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Unmasking the Dangers of Neoliberalism

Overcoming our State of Paralysis

MARTA P. BALTOIANO

 More than 30 years have passed since the Reagan administration adopted the economic precepts advanced by Milton Friedman and Friedrich von Hayek of the Chicago school of economics, and officially installed neoliberalism as the governing economic framework of the new administration. *Reaganomics* was the term used to describe the economic and social changes that gradually dismantled the welfare state of the past decades. Faced by a global economic crisis, the new administration widely deregulated the market, privatized public institutions, and reduced expenditures on social service. Education was one of the first public institutions that fell prey to the control of neoliberalism. During the 1980s, assisted by the publications of several reports discrediting public education, the government, conservative think tanks, and particularly business groups began shaping the general perception of public education. For 38 years Americans have been bombarded with negative messages and images about the state of public schools, and they have come to believe that public schools are a disgrace for this country for not offering quality education. The public agrees that teachers should be punished and fired for not raising students' test scores, and labor unions should be dismantled because they interfere with the ability of the state to penalize and remove "bad" teachers, and shut down low-quality schools.

It is just in the last few years that teacher educators have come to recognize the magnitude and impact of the ideology of neoliberalism on education and on the soul of this nation. The attacks and the educational reforms have been so constant, convoluted, and contradictory that the field has not been able to recover, organize, and fight back. In this age of measurement (Biesta, 2017), teachers, administrators, parents, students, and teacher educators are so overworked implementing a senseless culture of evidence that they have lost track of the democratic goals of public education. Neoliberalism has disrupted the social contract upon which education was founded. It has shifted the commonsense agreement that as a nation we embraced when this country was formed. It obliterated the belief that schools were "little democracies" (Dewey, 1916), whose purpose was the formation of critical citizenry, achieved through dialogue, civility, respect, tolerance, acceptance, deliberation, and

debate. In the last 38 years, we have been forcefully immersed in this culture of accountability where measurement has become a synonym of social justice, and democracy has become the right to purchase whatever we want. In this journey we forgot that what we are measuring does not represent a “conception of good education” but just indicators of some quality criteria established by external agents (Biesta, p. 316). We are terrified to question or criticize the word accountability, without realizing that what we educators need to focus on are assessment and transparency.

We have also been oblivious to the impact of neoliberalism on parents, and particularly, on communities of color. The social impact of neoliberalism as an ideology as a form of governmentality has had serious, detrimental effects on the way parents and working-class communities perceive public education. Several reports (Kovacs and Christie, 2011) have documented how think tanks funded by *philanthrocapitalists* (Ravich, 2010) have exclusively chosen these parents as targets of their subliminal, marketing campaigns. The shifting of the common sense, the creation of the homo oeconomicus, the distorted notion of citizenship, the creation of new subjectivities, moralities, and behaviors, are part of the ideology of neoliberalism (Foucault, 1978/1979). Working-class and immigrant parents have been recruited and convinced that public education does not offer them any chance of social mobility. They have become the first line of attack against teachers, labor unions, and public schools.

As teacher educators preoccupied with the implementation of the newer CAEP accreditation standards (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation), we are finding difficult to craft space for dialogue, organizing, or strategizing about the state of public education. However, after a year of devastating uncivility manifested in public discourses, teacher educators should reflect on our roles forming the new generation of teachers. It is the confluence of these historical events that may awaken teachers, teacher educators, parents, and all sectors of civil society to reflect and reclaim what it seems to be lost: the indisputable democratic goals of public education.

During a time in which the government has renounced its role of protector of the “common good” and has become the defender of the market, public schools and their teachers need to reclaim what is a landmark of the professional educator (and of any other professional), the “promotion of human well-being” (Biesta, p. 318) exerted in their “relationships of authority and trust.” Biesta (2017) argues that

democracy is not to be understood as something “natural” but rather as a historical intervention, that is a way of conducting our collective lives based on a commitment to a set of specific values, namely those of equality, liberty, and solidarity. (p. 327)

This suggests that it is time that the field begins talking about this deliberate intervention before it is too late. Democracy is not a given state or condition.

Democracy is always a work in progress, whose egalitarian goals fluctuate depending on how politically conscious and deliberately committed the new generation is. As such, because democracy is not a granted, natural, static institution, we, citizens of this country, who labor in the field of education, and believe in the power of education, need to begin articulating alliances and sponsoring dialogues to awaken this process. We are witnessing what a bad education can do for a democracy. We are witnessing what a generation without critical consciousness looks like. We are seeing how the new uncritical citizens of neoliberalism look like—the new *homo oeconomicus*—political apathetic, socially indifferent, active consumer, and convinced that democracy is the power to buy whatever they want.

The most important responsibility of teacher educators with respect to ensuring democratic accountability is to revert the advances of the neoliberal ideology. Freire (1970) argues that dialogue is the path to conscientização (critical consciousness), and praxis follows, which is the union of dialogue, reflection, and action. We need to deliberate about what the qualities of a good democratic education are and demand that this be measured as an indicator of good schools. We need to reclaim the concept of the collective—the public needs to deliberate on what a transformative, democratic education is about. We need to reclaim the concept of public good, which are not the market and its proxies. This work needs to commence in our classrooms, in our department meetings, in faculty retreats, in school district offices, and particularly, in our communities. We need to establish strategic alliances with all like-minded civic sectors. We need to offer labor unions some support. Even those that are questionable need to step up and join this deliberative process. We need to remember that unions were crucial in creating the middle class in this country and in getting rid of the caste system that was so prevalent in Europe. This is what made America different. Labor unions represent a mode of collective identity that runs contrary to the self-interest of the *homo oeconomicus*.

As teacher educators and professionals, we have the duty to unveil to our constituencies how hegemony is carried out by the powerbrokers of neoliberalism through consensus (passive acceptance) and coercion (Ambrosio, 2013). We need to unmask the technologies of power—the apparatuses, ideology, and processes—that have robbed American education of its more fundamental role: to form the new generation of criticalists who will defend centuries of democratic traditions against the lure of authoritarian leaders and autocratic ideologies.

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