Race and track location in U.S. public schools. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility, 25*(3), 169–187.
Malkus, N. (2016). *AP at scale*. American Enterprise Institute. Retrieved from http://www.aei.org/publication/ap-at-scale-public-school-students-in-advanced-placement-1990-2013/?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=malkus&utm_content=paper.
Marx, K. (1973). *Karl Marx on society and social change: With selections by Friedrich Engels*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
McAvoy, P., & Hess, D. (2013). Classroom deliberation in an era of political polarization. *Curriculum Inquiry, 43*(1), 14–47.
McLaren, P. (1998). *Life in Schools. An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy in the Foundations of Education* (pp. 183–223). Reading, MA: Addison Wesley Longman.
Mickelson, R. A. (1980). Social stratification processes in secondary schools: A comparison of Beverly Hills High School and Morningside High School. *Journal of Education, 162*, 83–112.
Mishel, L., Gould, E., & Bivens, J. (2015, January 6). *Wage stagnation in nine charts*. Economic Policy Institute. Retrieved from http://www.epi.org/publication/charting-wage-stagnation/
Murray, M. (2008). When war is work: The GI Bill, citizenship, and the civic generation. *California Law Review, 96*(4), 967–998.
National Center for Education Statistics. (2017). Digest for education statistics. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_104.20.asp

Noddings, N. (2011). Schooling for democracy. *Democracy and Education, 19*(1), 1.
Oakes, J. (2005). *Keeping track*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Oakes, J., & Guiton, G. (1995). Matchmaking: The dynamics of high school tracking decisions. *American Educational Research Journal, 32*(1), 3–33.
Oakes, J., & Saunders, M. (2008). *Beyond tracking: Multiple pathways to college, career, and civic participation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
Parker, W. C. (2010). Listening to strangers: Classroom discussion in democratic education. *Teachers College Record, 112*(11), 2815–2832.
Perna, L. W. (2005). The benefits of higher education: Sex, racial/ethnic, and socioeconomic group differences. *The Review of Higher Education, 29*(1), 23–52.
Phillips, M. (2012, June 5). Why we need vocational education. *The Washington Post.* Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/why-we-need-vocational-education/2012/06/04/gJQA8jHbEV_blog.html?utm_term=.69f00c3962ed
Pierson, P. (1995). *Dismantling the welfare state?: Reagan, Thatcher and the politics of retrenchment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Posselt, J. R., Jaquette, O., Bielby, R., & Bastedo, M. N. (2012). Access without equity. *American Educational Research Journal, 49*(6), 1074–1111.
Slaughter, S., & Rhoades, G. (2004). *Academic capitalism and the new economy: Markets, state, and higher education*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
Tucker, M. (2012, January 26). The death of vocational education and the demise of the American middle class. *Education Week.* Retrieved from https://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/top_performers/2012/01/the_death_of_vocational_education_and_the_demise_of_the_american_middle_class.html.
Tyson, K. (Ed.). (2011). *Integration interrupted: Tracking, Black students, and acting White after Brown*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
U.S. Census Bureau. (2015). A half century of learning: Educational attainment from 1940 through 2015. Retrieved from https://www.census.gov/topics/education/educational-attainment.html
Warren, E. (2007). *The new economics of the middle class: Why making ends meet has gotten harder*. Testimony Before Senate Finance Committee.
Webber, D. A. (2016). Are college costs worth it? How ability, major, and debt affect the returns to schooling. *Economics of Education Review, 53*, 296–310.
Yonezawa, S., Wells, A. S., & Serna, I. (2002). Choosing tracks: "Freedom of Choice" in detracking schools. *American Educational Research Journal, 39*(1), 37–67.