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Audaciously Espousing Hope Within a Torrent of Hegemonic Neoliberalism

The Obama Educational Agenda and the Potential for Change

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Abstract

It has been over eighteen months since Barack Obama defeated John McCain in the US presidential election. Since this period of time, the Obama administration has implemented, proposed, and supported a spate of educational reform measures, including increasing the length of the school year, tying school funding to K-12 students' performance on high-stakes examinations, firing teachers, gutting teacher unions and closing schools, opening charter schools, and tying teachers' evaluations to students' performance on standardized examinations. Despite the Obama administration's active involvement in shaping educational circles, there has been a dearth of critical analysis in relation to Obama's leadership and his educational agenda. In this essay, we illustrate how the Obama administration's educational vision is a manifestation of the dominance of neoliberal ideology over most elements of social life for the past 30 years. We believe our critical analysis of US political leaders' and their constituents' support of the corporate takeover of US schools gives those interested in education the power to strive for democratic and transformative experiences for all students.



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Barack Obama is known for mobilizing people of all stripes, especially the youth, and inspiring them to believe—he famously punctuated campaign speeches with “Yes, we can!”—that Americans could take back their country and that they could strive to meet the unfulfilled promises that framed the “greatness” instilled in the American people, their constitution and their history (Au, 2009).¹ While his campaign for US President in 2008 was short on specifics in relation to reforming the educational system, it was clear that Obama represented, in the eyes of many, a progressive, forward-looking agenda, especially in juxtaposition to the previous administration. However, that agenda was framed within the strict confines of neoliberal hegemony (Giroux, 2009). In a few words, by way of the title of his famous book, he was about the “audacity of hope.” The United States, under the Conservative, Republican regime of George W. Bush, experienced intensified militarization, what Peter McLaren terms as the “permanent war on terror,” and also exhibited visible economic degradation and an assault on public education (Giroux & Saltman, 2009; McLaren, 2009; Ross & Gibson, 2007).

The militarism and suffering that global citizens experienced during the Age of Bush was due, in part, to the Bush administration’s unwavering allegiance to US corporate and military domination of the globe (Carr, in press; McLaren, 2005). However, the economic and social policies and practices promulgated by the Bush regime and, as illustrated in this essay, the educational policies of the Obama administration are manifestations of the dominance of neoliberal ideology over most elements of social life for the past 30 years. According to Hursh (in press), neoliberal ideology is grounded in the belief that economic prosperity and improvements of segments of the social world, such as health care, education, and the environment, emanate from “unregulated or free markets, the withering away of the state as government’s role in regulating businesses and funding social services are either eliminated or privatized, and encouraging individuals to become self-interested entrepreneurs.” Since neoliberalism is a term rarely uttered is most dominant (mainstream) media outlets, most US citizens are not cognizant of its link to many deleterious economic and social developments, such as massive unemployment, the swelling of home foreclosures, homelessness, militarism, school closings, maldistribution of wealth, and environmental destruction (Hursh, in press; McLaren, 2008; Ross & Gibson, 2007; Scipes, 2009).²

We have chosen to highlight neoliberalism’s impact on education because we believe that

¹ The material generated in this essay is based, in part, from our introduction to the forthcoming volume—P.R. Carr and B. Porfilio’s (Eds.). (In press). *The phenomenon of Obama and the agenda for education: Can hope audaciously trump neoliberalism?* Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

² There are numerous scholars who describe and define the most dominant ideological doctrine impacting life in schools and in the wider society for the past thirty years as neoliberalism. For instance, Russom (2010) defines it as “a set of economic policies that emphasizes the minimization of state intervention in the economy, privatization of sectors of the economy once thought to be the domain of the public sector, deregulation of markets, slashing government spending, and promoting anti-union ‘flexible’ labor policies making it easier for employers to depress wages and fire workers at will.” To learn more about the historical forces impacting the development of neoliberalism, see B. Porfilio & C. Malott’s *The destructive path of neoliberalism: An international examination of education* (2008).

progressive societies need a responsive, socially relevant and socially just, and pedagogically engaged, educational system that bolsters and cultivates critical teaching and learning, accepts that knowledge is socially constructed and mediated (Kincheloe, 2008c), and that education is a political project (Freire, 1973). Our interest in critical pedagogy helps us elaborate a conceptual framework to pinpoint how developments in the wider society shape the events that unfold within classrooms. It also helps us identify the potential for transformation within schools and society, a connection that we believe is fluid and necessarily complex (Kincheloe, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c). Ultimately, we believe that there is a link, as others have pointed out, including John Dewey decades ago, between education and democracy (Ayers, 2009; Carr, in press; Giroux, 2009). Thus, the spectacular victory of the first African-American to become President of the United States, which was hailed by the media as well as by the world, has been seen as a watershed moment in the political and historical development of not only the US but also all nations. Given the dearth of critical analysis in relation to Obama's leadership and his administration's educational agenda, which we contend is fundamental to meaningful democratic development, we examine the meaning of potential transformation in and through the Obama administration's approach to education.

The paper addresses the following: 1) the question of Obama's political ascendancy in relation to democracy; 2) a critical analysis of how Obama's social and economical policies are linked to both the larger neoliberal agenda and education; and 3) an analysis of neoliberalism, education, and democracy in light of Obama's message of hope. We believe that a more critical analysis of neoliberalism can assist educators, administrators, parents, and all those interested in education to strive for a more meaningful educational experience for all students and citizens, regardless of their race, gender, social class and other markers of identity (Russom, 2010). Importantly, an approach to education that considers critical pedagogy offers the possibility of *hope* and *transformational change*, and also what Freire called *conscientization*, the ability to re-conceptualize and re-position the political and economic relations that impinge on a thicker, more robust notion of democracy (Carr, 2007, 2008).

The 2008 US Presidential Election: Electing Another Neoliberal President

It has been nearly 24 months since Barack Obama defeated John McCain in the US presidential election to become the 44th US president. For many US citizens and other social actors across the globe, Obama's election signaled an end to the anti-democratic and authoritarian policies, practices, and mandates implemented by the Bush regime for eight years. Unfortunately, they were incorrect in their belief that a new US presidential administration would *a priori* disrupt the firm link between the state and transnational business leaders, who have increasingly wielded their power and influence to control labor, resources, wealth, and political decision-making in various social contexts, effectively commodifying a range of elements of socio-cultural life. Certainly, the people who believed Obama's message of "hope" during his push to win the corporately sponsored political horserace of 2008 were correct that the Bush II regime "was shockingly extremist" compared to other US (neoliberal) presidencies, including those led by Clinton, Bush I, and Ronald Reagan (Giroux, 2010). For instance, amongst numerous anti-democratic and authoritarian impulses, the Bush administration launched an imperial—some would argue, criminal—war; hijacked the mass media to fabricate how the

No Child Left Behind Act (2002) would benefit urban children and urban communities; criminalized and demonized Arabs, Muslims and immigrants; blamed African-American residents for the poverty, suffering, and dislocation emanating from Hurricane Katrina; curtailed US citizens' right to privacy and due process of law; perpetuated the prison-industrial complex; eliminated social entitlements for children, the elderly and the poor; and gave the US "the twin black eyes of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo" (Cohen, 2007; McLaren, 2005; Giroux, 2010). Yet, the pain, suffering, and misery encountered by working citizens in North America and so-called Third World regions, as well as the pollution ushered across the planet during the Age of Bush, cannot be reduced to merely the desire of one man and his followers to "drive the US to world supremacy" (Boggs, 2005, p. xi). Rather, there are constitutive forces and social relations that gave lifeblood to the dark times of the Bush administration and, as illustrated below, continue to do so today under the Obama administration (Giroux, 2004; McLaren, 2005; Ross & Gibson, 2007; Porfilio & Malott, 2008).

In the George W. Bush era, the confluence of communications technologies; transnationally oriented state managers; supranational institutions [the World Bank, The International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Trade Organization (WTO)], whose chief purpose is to promote corporate imperatives over the needs of people and the environment; and a corporately controlled mass media meshed together to condition the public to acquiesce to the hegemonic *consensus*. This is the belief that the solution to economic and social problems is to allow the "free market" to be the central force in every aspect of social life, including education, catastrophes, prisons, imperial conflicts, and health care (Giroux, 2004, 2010; Klein, 2007; McLaren, 2005; Porfilio & Malott, 2008; Ross & Gibson, 2007). These factors are also responsible for "the unfolding global recession and sub-prime crisis" (McLaren, 2008, p. vii). During the US's presidential election of 2008, the US populace and the global community may have allowed their alienation and disaffection of the pernicious state of global affairs to unflinchingly accept that Obama could represent a new beginning to the interests of peoples around the globe. While enthralled by how Obama's corporate handlers crafted an image of a rockstar-like persona representing symbols of "hope," "change," and "unity," insufficient attention was paid to the substance, content and rigor of Obama's ideas for policy. Instead, attention was on the seductive allure of the message, which was decidedly more progressive and acceptable than what the US had known in years, and, significantly, what the US was known for abroad in some time. The potential for democracy and democratic change, however, is questionable. Although Obama portrayed his campaign as one being hinged on the essence of democracy, it differed little from the traditional methods, e.g., massive fundraising, message control, tightly restraining alternative options outside of the two traditional parties, and promises aimed at maintaining the supremacy of the *status quo* (Carr & Porfilio, 2009).

In essence, the US presidential campaign of 2008 illustrates how the two-party system in the US has become "organically linked to the exploitation of human labor and the well-being of corporate profits" (McLaren, 2005, p. 24). According to Chomsky, US presidential elections have become simply "moments when groups of investors coalesce and invest to control the state and have quite the substantial predictive successes" (as cited in Goodman, 2008a). It is, in fact, improbable to be elected US president if a candidate fails to support "dominant authoritarian domestic and imperial structures and doctrine" (Street, 2008a). One might also imagine the

almost impossible odds to surmount if the candidate proclaimed that he/she was not religious.³

Not coincidentally, John McCain and Barak Obama both failed to address issues that would highlight how the actual working of the political economy favors the transnational elite at the expense of the many. Instead, the McCain campaign was honest enough to announce clearly that the election would not be about issues. Sarah Palin's hairdresser received twice the salary of McCain's foreign policy adviser, *The Financial Times* reported, which provides an improbable, if accurate, reflection of the significance for the campaign. While Obama's message of "hope" and "change" offered a blank slate on which supporters could write their wishes, it remained vacuous in terms of public engagement. It is stunning that a two-year campaign in which billions of dollars were spent could result in such minimal debate on the actual meaning of democracy, at least from a critical pedagogical point of view. For instance, the notion of peace as opposed to war did not seem to be an option, with all of the political class simply agreeing that war, the military, and a military economy cannot be challenged. Political candidates, newscasters and political pundits were unwilling to question the social value of the US having over 750 military bases in a hundred countries, spending roughly half its budget on militarization of one form or another, or providing massive amounts of military assistance to an assortment of regimes around the world. Another issue, and the focus of our analysis in this paper, is that only the most superficial commentary is paid to the theme of education, which, we contend, must be linked with democracy for it to hold the promises of "hope," "change," and "transformation." One could search websites for position papers, but correlation of these to policies is hardly spectacular, and, in any event, the major influence over voters is the information placed front and center by the candidates, as party managers know well (Carr & Porfilio, 2009).

The melding together of neoliberalism and education here takes place within the hegemonic, normative understanding that policies, actions and decisions taken in the name of legitimate authority are acceptable because we live in a democracy. However, the thinnest wedge of democracy is only weakly connected to providing an education to position the populace to critically understand what forces impact the unfolding events within and outside of schools. This sterile form of education becomes a key lever in presenting issues and works to block solidarity among the populace for transformation in society. Critical pedagogy provides the potential for unmasking how this thin form of democracy perpetuates the neoliberal agenda and also has the power to elucidate how neoliberalism impacts the purpose and lived reality of schooling and education. Can there be economic and social transformation in education within a backdrop of neoliberalism? Is democracy achievable when neoliberalism is so tightly twined to the vine of neoliberal markets, practices and inequitable outcomes? In Carr's research (2007, 2008), he found a weak link among teacher educators in relation to democracy and education. This weakness overlooks social justice as a key feature to education and raises questions about how

³ The current debate, and fury, around the request to place a Muslim cultural centre with a prayer space, which has been labeled a mosque, within two blocks of Ground Zero, where the World trade Center once stood is very instructive in relation to the supremacy of the Christian religion within American political and social culture. Although there will be strip-bars, fast-food outlets, and souvenir stands and many other establishments that raise questions about the sanctity of the area, the mosque has been singled out for special vilification. At the same time, a Christian pastor sought to burn the Koran on September 11, 2010, and a large percentage of Americans, at the time of the writing of this piece, still believe that President Obama is a Muslim, thus inferring, supposedly, that he is less American, less likely to support American values, and, ultimately, less worthy of being the President.

Obama's educational plans will redress critical issues of inequity and marginalization while functioning in the same educational framework of previous presidents (Giroux, 2009; Giroux & Saltman, 2009).

The Age Of Obama: Does Neoliberalism Trump "Hope" And "Change"?

Since securing the Whitehouse, the Obama administration has done little to implement policies and practices based upon improving the lives of US citizens but, arguably, has done a great deal to aid the corporate elite's desire to garner labor power, extract resources, and control territories across the global landscape. As Englehardt (2010) puts it, the policies of Bush and Obama "often have a tweedledum-and-tweedledee-ish look to them." Specific party politics, however, do not account for the similarities of their policies; rather, they reflect political and economic systems and their "own set of narrow, repetitive 'solutions' to our problems" (Englehardt, 2010). For instance, the Obama administration was complicit in creating BP's Gulf oil spill, which has caused colossal damage "to the shorelines of Gulf states such as Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida," to the sea floor, and to marine life (Schoof & Adams, 2010). Not only did the administration cater to corporate interests by giving oil companies the power to "drill at depths at which current technology makes mistakes irreparable" (Ford, 2010), but it allowed millions of gallons of oil to leak into the Gulf. This is indicative of how the administration is concerned more with the economic viability of the corporation than catastrophic environmental destruction or impact on the livelihood of a range of workers (Henry & Reeves, 2010).

Like his predecessor, Obama has also supported corporate and militaristic initiatives that propagate the interests of the global elite. He has supported Bush's 2008 TARP (Troubled Asset Relief Program) bailout, legislation designed to concede power to the capitalist class through the consolidation of the banking industry and allowing Wall Street to engage in speculative financial endeavors. Since Obama has been in office, Wall Street bankers have had free reign over the economy (Taibbi, 2010). Obama's continued support of Wall Street has not only allowed many investors to "thrive right now" (Harvey, 2010), but, importantly, has also put the banks and their leaders in a *better* financial position than before the financial collapse of 2008. Unfortunately, catering to the financial elite has done little to eliminate poverty and homelessness, provide jobs, rebuild the infrastructure, or develop "sustainable energy technologies" (Hursh, in press).

The reasons for unprecedented military spending on empire-building escapades seem to go unchecked and are unquestioned by most citizens. The political and economic elite keep critical conversations out of schools and remove them from media outlets. Many citizens fail to even ask the question why the US continues to be at the center of global conflicts, even though its political leaders spend more than the rest of the world combined to stop conflicts from occurring. Although, on the surface, the Obama administration looks as if it has retrenched the US's foreign policy of using the military to control labor, resources, and capital across the globe with its recent pledge to end combat operations in Iraq, the sad reality is the administration has opted to build upon a cornerstone of the Bush administration's military strategy—engaging in "shadow wars" across various sections of the Middle East, Africa, and Asia (Shane, Mazzetti, & Worth, 2010). The Obama administration has acted surreptitiously in its economic and military support of government leaders and military officials in countries such as Yemen. Concurrently, it

has expanded military activities across Africa by providing training to soldiers, weapons to countries, and other assistance to governmental and business leaders who are committed to empowering themselves and insurgent networks that may threaten US global hegemony.

Contrary to rhetorical statements during the campaign, the Obama administration has provided economic support and power to privatized military units for the purpose of garnering information about potential “enemies.” Significantly, it has also engaged in substantial drone warfare in Pakistan to allegedly quell militant networks that are against US political and economic interests (Shane, Mazzetti & Worth, 2010; Volman, 2010). While this brand of shadow warfare may momentarily alleviate the Western public’s growing displeasure of “the staggering costs of big wars that topple governments, require years of occupation and can be a catalyst for further radicalization throughout the Muslim world” (Shane, Mazzetti & Worth, 2010), it does not fundamentally alter the hegemony of military and corporate interests over people and the environment. For instance, shadow warfare continues to exhaust natural resources, monetary resources on weapons, surveillance, and technology, fuels the possibility that additional conflicts will occur between Western powers and groups who face the brunt of the shadow military activities, and perpetuates additional abuses against political prisoners, men, women and children who have been casualties of the US shadow wars since the beginning of the Cold War Era.

This discussion of the policies demonstrated during the first half of the Obama administration illustrates an adherence to neoliberal tenets similar to those of the Bush administration and to other US Presidential administrations since Regan. Because the political economy of a democracy impacts education, it must foreground any consideration of the role of education in contemporary times. Further, the issues documented above demonstrate the political confusion over means and ends. The continual adherence to the neoliberal doctrine by US political leaders only has deteriorated rather than improved the quality of life for global citizens. It also blocks the public from recognizing the detrimental impact that neoliberal educational policies have on students, teachers, and society. As we show below, the political confusion is a key factor in why many of Obama’s supporters believe the Obama administration’s neoliberal educational agenda will yield “hope” and “change” rather than perpetuate social inequalities inside and outside of schools.

The Hour-Glass Of Educational Change And The Obama Revolution

In education circles, the Obama administration has, arguably, supported and instituted policies and practices that may do more to undermine transformative forms of teaching and learning in K-12 schools than policies supported and promulgated by the Bush administration (Giroux & Saltman, 2009; Hursh, in press; McLaren, 2009). Democrats and Republicans, in lock-step together as the corporate entity controlling formal political life, along with Wall Street, realized that US residents were preoccupied and disoriented from the economic crisis impacting their families and communities, which provided the impetus for them to act swiftly to implement a spate of corporatist initiatives in K-12 schools across the US. In the past eighteen months, they have gone far beyond what George W. Bush’s administration was able to do with its No Child Left Behind (NCLB)⁴ policy⁵ in terms of privatizing education (Russom, 2010; Scott, 2010).

⁴ Many scholars have shown that NCLB has oppressed K-12 students on the structural axes of race and class. (Continues on next page.)

Below, we discuss how the Obama administration's educational agenda is linked to further eradicating public education, promoting corporate interests over the needs of children and the US at-large, and pressuring the public to accept the notion that corporate involvement will improve all elements in the social world. Before examining several specific educational policies currently supported by the Obama administration, we briefly present the educational initiatives supported by the major designer of the Obama administration's educational agenda, Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan.

Arne Duncan and Education Leadership

The Obama administration is following in the neoliberal footsteps of its Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan. From 2001-2009, Duncan, as CEO of Chicago Public Schools (CPS), instituted sweeping educational reforms "steeped in a free-market model of school reform" (Kumashiro, as cited in Street, 2008b). According to Street (2008b), "Privatization, union-busting (charter and contract schools operate union-free), excessive standardized testing, teacher-blaming, military schooling, and the rollback of community input on school decisions" were the hallmarks under Duncan's corporate-form of schooling in Chicago. One integral component of Duncan's neoliberal schooling agenda is witnessed in Renaissance 2010. Under this directive, the corporate elite in Chicago were given the power to set up a Commercial Club, which used its "leverage to dismantle the elected school board and replace it with the Chicago Board of Education, a body composed of their own representatives" (Hursh, in press).

After garnering control of the chief educational authority, the elite showed little concern for establishing quality schools across the city (Lipman, 2003; Lipman & Hursh, 2007). Rather, they aimed to create a "two-tiered educational system" in Chicago. After closing and consolidating numerous schools across Chicago, the leaders and politicians supported the creation of charter schools and additional academic programs in areas of the city where affluent people from the dominant culture lived or in areas that would possibly be attractive to affluent citizens who were considering locating to this "world-class city" (Lipman & Hursh, 2007). The additional resources parlayed into superior academic programs for mostly affluent residents, such as magnet programs, International Baccalaureate Programs, regional gifted schools, and Math and Science Technology Academies (Street, 2008b). Since many of the schools created under Renaissance 2010 were charter schools, school administrators were in the position to handpick affluent students from the dominant culture and hire teachers who were adept at creating educational environments that treated students as subjects rather than as objects. The schools

The legislation is responsible for some of the most qualified teachers leaving urban schools because they are forced to implement "drill and kill" curriculum to help ensure their students and schools do well on corporately produced standardized examinations, for more and more urban students failing to graduate on time or dropping out of school entirely, and for creating militarized school zones, where army recruiters are given free rein to cajole minority and poor students, who are desperate for funds to attend college, to join the imperial armed forces (Kozol, 2005; Mathison & Ross, 2008).

⁵ Please see N. Klein's (2007) *The shock doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism* to examine further how the ruling elite have used the public's disorientation from perceived or actually global catastrophes to corporatize numerous segments of our social life for the past thirty years.

commonly exhibit “a relaxed and open pedagogical environment that encourages free inquiry, critical and experimental thought, autonomous and democratic expression, and the collective sharing of ideas and knowledge” (Street, 2008b).

On the other hand, minoritized and impoverished students and their educators and caregivers in Chicago were forced to grapple with their neighborhood schools being gutted and transformed into test-polluted, overcrowded, and debilitating commercial institutions. In the midst of being part of an environment where schools were deemed “underperforming and forced to be closed,” “students were treated like cattle, shuffled around from school to school” (Brown, Guitstein, & Lipman, 2009). Not only did the privatization of the schools lead to “increased violence and put children's lives at risk due to crossing neighborhood and gang boundaries,” it also ensured that the voices of community members were marginalized in terms of what resources, pedagogies, and programs are best suited to foster youths’ intellectual, social, and emotional growth.

Furthermore, Duncan used Renaissance 2010 to militarize schools and build military academies in the most impoverished sections of Chicago. Duncan had no qualms in his plan to ensure that Chicago had “the largest JROTC program in the country in number of cadets and total programs” because he feels military programs promote “positive learning environments” (Brown, Guitstein & Lipman, 2009). However, what is missing from Duncan’s characterization of militarizing public schooling in impoverished contexts is that these youth have no more desire than their affluent counterparts to gain supposed “leadership” skills from military officials or to attend military academies. This form of schooling is only an attractive option for these youth because systemic barriers sap the degree of power they hold over their life chances. For instance, public schools routinely fail them, they grapple with violence and over-policing in their communities, and the US government fails to promote economic justice, which is at the core of the problem in relation to cultural capital, inequitable opportunities, and the dearth of social justice inside and outside of the classroom. The state intentionally keeps the minimum wage low, provides inadequate transportation, provides limited social services, and maintains inadequate housing options for impoverished urban residents (Anyon, 2005; Porfilio & Hall, 2005). These social and economic forces have led to reactionary calls for charter schools and military forms of schooling that, ultimately, plunge marginalized communities into inferior educational opportunities.

Race To The Top (Of What?) and (Neoliberal) Transformation

On July 24, 2009, Arne Duncan and the Obama administration announced a new education policy, Race to the Top (RTTT), a \$4.35 billion dollar “competitive incentive program” designed to further gut public schooling in the US, structure schools on market ideologies and practices, and provide the corporate elite an additional avenue to profit off of children. To be “competitive” and bolster their chances of winning the educational pot held by Duncan and the Obama administration, numerous states in the US have had to ensure that they would support “expansion of charter schools as well as high-stakes testing, and test-score driven accountability” (Christianakis & Mora, in press). Therefore, RTTT only exacerbates the testing, accounting, and competitive form of schooling that both political parties in the US have touted as the panacea to eliminate the “opportunity gaps” plaguing the educational system for the past two decades (Ravitch, 2010).

To be deemed “accountable” for student learning under RTTP, states, under the tutelage of the federal government, are linking teachers’ evaluations to their students’ performance on high-stakes examinations. The policy will surely widen the opportunity gaps that pockmark the US educational system. Many minoritized and marginalized youth already attend underfunded, dilapidated, militarized, and overcrowded schools (Anyon, 2005; Kozol, 2005; Lipman, 2003; Porfilio & Malott, 2008; Ross & Gibson 2007; Saltman & Gabbard, 2003). By implementing more examinations and linking teachers’ performance to how their students perform on those tests, teachers will only create a more alienating environment for students. As other critical scholars have shown, in a test-driven educational environment, teachers will feel compelled, or, in some cases, forced, to implement pedagogies of silence and control to push students to simply regurgitate information in order to pass the exams because students’ poor test performances may cost them their jobs, close their schools, or nudge students to drop out of the formal schooling process (Au, 2008; Kozol, 2005; Mathison & Ross, 2008; Porfilio & Malott, 2008). Therefore, there will be numerous low-income students and students of color who will disengage from the instructional process and dropout⁶ of school because their ways of knowing as well as their identities, cultures, histories, and material realities will not be considered part of the “knowledge” that becomes standardized, and thus validated, on exams and in classroom discourse (Au, 2008, p. 118). The standardized exams also set up special needs students and English language learners (ELL) for failure because they may lack the cultural capital or the physical capacity to demonstrate that they can offer the “correct” answers to the corporate test-makers. Similarly, this exam regime pushes critical and engaged educators out of the educational system (Apple, 1999; Kozol, 2005; Porfilio & Malott, 2008).

Significantly, as a result of RTTT, business leaders who sell the exams and test preparation materials to schools will benefit from the curriculum being tied to the examinations. Other neoliberal interests will benefit because they will be supplied with a cheap supply of labor to fill jobs in the contingent, service-oriented economy; this expendable sector of the population could almost be red-circled from kindergarten based on their cultural capital. The capitalist class will also employ the standardized exams to better “spot talent and recruit the cream of the working class that can be funneled into higher education and employment as technical personnel, frontline managers, and professionals” (Russom, 2010).

Charter Schools and the Right to Choose (or the Right to Lose?)

The Obama administration made good on its campaign promise to develop and implement “privately run charter schools” as a chief way to solve educational problems under RTTP (Russom, 2010; Scott, 2010). To be competitive for tapping the pool of federal funds available under RTTP, many states were compelled to give more access to charter schools. For instance, the federal government gave high points to states “if they had no caps or caps greater than 10% of their total public schools [for charters], medium points if they had caps between 5%-10%, and low points if they capped charter schools at 5% or lower” (Christianakis & Mora, in press). In fact, New York State passed a law to increase the number of charter schools in the

⁶ According to Russom (2010), there is a “high school dropout rate of nearly 30% nationwide, and more than 50% in many major cities.”

state, which gave them a better chance to net federal dollars. The law “will eventually boost the number of charter schools in the state from 200 to 460” (Trapasso, 2010). Not coincidentally, New York State’s commitment to opening more charter schools helped the state land almost \$700 million on its second application to secure RTTP funds. Upon awarding New York State the funds, Duncan praised New York State’s teachers’ union and political leaders for having the “breathtaking courage” to tie teacher performance to students’ test scores and supporting more charter schools, because he believes the initiatives have the power to dramatically improve student achievement (Blain, 2010).

Despite the Obama administration’s contention that charter schools will transform education, critical scholars have shown clearly that the implementation of charter schools have not radically altered students’ performance on high-stake exams (Ayers & Klonsky, 2006; Booker, Gill, Simmer & Sass, 2009; Christianakis & Mora, in press; Ross & Gibson, 2007). This is despite the fact that, unlike other public schools, charter schools have the power to exclude certain student populations, such as ELL and special education students, who may hinder the schools’ overall achievement on the examinations. Corporate leaders who delve into the charter school business generally manage their schools like the larger corporate world, which perpetuates a dehumanizing, alienating, and conformity-riddled environment for students and educators⁷. For instance, they tend to fire and layoff certified teachers to reap more profits, in turn hiring non-tenured teachers who are beholden to the corporate administration because their contingent job status positions them to fear reprisals for challenging their bosses’ mandates. They also use charter schools to sell standardized curricula, textbooks, and test preparation materials. Not only does this give the elite the ability to reap handsome profits, but it also, as illustrated above, gives them the power to subvert teachers’ ability to implement pedagogies that guide students to reflect critically about self and Other, knowledge and power, and the role they and their students can play to eliminate oppression in their schools and their communities. In effect, these pre-packaged, pre-evaluated, pre-scripted educational systems negate the social context and the generative themes that Freire (1973) located at the center of a socially relevant teaching and learning experience. Rather than developing a closer *rapprochement* with social justice, democracy and critical engagement, the push toward privatization seems to favor the opposite, measuring success simply on neoliberal terms and standards.

George Dei (Dei, Mazzuca & McClassac, 1997) refers to dropouts as “push-outs,” which provides some context for the process of weaning the educational system of those who do not have the requisite cultural capital. For example, the dropout rate for African-Americans and Latinos is disproportionately higher than that for Whites, yet the response of providing more school choice for those who are “under-achieving” seems to miss the point that the problem is systemic and relates to power. The reality that the first African-American President seems hesitant to discuss racialization, racism and race relations, let alone noting how Whiteness, power and privilege in education works, is problematic at several levels.

In the end, the Obama administration’s support for creating additional corporately run charter schools appears more in line with an overall vision of doing away with public education

⁷ There are exceptions to the rule, and a small number of charter schools focus on empowerment, social justice, and transformation, but these schools are generally not antagonistic to the public school system, which is the case for a large number of charter schools.

and having a “privatized education system.” For instance, in addition to supporting charter schools and other corporate schooling practices, the Obama administration’s support of Rhode Island’s school boards’ decisions to fire tenured urban school teachers and blame them for the failure of their students on high-stakes examinations, indicates the desire of the administration and neoliberal supporters to gain the public’s favor in privatizing American schools. By scapegoating teachers for the unjust practices and systemic inequalities that set up minoritized youth for failure in schools and in society, the public will be more likely to support neoliberal policies and practices to (supposedly) fix the ills of the US public school system.

Leadership and Seeking a Better Society Through Education

The question of leadership is crucial to making education a forum for societal development and engagement. The Obama administration, generally, has offered conflicting evidence of whether any existing forms of transformative education exist in K12 classrooms. Obama and his handlers seemingly accepted the unnecessary and debilitating legislation proposed by Arizona lawmakers and Governor Jan Brewer in Arizona House Bill 2281, which effectively bans the teaching of ethnic studies in Arizona’s public schools. They also remained silent when Tom Horne, Superintendent of Public Instruction in Arizona, chastised scholars, teachers, and other citizens for wanting to learn and teach about what forces, structures, policies, and laws are responsible for the oppression of Chicano people in the past and present as well as “learn(ing) about the cultures of themselves and others” (Hill, 2010). Horne also made egregious and sensational statements to the dominant media that were designed to demonize Chicano people and ethnic studies. He stoked the racist ire of members from the dominant culture by claiming that ethnic studies courses will eventually become part of a larger movement to favor Chicano students over their White counterparts in schools through the creation of “Chicano-only” classrooms. Horne also played upon many members of the dominant culture’s fear and hatred of foreigners, in general, and Chicanos, in particular, by linking ethnic studies as a part of the “Other’s plot to indoctrinate ‘loyal’ Americans in communist ideology and to overthrow the United States government” (Hill, 2010).

As Randy Acuña, Professor of Chicano studies at the University of California at Northridge, makes clear, Chicano people have been subjugated by the elite since “Columbus got off the boat in 1492,” and they are oppressed today. All you have to do is “look at the demographics and you’ll see how Mexicans are the lowest in income; they come from the worst schools” (Smith, 2010). Furthermore, the elimination of ethnic studies and culturally relevant programs appears to be part of the broader neoliberal project to standardize and corporatize teaching, knowledge, and literacy.

Instead of lending support for the Chicano people’s desire to empower themselves through critical forms of history and pedagogies, the Obama administration has criminalized Chicanos by supporting the fifteen-year US policy of militarizing immigration along the US/Mexico border (Goodman, 2010). For instance, Obama signed into law a \$600 million bill to “deploy some 1,500 new Border Patrol agents and law enforcement officials along the border, as well as two aerial surveillance drones” (Goodman, 2010). Rather than providing economic and social support for Latino(a) migrants, whose communities have been devastated by neoliberal “free trade” policies, the Obama administration opted to treat Latino(a) immigrants as chattel. During Obama’s first year in office, more than 388,000 immigrants were deported to Mexico, a

figure more than “any other year in the republic’s history” (Benjamin, 2010). Therefore, it would hardly be a stretch to state that Obama’s “security first” approach to immigration “makes it seem as though he's trying to appease conservatives at the expense of Latinos” (Benjamin, 2010).

Moreover, the Obama administration’s recent pronouncements to shut down 2,000 of the US’s “drop out factories,” schools that produce nearly half of the US’s school dropouts, to fire teachers who are unable to guide their students to perform well on high-stakes examinations, and to tout extending the school year as a solution to improve student achievement, are all attempts to condition the public to believe that education is merely a competitive, individualistic and corporate commodity (Simmons, 2010). Once again, through initiatives said to improve student achievement, the leadership of Obama and his cabinet has failed to guide the public to conceptualize education as a social good that has the potential to guide students to become critically engaged and socially transgressive citizens.

Tying Critical Pedagogy into the Contemporary Neoliberal Educational Agenda

With neoliberal forces gutting humane and progressive forms of education and fueling the Other’s marginalization in schools and in society, there is an immediate need to advocate for and develop critical forms of pedagogies. Education predicated on the ideals of love, democracy, and justice, as well as what Freire (1973) called *conscientization*, and geared to fostering students’ understanding of the larger forces responsible for injustice in schools and society, has the potential to reduce the number of students from dropping out of schools, unlike any of the Obama administration’s aforementioned policies. Rather than treating students as objects who are valuable if they only perform well on examinations, critical educators could be given the power to open spaces in their classrooms to help students examine problems confronting the educational system and the wider society. Similarly, educators could generate pedagogical projects where students work with community members inside and outside of schools to examine why neoliberal policies, for the past thirty years, have ensured that students who are marginalized by race and class attend “drop out factories,” while their affluent counterparts attend schools that prepare them for power in the business and social world; why corporate and government officials are unwilling to provide adequate resources in schools and social programs in communities that could place minoritized students in a better place to engage in the schooling process; and why teachers need to be accountable for preparing students to succeed on mindless, standardized examinations that do not foster students’ understanding of the relationship between knowledge and power, their openness to diverse intellectual ideas and peoples, or their thirst to join others in the collective struggle to build egalitarian schools and a just society.⁸

Critical pedagogy presents a framework to understand political literacy and social transformation, in which static representations of power, identity, and contextual realities are rejected (Denzin, 2009; Kincheloe, 2008a). Critical pedagogy is not about providing a checklist against which one can determine the level of social justice within a given society (Carr, 2008a).

⁸ Please see Morrell’s (2008) *Critical literacy for urban youth: Pedagogies of access dissent, and liberation* to examine how educators can establish community-based critical research for the purpose of guiding youth to understanding what causes injustice in schools and in the wider society.

Rather, it is concerned with oppression and marginalization at all levels and seeks to interrogate and critique power and inequitable social relations (Macrine, 2009). Giroux (2007) emphasizes that critical pedagogy “refuses the official lies of power and the utterly reductive notion of being a method . . . (It) opens up a space where students should be able to come to terms with their own power as critical agents; it provides a sphere where the unconditional freedom to question and assert is central” to an intellectual stimulating education as well as building a robust democratic society (p. 1).

Critical pedagogy makes a direct, explicit and undeniable linkage between the formalized experience in the classroom and the lived experience outside of the classroom, in which bodies, identities and societal mores influence what takes place in schools (Giroux, 2007). Giroux (2007) boldly states that “Democracy cannot work if citizens are not autonomous, self-judging, and independent—qualities that are indispensable for students if they are going to make vital judgments and choices about participating in and shaping decisions that affect everyday life, institutional reform, and governmental policy” (p. 1). Significantly, Denzin (2009) provides a number of points that draw together the web of a “critical democratic pedagogy”: “critical pedagogy encourages resistance to the “discourses of privatization, consumerism, the methodologies of standardization and accountability, and the new disciplinary techniques of surveillance (p. 381). Critical pedagogy provides the tools for understanding how cultural and educational practices contribute to the construction of neoliberal conceptions of identity, citizenship, and agency” (p. 381).

Being conscious, able to *read the world*, immersed in humane acts, and engaged in a meaningful interrogation of what the purpose of teaching and learning is should be uppermost in the minds of decision-makers as much as the populace in general (Macrine, 2009). Condemning those who would question hegemonic practices as cynical, negative, uncooperative, unconstructive (even destructive), and corrupted can only further widen the gap between those who enjoy comfort and those seeking a more just conceptualization of society. Education, which must underpin democracy for it to be relevant and consequential in favor of the masses, is a political project, one that needs to be understood as such for it to challenge systemically entrenched practices, values, norms and conventions (Freire, 1973/2005; Kincheloe, 2008a, 2008b). Comprehending the dialectical relations between oppressed and oppressor requires a re-thinking of the premise of education, one that properly labels *banking* models of education.

Some of the components of a critical synthesis of critical pedagogy, according to Kincheloe (2008c), are the following:

1. The development of a social individual imagination.
2. The reconstitution of the individual outside the boundaries of abstract individualism.
3. The understanding of power and the ability to interpret its effects on the social and the individual.
4. The provision of alternatives to the alienation of the individual.
5. The cultivation of a critical consciousness that is aware of the social construction of subjectivity.

6. The construction of democratic community-building relationships between individuals.
7. The reconceptualization of reason-understanding that relational existence applies not only to human beings but concepts as well.
8. The production of social skills necessary to activate participation in the transformed, inclusive democratic community.

The inextricable linkage to the establishment of a more decent society is ingrained in the foundation of critical pedagogical work. The desire to enhance human agency, imbued in a process of theory and action, thus underscoring praxis and the liberatory potential of critical engagement, is (and should be) a central consideration, not an after-thought. Political literacy and media literacy provide a mandatory platform from which education can be explored, cultivated and transformed (Carr & Lund, 2008; Carr & Porfilio, 2009). Critical pedagogy can assist us in asking questions that are far from the mainstream political process and corporate media, and, importantly, resonate with the lived realities of the majority of people who do not partake fully in the myriad societal, institutional, political, economic and cultural decision-making that serve to shape their lives. As a cautionary note, as illustrated by De Lissovoy (2008), critical pedagogy is not disconnected from other critical theoretical frameworks but must be considered from a “compound standpoint,” which enhances its relevancy for the multi-disciplinary study of democracy.

The central question of the purpose of education is not the focus of the Obama educational reforms. We have argued that his vision is not (radically) different than that of his predecessors, who have all paid homage to the supremacy of the neoliberal market place. While rhetoric and a broad public willingness to accept that things should be different than they are, and that we can do something to ensure that they are different than they are, should not obscure the reality that things are continuing on a trajectory that does make things different in and through education. The policies presented at this mid-point in the Obama administration suggest corporate interests are taking a hold over educational aspects of the social world. The administration has not made it a priority to end senseless violence, aggression, militarization and war.

To consider that our analysis, or any analysis, for that matter, has a political dimension is to state an obvious point, even if it is a popular contention within neoliberal circles to feign neutrality, objectivity, universal truth, and an allegiance to normative hegemonic values. Our fundamental argument is that power must become an integral part of the educational experience; it must be exposed, cajoled, challenged and rendered bare so as to expose the existence of oppression, how it works, how it is sustained, and how it can be remedied. Will the proposals presented by Obama, as well as the concrete policies that he is enacting, provide for *hope*, *change* and *transformation*? We would argue that, without assessing in a most critical manner, the overarching neoliberal scaffolding framing how we conceive, develop, implement and cultivate education, the potential for education to be the vanguard of meaningful change for society, for all people, is limited.

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