

No Child Left Behind: A Brainchild of Neoliberalism and American Politics

March 31, 2010

Neo-liberalism and neoconservatism are in the driver's seat right now and this is not only happening in education.

MICHAEL APPLE

CULTURAL CRITIC AND EDUCATOR, Michael Apple offers a critique of the current situation in education, where liberalism has been displaced by neoliberalism, deeply affecting education and social policies: ". . . liberalism itself is under concerted attack from the right, from the coalition of neoconservatives, 'economic modernizers.' And new right groups who have sought to build a new consensus around their own principles, following a strategy best called 'authoritarian populism.' This coalition has combined a 'free market ethic' with a populist politics. The results have been a partial dismantling of social democratic policies that largely benefited working people, people of color, and women (these groups are obviously not mutually exclusive), the building of a closer relationship between government and the capitalist economy, and attempts to curtail liberties that had been gained in the past." (Apple, xxiv)

Throughout the world, a neoliberal agenda promoted by international organizations, professional organizations, and in the case of the United States by the American establishment, includes a drive towards privatization and decentralization of public forms of education, a movement toward educational standards, a strong emphasis on testing, and a focus on accountability. That is to say, educational neoliberal reforms are based on an economic model of educational policy.

In this article I define NCLB as a neoliberal educational reform readily supported by the American establishment, and, as demonstrated in the presidential candidates' debates, the two mainstream parties hardly differ in their proposal for education. Next I try to show how NCLB will affect educational practices, policies and institutions, including higher education, and finally, I will offer a number of critiques of NCLB from the perspective of social justice education.

An Educational Panacea?

The economic model of education policy assumes a substantial consensus for a common set of educational goals. Unfortunately, such agreement rarely exists in the construction of real world reform.

HENRY LEVIN AND CLIVE BELFIELD

ANY ASTUTE OBSERVER of the third presidential debate, which focused on domestic issues, will agree that the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was never a matter of policy dispute between the candidates of the two mainstream parties.

The challenger, Senator Kerry, did not question the values, implementation, effectiveness, or methods of NCLB. Quite the contrary, he emphasized that, "the No Child Left Behind Act is really a jobs act when you think about it. The No Child Left Behind Act says, 'We'll raise standards. We'll increase federal spending. But in return for extra spending, we now want people to measure . . . whether or not a child can read or write or add and subtract.'"

In the same vein, during the vice presidential candidates debate at Case Western Reserve University, in Cleveland, Ohio, Vice President Cheney said: "I think the most important thing we can do is have a first-class public school system... And the president, his first legislative priority was the No Child Left Behind Act. It was the first piece of legislation we introduced. We got it passed that first summer on a bipartisan basis. And it does several things. It establishes high standards. It, at the same time, sets up a system of testing with respect to our school system, so we can establish accountability to parents and make certain that they understand how well their students are doing. And they have the opportunity to move students out of poorly performing schools to good schools. It's also important, as we go forward in the next term, we want to be able to take what we've done for elementary education and move it into the secondary education. It's working. We've seen reports now of a reduction in the achievement gap between majority students and minority students. We're making significant progress."

Thus, the first important learning is that NCLB passed with overwhelming bipartisan support and enthusiasm because it reflects the perspective of the American establishment, and was originally supported by a number of professional organizations.

Make no mistake. The NCLB increased the role of the federal government in accountability like never before. Although the federal government only funds 7 percent of the total expenditure of education in the country, it has tried to leverage those funds for specific purposes. DeBray explains the process: "The 1994 ESEA reauthorization altered the federal role in accountability for states and schools in two significant ways. First, the Clinton administration proposed that states adopt clear standards and assessments for all students in Title I, a strategy that was intended to use the money in Title I to drive the "seed money" for standards-based reform provided in Goals 2000, a much smaller federal program enacted earlier in 1994 (DeBray, 57)

NCLB creates a condition in which the federal government diminished the educational autonomy of the states strengthening the federal role by increasing requirements for states. (DeBray, 58). NCLB is a reform model claiming raising standards while at the same time defining what those standards are, and what quality of education is or ought to be. It is a model that bases the understanding of education in strictly and overwhelming economic terms (e.g., Senator Kerry 's idea that NCLB is a jobs act). It is a model based on cognitive measurements of students, schools and teachers, making testing and accountability the buzzwords of the moment in educational environments. And finally, like in the *Wizard of Oz*, "education" has become the magic word that is supposed to transform the world around us.

Listening to the President of the United States in the third presidential debate at Arizona State University, I thought that President Bush was running for the presidency of the teachers' union, not for the Presidency of the United States. His answers to most of the pressing issues of a domestic policy agenda was "education."

- Do you want to keep the economy growing and maintain a competitive workforce? Education is the answer.

- Have you lost your job? Get education.
- You need trade adjustment assistance? Go to community colleges.

This was the voice of President Bush during the third debate:

I went to Washington to solve problems, and I saw a problem in the public education system in America. They were just shuffling too many kids through the system, year after year, grade after grade, without learning the basics. And so we said: Let's raise the standards. We're spending more money, but let's raise the standards and measure early and solve problems now, before it's too late. Got four more years, I've got more to do to continue to raise standards, to continue to reward teachers and school districts that are working, to emphasize math and science in the classrooms, to continue to expand Pell Grants to make sure that people have an opportunity to start their career with a college diploma. And so the person you talked to, I say, here's some help, here's some trade adjustment assistance money for you to go a community college in your neighborhood, a community college which is providing the skills necessary to fill the jobs of the twenty-first century.

Senator Kerry concurred. During the October 8, 2004, second candidates' Debate at Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri, he argued:

I think you ought to get the break. I want to lower your cost to health care. I want to fully fund education, No Child Left Behind, special-needs education. And that's how we're going to be more competitive, by making sure our kids are graduating from school and college.

While agreeing with the President on the need for NCLB, he blamed the administration for underfunding it: "The president reneged on his promise to fund No Child Left Behind." This was the cornerstone of disagreements between both parties: the appropriate level of funding for a substantial reform like this one. DeBray has argued that this is what undermined the consensus: "President Bush's budget for 2004 calls for significantly less education spending than what Congress has authorized. Further, as governors have slashed state education budgets, it is clear that states no longer have the capacity to implement the kinds of policies they did during the economic boom of the 1990s. If the federal government does not adequately fund the law's mandates, both Republican and Democratic governors will resist politically, as Vermont's Howard Dean (D) and Louisiana's Mike Foster (R) at different times suggested they might." (DeBray, 62)

Another slight difference between the candidates is that the key educational problem for Kerry, as he expressed in the second debate, is his emphasis on fostering global educational competition: "China and India are graduating more graduates in technology and science than we are." One may wonder, however, if such competition has to do with training a workforce or in different factors, such as the capacity of research and development in the United States to produce new knowledge and technology. Everybody knows that the U.S. higher education system has been braindraining other nations human capital for decades, and that once students graduate, many simply remain working for American corporations. This may not be the norm any longer: "Testimony to this is the beginning of a 'reverse brain drain' manifested by a sustained drop in the number of doctoral students from China, India, and Taiwan (China) who planned to remain in the United States beginning in the late 1990s." (Saravia and Miranda, 608)

Thus, the issue of international competitiveness in science and technology does not seem to reside solely in the national capacity to attract and/or educate scientists, engineers, and technologists, but perhaps in the creative productivity of such a work force: ". . . Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Taiwan (China) account for more than one quarter of all applications for industrial patents awarded in the United States each year and, remarkably, Taiwan (China) and Singapore surpassed the United States in the overall number of citations to their patents on chemical design." (Saravia and Miranda, 608)

Still, while one may agree or disagree if the United States is lagging behind in science and technology compared to other nations, it is somewhat understandable why the issue of fully funding NCLB educational reform becomes the cornerstone of disagreements between Democrats and Republicans: "On the first anniversary of the signing of the No Child Left Behind Act in January, Democrats, including senators Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA) and Joseph I. Lieberman (D-CT), sent President Bush a letter that read in part, 'America's public schools cannot overcome the enormous obstacles they face on the cheap.'" Their letter demanded a \$7.7 billion increase in the federal education budget for the next fiscal year (2004). Bush, by contrast, has proposed a \$1.1 billion increase, saying that the country cannot afford more in time of war. (DeBray, 63)

Globalization and Higher Education

Text and discourse are never innocent of complicity with events.

E. SAN JUAN JR.

WHY DO PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES usually take place in universities? Perhaps because they are considered sacred environments for the pursuit of the quest for knowledge, liberty, and freedom of thought, or perhaps because universities are seen as environments that welcome debate, as environments in which objectivity, neutrality, and apoliticity seems to prevail. This is not the place to discuss these commonsense perspectives on universities, and in fact, it doesn't matter because the debates, as the one that we witnessed between Bush and Kerry, were highly scripted, with little if anything left to the actual theoretical imagination or the methodological and analytical rigor of academic exchanges. The presidential debates were a form of "spectacle democracy."

On what is specific to higher education, neoliberal globalization designs four primary reforms for universities related to efficiency and accountability, accreditation and universalization, international competitiveness, and privatization (Rhoads and Torres, in press). Concerns about efficiency and accountability are manifest in the efforts of legislatures, governing boards, and policy makers to

increase the productivity of faculty while decreasing university and college expenditures. The classic example is the effort to increase faculty teaching loads without raising salaries. The proliferation of large classes in which one professor can reach hundreds of students is another example, as were early efforts to promote distance and Internet-based education.

With regard to accreditation and universalization, major efforts are underway throughout the world to reform academic programs through accreditation processes and various strategies that produce increased homogeneity across national boundaries.

Reforms associated with international competitiveness are characterized by efforts to create measurable performance standards through extensive standardized testing (the new standards and accountability movement), introduction of new teaching and learning methods leading to the expectation of better performance at a lower cost (e.g., universalization of textbooks), and improvements in the selection and training of teachers. Competition-based reforms in higher education tend to adopt a vocational orientation and reflect the point of view that colleges and universities exist largely to serve the economic well-being of a society.

Privatization, of course, is the final major reform effort linked to neoliberal globalization and perhaps the most dominant aspect. Neoliberal economic supporters view the marketplace as the ideal regulator of services, products, and costs. Consequently, if we think of education as a product or service, then from a neoliberal perspective the best way to regulate schools, colleges, and universities is to allow the market to do so. Nation-states need not fund or concern themselves with tuition costs; the market can take on such responsibilities quite handily. If institutions price themselves too highly, prospective students will inform them by selecting other less costly institutions.

Alternatively, if a prospective student cannot afford higher education, then there are other options that societies offer, including military service and work within the service sector of the economy. The rationale of such a system is purely economic. Furthermore, the system is, from the perspective of neoliberalism, entirely just, given that subjective individuals do not open and close doors, but a system of costs and payments dictates nearly every outcome.

The neoliberal promise in education in the United States is one that points to progressively extend the model of NCLB to secondary school, and eventually to universities, which is compatible with a recent initiative by the World Trade Organization. The WTO, a multilateral agency heavily supported by the United States, has recently debated an initiative that promotes, or attempts to ensure that educational services worldwide be deregulated and, on behalf of free markets, treated as any other financial service. This initiative opens the way for substantial higher educational reforms, through privatization to occur not only in the world, but also in the United States, a signatory of the WTO agreements.

Pitfalls and Contradictions

Maybe their meanness killed something important in them.

LINDA BELL

FROM A PERSPECTIVE of teaching for social justice, a critique of NCLB points to fundamental pitfalls and contradictions of the model which, in the end, not only may lead to its own demise, but will

deeply damage the fabric of public education as the cornerstone of the democratic pact in the United States, and by implication, will damage peoples and entire communities, especially people of color.

Carlos Ovando offers eleven reasons why NCLB could be consider a fraud. 1. The massive increase in testing that NCLB will impose on schools will hurt their educational performance, not improve it; 2. The funding for NCLB does not come anywhere near the levels that would be needed to reach even the narrow and dubious goals of producing 100 percent passing rates on state tests for all students by 2014; 3. The mandate that NCLB imposes on schools to eliminate inequality in test scores among all students within 12 years is a mandate that is placed on no other social institution, and reflects the hypocrisy of the law; 4. The sanctions that NCLB impose on schools that don't meet its test score targets will hurt poor schools and poor communities most; 5. The transfer and choice provision will crest chaos and produce greater inequality within the public system without increasing the capacity of receiving schools to deliver better educational services; 6. These same transfer and choice provisions will not give low-income parents any more control over school bureaucracies than food stamps give them over the supermarkets; 7. These provisions about using scientifically based instructional practices are neither scientifically valid nor educationally sound and will harmfully impact classrooms in what may be the single most important instructional area, the teaching of reading; 8. The supplemental tutorial provisions of NCLB will channel public funds to private companies for ideological and political reasons, similar to debates about vouchers, not sound educational ones; 9. NCLB is part of a larger political and ideological effort to privatize social programs, reduce the public sector, and ultimately replace local control of institutions like schools with marketplace reforms that substitute commercial relations between customers for democratic relations between citizens; 10. NCLB moves control over curriculum and instructional issues away from teachers, classrooms, schools and local districts where it should be, and puts it in the hands of state and federal educational bureaucracies and politicians. It represents the single biggest assault on local control of schools in the history of federal education policy; 11. NCLB includes provisions that try to push prayer, military recruiters, and homophobia into schools while pushing multiculturalism, teacher innovation, and creative curriculum reform out.

Ovando's critique is shared by many scholars, and they are also many other voices of dissent in many school districts and state departments of education struggling to comply with the letter and the spirit of the law. Yet, I will argue that even the spirit of the law, based on the notion of accountability should be carefully inspected and criticized.

Technocrats and bureaucrats take for granted that accountability is one of those terms that cannot be challenged because accountability refers to the process of holding actors responsible for their actions. Nonetheless, "Operationalizing such an open-ended concept is fraught with complications, starting with the politically and technically contested issue of assessing performance. Even if the measurement problem were solved, the factors explaining the process have received remarkable little research attention. For example, although political science has sought broad generalizations to explain wars, treaties, military coups, legislation, electoral behavior, and transitions to democracy, it has not produced empirically grounded conceptual frameworks that can explain how public accountability is constructed across diverse institutions." (Fox and Brown, 12)

If a discipline such as political science has not been able to truly define what accountability is, how can one expect to sort out those dilemmas in education? Only in the feverish imagination of technocrats who, paraphrasing Mark Twain's irony, can be criticized that if the only tool that they have is a hammer, all the problems begin to look like nails. I wonder sometimes what would Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Dewey, or Freire, to name just a few great pedagogues, would say confronted with the theories of the lesser-known pedagogues of the Congress, the White House, and their academic advisers and consultants who inspired the principles of NCLB.

Technocrats will probably argue that the rules of *realpolitik* call for an understanding of systemic issues and the need of solving pressing institutional needs, and what is needed are practical solutions, hopefully through consensus, solutions which cannot easily be made compatible with the lofty ideas of pedagogues. I will disagree. While recognizing the importance of those practical needs, the logic underpinning the rationales for policy formation, or the legal constraints of policy-making and institutional negotiation, there is no reason why to base all policy on economic rationality ignoring centuries of humanistic education, pedagogical research, or alternatives models and critical perspectives. Or perhaps one simply may ask why a reform like the NCLB ignores vast amounts of contemporary scientific research that shows the difficulties of implementing its measures, and the pitfalls and dangers of those measures if implemented.

The complexities of NCLB call for a more reflexive and critical understanding of contemporary schooling in the United States. While criticizing social reproduction, critical educators have been struggling to promote equity and equality in schools, alongside with achieving good quality education. To this extent, critical educators believe that better research findings, more consistent policy, better school management, teacher training, curriculum and instruction theories, and textbooks make a difference. Thus, to critically examine the foundations, instruments, methods, and policy orientation of NCLB, and its implementation, makes a lot of pedagogical and political sense. Yet, there are other pressing questions of a greater order that we cannot ignore.

Even if NCLB were to succeed in its implementation and premises, what difference do better schools — as defined by NCLB — make for the betterment of our society if the overall orientation of the U.S. government is to achieve global hegemony through the use of brutal force (disguised through military new euphemisms such as 'smart bombs'), and particularly acting as a world policeman by exporting democracy through carpet bombing in Iraq?

What difference do schools make in the training of children and youth who will become the new Centurions? What difference do schools make in the education of people of color, if they will become "green card Marines" in the imperial army? What difference do schools make in promoting social mobility if there are not jobs for the graduates after most of the best jobs have been outsourced out of the local markets and into a globalized market, benefiting the surplus value of globalized corporations? What difference do schools make in promoting multicultural traditions if, as many scholars have argued, there is only one dominant, hegemonic culture in capitalism, and that is the commodification of labor and knowledge and the culture of class? What difference do schools make if, as some scholars have argued, they represent the broken promises of public education?

What difference do schools make if betraying the principles of the Enlightenment, under the burden of heavy school districts and union bureaucracies, with schools located in run down buildings, managed by self-serving politicians, stuffed by technocratic curriculum, demoralized administrators and teachers, and tested-to-death, disenfranchised students, with overworked and underpaid parents, and assailed by the world of business as another site for-profit taking, schools have abandoned the key tenets of reasonability and utopia?

These are, indeed, some of the pressing questions of today and certainly, questions that NCLB, a brainchild of neoliberalism, is unable or unwilling to answer. The answer, however, is not in a top down law of the Establishment, but in the struggle in the streets. The answers are in the development of public spheres, in the new communities of debate and deliberation in the Internet and nongovernmental organizations, and in the potential new social role of universities promoting a democratic discourse as a critic of the established power. The answer is also in the ability of teachers to remain autonomous despite teacher-proof educational models. To remain caring, critical, and well informed despite growing bureaucratic regulations of profession. The answer is finally in the social movements that will not accept the authoritarianism of reforms like NCLB, and will

continue the struggle, challenging and even practically vetoing policies of the establishment while at the same time advancing alternatives.

Over centuries considering the contradictions of the social orders, the human condition was not improved by nihilists but by visionaries; it was not improved by negativists, but, paraphrasing Paulo Freire, by being impatiently patient seeking social transformation, equity, solidarity, freedom, and justice for all. Freedom was not conquered by the ruthless exercise of power, but by the imagination, passion, and utopia of many anonymous women and men who chose to live and to know decent, dignifying lives despite the rule of authoritarian powers. Neoliberalism and NCLB will not pass the test of time.

Footnotes

Sources

Michael Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum* (New York, Routledge, third edition, 2004).

Linda Bell, *Beyond the Margins. Reflections of a Feminist Philosopher* (Albany: New York, SUNY Press, 2003).

Nicholas C. Burbules and Carlos Alberto Torres, eds. *Globalization and Education: Critical Perspectives*. New York, Routledge, 2000.

Elizabeth DeBray, "The Federal Role in Schools Accountability: Assessing Recent History and the New Law," *Voices in Urban Education*, Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, Spring 2003: 56-62.

Greg Dimitriadis and Dennis Carlson, eds. *Promises to Keep: Cultural Studies, Democratic Education and Public Life* (New York, Routledge, 2003).

Jonathan A. Fox and L. David Brown, eds. *The Struggle for Accountability. The World Bank, NGOs, and Grassroots Movements* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).

Russell Jacoby, "The myth of multiculturalism," *New Left Review*, 1994: 208: 121-126.

Henry M. Levin and Clive Belfield, "Vouchers and Public Policy: When Ideology Trumps Evidence," *Occasional Paper Number 95 from the National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education* (New York: Teachers College-Columbia University, 2004).

Cameroon McCarthy, *The Uses of Culture. Education and the Limits of Ethnic Affiliations* (New York, Routledge, 1998).

Carlos J. Ovando, "Teaching for Social Justice: A Critique of the No Child Left Behind." Paper presented at the California Association of Freirean Educators, Paulo Freire Institute, University of California at Los Angeles, February 28, 2004.

Robert Rhoads and Carlos Alberto Torres, eds. *The Political Economy of Higher Education in America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, in press).

E. San Juan Jr., *Racism and Cultural Studies: Critiques of Multiculturalist Ideology and the Politics of Difference* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

Nancy Gore Saravia and Juan Francisco Miranda, "Plumbing the Brain Drain," *Bulletin of the World*

Health Organization, August 2004, 82 (8).

Carlos Alberto Torres, *Democracy, Education and Multiculturalism. Dilemmas of Citizenship in a Global World* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998).