

Neoliberalism and the Control of Teachers, Students, and Learning: The Rise of Standards, Standardization, and Accountability

David Hursh

Since the reign of Reagan, education in the U.S. has been increasingly transformed to meet the competitive needs of corporations within globalized markets. Beginning with *A Nation at Risk* and proceeding through the national educational summits convened by IBM CEO Louis Gerstner at IBM headquarters, proliferating standardized tests and cries for educational accountability, education is being reshaped to support the now dominant neo-liberal economic policies promoted by government and corporations. In this paper I will develop a Marxist and Foucauldian analysis of the effects of neo-liberal economic policies on education and the lives of teachers and students.

In the first part I will focus on the rise of neo-liberal economics and instrumental rationality, the decline of the public good and public debate, and the redefinition of the individual as the competitive, instrumentally rational individual who can compete in the marketplace (Peters, 1994). As Marx prophesied over one hundred and fifty years ago, under capitalism individuals become valued only in terms of their contributions to the economy as producers and consumers, or, as Marx and Engels wrote, capitalism "left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment' and 'egotistical calculation.'" All would be reduced to "paid wage laborers" (Marx and Engels, 1952, p. 24).

I will then shift to examining the consequences for education in terms of how schooling is regulated and controlled, how students, teachers and schools are evaluated, and what kinds of knowledge and thinking are valued. In particular, I will argue that while conservative politicians have professed that the State should intervene less in the lives of individuals, that, in fact, the opposite has occurred. The State now intervenes from a distance by employing expertise through "technical methods such as accounting and auditing" (Barry, et al, p. 11). Educational policy makers (principally composed of corporate and governmental leaders) reflect this in demands for standards, testing, and accountability.

State Education Departments in 49 states have developed standards in the subject areas and a majority of states have implemented high-stakes standardized tests that students are required to pass for promotion from a particular grade or from high school. The imposition of standards and tests has enabled State Education Departments and school district administrators to surveil and assess whether teachers and students have "met" the standards. Consequently, in an effort to raise tests scores teachers are coerced to "teach toward the test" resulting in simplified and degraded teaching and learning.

The rise of neo-liberalism, the decline of personal rights, and the attack on the public good

As I (Hursh, 2000) and others (Parenti, 1999; Hursh and Ross, 2000) have described elsewhere, the rise of neo-liberalism was partly a corporate and political response to the hard-fought struggles for an extension of personal and labor rights beginning after World War II and ending with the election of President Reagan. During that time African Americans and other people of color fought for the right to vote, equal education, and welfare rights. Women struggled for equal rights in the workplace and home. College students fought for free speech and the right to be treated as adults. Workers fought for workplace protection and higher wages.

In response, corporations and governments in the U.S. and other industrialized countries have developed policies aimed at reducing personal rights and the power of workers, and promoting economic growth and corporate profits. Neo-liberal economic policies mark a shift away from Keynesian economic policies and concerns for general social welfare. Instead, neo-liberal policies emphasize "the deregulation of the economy, trade liberalization, the dismantling of the public sector [such as education, health, and social welfare], and [especially in the U.S.] the predominance of the financial sector of the economy over production and commerce" (Vilas, 1996). The U.S. dominated World Bank and International Monetary Fund has required national governments to develop economic policies that emphasize economic growth and property rights over social welfare and personal rights. Schools are not evaluated for whether students become liberally educated citizens but whether they become economically productive workers.

Neo-liberal economic policy discourse has become so dominant in the public sphere that it has silenced the voices of those calling for alternative social conceptions emphasizing the quality of life measured not in material goods but the environment, culture, health, and welfare (see, for example, *Dying for Growth: Poverty, Inequality, and Health of the Poor* (2000) and *Poverty, Inequality, and Health* (2000) for analysis of the relationship between the neo-liberal policies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and the collapse of the global public health system). Consequently, many have acquiesced to the notion that we live in a globalized society in which neo-liberal economic policy is inevitable.

A whole set of presuppositions is being imposed as self-evident: it is taken for granted that maximum growth, and therefore productivity and competitiveness, are the ultimate and sole goal of human actions; or that economic forces cannot be resisted. Or again--a presupposition which is the basis of all the presuppositions of economics--a radical separation is made between the economic and the social, which is left to one side, abandoned to sociologists, as a kind of reject. (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 31)

In order to resist the hegemony of neo-liberal discourses and practices, Bourdieu implores that we undertake a qualitative and quantitative analysis of both the material effects and the discourses of neo-liberal policies, analyses that will require the insights of

Marx and Foucault. He suggests that "there are a certain number of empirical observations that can be brought forth to counter it," (p. 31) such as "[w]hat will this or that policy cost in the long term in lost jobs, suffering, sickness, alcoholism, drug addiction, domestic violence, etc., all things which cost a great deal, in money, but also in misery?" (p. 41) Bourdieu, in *The Weight of the World* (1999), has undertaken just such an analysis in which he depicts, much like Sebastiao Salgado's photographs of workers and immigrants, the misery caused by neo-liberal policies on most of the world's parents, children, workers, and students.

Numerous critics, including Harvey, in *Spaces of Hope* (2000) have summarized quantitative data on the effects of neo-liberal policies. Harvey, using statistics provided by the United Nations and the Federal Reserve Bank, shows that economic inequality has increased in the U.S. and the world. Harvey further points out that the material conditions of workers--deplorable working conditions and pay providing only the minimal conditions for survival--"conditions that sparked the moral outrage that suffuses the *Manifesto* have not gone away" (Harvey, 2000, p. 44).

But, as stated above, we need not only examine the material conditions but "the production and circulation of this [neo-liberal] discourse" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 31). As Bourdieu states:

Everywhere we hear it said, all day long--and this is what gives the dominant discourse its strength--that there is nothing to put forward in opposition to the neo-liberal view, that it has succeeded in presenting itself as self-evident, that there is no alternative. If it is taken for granted in this way, this is a result of a whole labor of symbolic inculcation in which journalists and ordinary citizens participate passively and, above all, a certain number of intellectuals participate actively. (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 29)

Neo-liberalism: The Relevance of Marx and Engels

While the discourse of globalization and neo-liberal economic policy is new, the expansion of the economy around the globe and the commodification of the worker is not. Over one hundred and fifty years ago Marx and Engels commented on just such developments in *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*. As Harvey states:

[w]hat we now call 'globalization' has been around in some form or another for a very long time--at least as far back as 1492 if not before. The phenomenon and its political-economic consequences have likewise been the subject of commentary, not least by Marx and Engels who, in *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, published an impassioned as well as thorough analysis of it. (Harvey, 2000, p. 21)

While much of the *Manifesto* has become outdated or reflects an inadequate understanding of the world beyond Europe and the U.S., much remains relevant. For example, Marx and Engels accurately describe current globalization as follows:

The need for a constantly expanding market chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere. The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. . . . All old established industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life or death question for all civilized nations, by industries that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe. In place of the old wants, satisfied by the production of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations. (Marx and Engels, 1952, pp. 46-7)

The impact of global capital on the worker, whether "the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science," is accurately presaged by Marx and Engels. "It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single unconscionable freedom--Free Trade" (Marx and Engels, p. 44). It is clear that for Marx and Engels, "workers" refer to everyone other than corporate owners or capitalists, and all are degraded. Further, this is exactly, as Peters describes, the plight of the individual under neo-liberalism: the individual is free, free to compete in the market place (Peters, 1994, p. 66).

Not only, write Marx and Engels, are workers reduced to commodities to be exchanged, but such processes create laborers alienated from their own creative capacities. "Laborers," writes Harvey, "are necessarily alienated because their creative capacities are appropriated as the commodity labor power by capitalists." Laborers continually face "skilling, deskilling, and reskilling of the powers of labor in accord with technological requirements" and the "acculturation to routinization of tasks" (Harvey, 2000, p. 103).

In terms of education this results in focusing on producing efficient workers who are able to adapt and develop new skills and work toward the goals of ownership. As Harvey notes, "[o]n the one hand capital requires educated and flexible laborers, but on the other hand it refuses the idea that laborers should think for themselves. While education of the laborer appears important it cannot be the kind of education that permits free thinking" (Harvey, 2000, p. 103).

Education, and the rise of standards, testing, and accountability

The hegemony of globalized neo-liberal economic policies has contributed to redefining education in terms of its contribution to the economy. As Blackmore states: "Education has, in most instances, been reshaped to become the arm of national economic policy, defined both as the problem (in failing to provide a multi-skilled flexible

workforce) and the solution (by upgrading skills and creating a source of national export earnings" (Blackmore, 2000, 134). As one economist affiliated with Argentina's Ministry of Economics stated: "What we try to measure is how well the training provided by each school fits the needs of production and the labor market" (Puiggros, 2000, p. 84).

Corporate leaders and their allies in government have always endeavored to shape education to fit the needs of business. In the early 1900s, "productivity expert" Frederic Winslow Taylor promoted scientific efficiency as a way of increasing worker productivity. Curriculum theorists and education policy makers as a way of improving educational productivity quickly adopted Taylor's principles and techniques. David Snedden of Massachusetts, a powerful state commissioner in the early part of the century, argued that schools should aid the economy to function as efficiently as possible by sorting and training students for their "probable destinies" in the workforce. The education efficiency movement emphasized hierarchical decision making with experts conceptualizing educational goals, curriculum, and pedagogy to be carried out by teachers. Schools have been seen, writes historian Fones-Wolf, as a "means of socializing workers for the factory, and as a way of promoting social and political stability" (Fones-Wolf, 1994, p. 190).

However, under post-Fordist neo-liberal economics, the collaboration between corporations, government and education have become stronger. For example, in 1995, Undersecretary of Education, Marshall Smith, called for schools to meet the "ever changing challenges of international competition and the changing workplace." In the spring of 1996, the nation's governors held a first educational summit in the headquarters of corporate giant IBM. A working paper, developed under the direction of IBM's CEO Louis Gerstner, stated:

We believe that efforts to set clear, common, and community-based academic standards for students in a given school district or state is a necessary step in any effort to improve student performance. We are convinced that technology, if applied thoughtfully and well-integrated into the curriculum, can be used to boost student performance and ensure a competitive edge in the workforce. (*Education Week*, 1996)

Governmental and privately funded groups, such as the National Center for Education and the Economy, focus their reform efforts on developing students' knowledge, skills and attitudes to be productive workers.

The second educational summit in the fall of 1999, again held at IBM headquarters and directed by Gerstner, called for reforms that would explicitly transform schools to meet corporate expectations. This summit called for "every state [to] adopt standards backed-up by standardized tests [and] to set up a system of 'rewards and consequences' for teachers, students, and schools based on those tests" (Miner, 1999/2000, p. 3). Similarly, the National Alliance of Business, in *Standards Mean Business*, clearly lays out the agenda of standards, assessment and accountability: "A *standards-driven* reform agenda should include content and performance standards, alignment of school processes

with the standards, *assessments* that measure student achievement against world-class levels of excellence, information about student and school performance, and *accountability* for results" (n.d. p. 4., italics added).

Consequently, states are developing subject area standards and then aligning the standards with statewide standardized tests (although inadequately so that the tests rarely assess students on the standards). Increasingly, standardized test scores are being used by school districts to determine whether students should be promoted to the next grade or from high school. Further, some states, such as Florida and New York, are using test scores to rank schools and districts with the purpose of "rewarding" those teachers and schools with high scores and "punishing" those with low. To date, all but one of the states have followed the route of developing standards and implemented standardized tests.

The effort to impose standards, assessments, and accountability has been devastating for teachers and students. McNeil, in *Contradictions of School Reform: Educational Costs of Standardized Testing*, concludes: "*Standardization reduces the quality and quantity of what is taught and learned in schools.*" Further, "*over the long term, standardization creates inequities, widening the gap between the quality of education for poor and minority youth and that of more privileged student*" (McNeil, 2000, p. 3, italics in original). Her research revealed the emergence of

phony curricula, reluctantly presented by teachers in class to conform to the forms of knowledge their students would encounter on centralized tests. The practice of teaching under these reforms shifted away from intellectual activity towards dispensing packaged fragments of information sent from an upper level of bureaucracy. And the role of students as contributors to classroom discourse, as thinkers, as people who brought their personal stories and life experiences into the classroom, was silenced or severely circumscribed by the need for the class to 'cover' a generic curriculum at a pace established by the district and the state for all the schools. (McNeil, 2000, p. 4)

Governmental intrusion on the lives of teachers and students though accounting and auditing

Over the last decade the state has intruded into the lives of teachers and students to a degree unprecedented in history. Teachers are increasingly directed by district and school administrators to focus on raising test scores rather than teaching for understanding. In the Rochester (NY) City School District, high school teachers report that they are pressured to teach toward the test. Sixth grade math teachers receive from the central administration lessons with practice problems that are to be used three out of every five school days as preparation for the standardized math test. Elementary teachers report that they devote more than a month to test preparation for the English Language Arts exam by eliminating all subjects other than language arts. In Massachusetts the test scores of students are posted in the hallway outside teachers' doors. Nationwide, teachers are being deskilled as they implement curriculum developed by others.

Consequently, the question becomes: How is it that social conservatives, who have traditionally ostensibly called for the State to intrude less into the life of the individual, "getting government off people's back," have increased governmental control over teachers and students? In order to answer this conundrum, the analysis of Barry, Osborne, and Rose, in their introduction to *Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neo-Liberalism, and Rationalities of Government* (1996) superbly describes the changing role and tactics of governmental (i.e. State Departments of Education) and quasi-governmental organizations (i.e. The National Education Summit). Barry et al. write:

Paradoxically, neo-liberalism, alongside its critique of the deadening consequences of the 'intrusion' of the state' into the life of the individual, has none the less provoked the invention and/or deployment of a whole array of organizational forms and technical methods in order to extend the field in which a certain kind of economic freedom might be practiced in the form of personal autonomy, enterprise, and choice. (Barry, et al., p. 10)

State Departments of Education increasingly intrude into the lives of teachers and teacher educators. They undertake their regulation through, writes Barry et al., "technical methods such as accountings and auditing" (Barry et al., p. 11). Regulation occurs through technical means of standards, testing, and measuring that "tie techniques of conduct into specific relations with the concerns of government" and that "reconnect, in a productive way, studies of the exercise of power at the 'molecular level' [in schools] with strategies to program power at a molar level" (Barry et al., p. 13). Further, as reflected in state departments of education implementation of standards and standardized tests:

Public authorities seek to employ forms of expertise in order to govern society at a distance, without recourse to any direct forms of repression or intervention. Neo-liberalism, in these terms, involves less a retreat from governmental 'intervention' than a re-inscription of the techniques and forms of expertise required for the exercise of government. (Barry et al., p. 14)

Governmental and quasi-governmental organizations seek to govern without specifying exactly what must be done, but by presenting the requirements or standards as rational and non-controversial, and providing a limited range in which it must be implemented. This makes it possible for social actors, such as teachers, to have a false sense of choice and freedom. As Rose writes, the 'formal political institutions' govern from a distance and "conceive of these actors as subjects of responsibility, autonomy, and choice, and seek to act upon them through shaping and utilizing their freedom" (Rose, 1995, pp. 53-4).

The neo-liberal states, through the use of standards, assessments, and accountability, aims to restrict educators to particular kinds of thinking, thinking that conceptualizes education in terms of producing individuals who are economically productive. Education is no longer valued for its role in developing political, ethical, and aesthetic citizens.

Instead, the goal has become promoting knowledge that contributes to economic productivity and producing students who are compliant and productive. Blackmore summarizes that "educational policy has shifted emphasis from input and process to outcomes, from the liberal to the vocational, from education's intrinsic to its instrumental value, and from qualitative to quantitative measures of success" (2000, p. 34).

Neo-liberalism, and the move to hold teachers and students accountable through standardized tests, needs to be critiqued and resisted. Bourdieu, in *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market* (1998), encourages us to resist the logic of neo-liberalism.

Everywhere we hear it said, all day long--and this is what gives the dominant discourse its strength--that there is nothing to put forward in opposition to the neo-liberal views, that it has succeeded in presenting itself as self-evident, that there is not alternative. If it is taken for granted in this way, this is a result of a whole labor of symbolic inculcation in which journalists and ordinary citizens participate passively and, above all, a certain number of intellectuals participate actively. (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 29)

Bourdieu reminds us that there is an alternative to the logic of neo-liberalism and that we must reassert the possibility of a world and an educational system that focuses on more than economic efficiency.

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