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# The Best Democracy Money Can Buy: NCLB in Bush's Neo-liberal Marketplace (a.k.a., Revisioning History: The Discourses of Equality, Justice and Democracy Surrounding NCLB)

Rebecca A. Goldstein  
*Montclair State University*

Andrew A. Beutel  
*Ramapo Ridge Middle School, Mahwah, NJ*

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## ARTICLE

**The Best Democracy Money Can Buy: NCLB in Bush's Neo-liberal Marketplace (a.k.a., Revisioning History: The Discourses of Equality, Justice and Democracy Surrounding NCLB)**

Rebecca A. Goldstein

Montclair State University

Andrew R. Beutel

Ramapo Ridge Middle School, Mahwah, NJ

**Introduction**

With the landmark passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in January 2002, a new era of accountability, standards, and sanctions have become solid fixtures in public education (see Cross, 2004; McGuinn, 2005; and McGuinn, 2006 for an extensive discussion of the evolution of standards in US public education). The implications of this federal mandate were viewed differently, depending upon the perspective of the viewer. Regardless, there has been and continues to be a great deal of skepticism regarding NCLB's ability to change the educational experiences of children and youth, particularly those of poor and minority students (Fusarelli, 2004; Kantor & Lowe, 2006; Rogers & Oakes, 2005). Further, the political discourse surrounding NCLB has been very charged since its inception, with different camps supporting the legislation as an extension of the Brown decision (and hence, the realization of equality in US society), while others have decried it as discriminatory, marginalizing, and undemocratic (see for instance, Kozol, 2005; Paige, 2006; Slavin, 2006; and Stiefel, Schwartz, & Chellman, 2007 for examples of these different arguments). It is these arguments surrounding equality/equity, social justice, democracy (and education *for* democracy), and NCLB that this article will examine. Using the speeches of Secretaries of Education Roderick Paige and Margaret Spellings, we will illustrate how the federal government and NCLB, the federal education policy driving US public education, frames the notions of equality/equity, justice, and democracy to reflect the Administration's conservative and market-driven ideologies. By engaging in an iterative process of critical discourse analysis, we will illustrate how the message conveyed regarding NCLB remains the same, even as the audience changes. As a result, the Bush Administration has been able to galvanize support across multiple communities, while simultaneously silencing opposition.

**Struggles over the Purposes of Public Education:  
The Evolution of a Research Agenda**

With NCLB up for reauthorization, there have been a number of reports released detailing the nation's progress in the education of its young people, but those results are mixed (see, for instance, Raymond & Hanshek, 2003). Such contradictions in results are not new in educational research, nor are philosophical or political arguments over public education; indeed, there have been struggles over what to teach, how to teach, to whom, for what purpose, and how to gauge success, for much of the institution's existence (Cremin, 1990; Kliebard, 1995; Kliebard, 2002). Further, depending upon what one believes to be the purpose of public education, the research reveals different implications (Ravitch, 2001; Reese, 2005).

As researchers and educators who firmly believe in the emancipatory possibilities of public education (Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1998; Oakes & Lipton, 1998), exploring the contradictions in theory, practice, and politics of education is important because of their moral and ethical implications for working with children and adolescents. The introduction of NCLB in 2001, its passage into law in 2002, and subsequent influences on public education have provided an interesting historical moment to explore.

Specifically, we were interested in how the Bush Administration has been able to galvanize support across multiple interest groups to further their vision of education reform, while simultaneously conveying a uniform message and employing audience-specific discourse. This article will explore those audiences and discourses to consider their implications for those of us who view public education as more than simply preparation for work and limited civic life (defined as, for example, voting or contributing to the economy; see, for instance, Marshall and Tucker, 1992; Mishel & Rothstein, 2007; Parker, 2003; Tucker, 2007).

## **Data**

The data discussed in this article derive from a larger study examining the Bush Administration's public political discourse surrounding NCLB and public education. To that end, we were interested in exploring a number of key grounding questions that sought to explicate the central tenets: (1) stronger accountability for results, (2) more freedom for states and communities, (3) proven education methods, and (4) more choices for parents. Among these questions were the following:

1. What does the discourse reveal about the Bush Administration's position on NCLB and public education?
2. What are the key terms used in the discourse? How are they defined in use? In what ways is this consistent with other public discourse? How do they change depending upon audience?
3. What does the discourse say about the roles of schools, teachers, and state and federal governments regarding the education of children in the United States?
4. What does the discourse identify as the barriers to and solutions for all students receiving an education?

These four questions guided our initial interaction with the data. When we initially began our exploration, we examined multiple venues of public discourse regarding NCLB, including such media outlets as television news, newspapers, popular journals. However, we found this to be too cumbersome and instead chose to narrow our focus to information directly available from the Department of Education. We then explored policy briefings, press releases, speeches, and other materials made available through the Department of Education's website and narrowed our data set to focus specifically on the speeches of the Secretaries of Education. Using an iterative, multidisciplinary process (e.g., Fairclough, 2003; van Dijk, 2001), we tracked the discourse (Altheide, 2002), that is, we identified key terms and themes that were used repeatedly within the speeches in order to ascertain their definitions and the context in which they were used. We then coded for these terms and themes and identified the audiences with whom they were employed in order to develop more specific research questions related to those key terms and themes. Given our specific interest in issues of equity, social justice, and education for democracy, one subset of questions addressed those specific issues:

1. What does the discourse reveal about the Bush Administration's view of equality/equity and public education?
2. What does the discourse reveal about the Bush Administration's view of justice?
3. What does the discourse reveal about the Bush Administration's view on democracy and public education?
4. How does the discourse change (or remain the same) across different audiences?

The four research questions served as the basis for the analysis and discussion that will follow in this article. In exploring these more specific research questions, our goal was to reconstitute the data in ways that helped us to understand the impact of the discourse surrounding NCLB on public perception. This is particularly important given how NLCB is supposedly reshaping the educational landscape; in

order to understand this particular socio-historical transformation, we must explore the language utilized (Fairclough, 2003). For this reason, we found discourse analysis, particularly critical discourse analysis (CDA), useful as both a theoretical and analytical lens throughout the entire process.

Our goal, quite literally, was to untangle what Jäger (2001) calls the “entwined and interdependently deeply rooted net,” that is, what the societal discourses surrounding NCLB represent (p. 50). Thus, CDA was appropriate because it examines discourse as a social act and analyzes the social, political, and cultural influences on that discourse (see, for instance, Fairclough, 2001 and 2003; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Those who engage in CDA are particularly interested in how powerful individuals in society influence social values and ideologies as they engage with language (van Dijk, 1993). For instance, Lazuka (2006), Dunmire (2005), and van Dijk (2006) utilized CDA to make sense of how a political leader uses discourse among different groups to define reality, persuade the public, engage in power-sharing, and manipulate opinion. By analyzing the intentionality of speech acts through an examination of the political speeches of President Bush, Lazuka (2006) noted the following:

. . . the speaker’s selection of speech acts is indicative of his communicative intention. When carrying his discourse, the speaker assumes an agentive stance. Thus, we can assume that the speaker believes that by strategizing his discourse in a particular way—in this case through the selection of appropriate speech acts—he may influence some ‘self-projected’ outcomes in the future. (p. 327)

As part of this analysis, Lazuka found that dichotomous rhetorical phrases such as “us/them” and “we/they” were utilized to establish an unequal power relationship focused in difference and intertextuality (e.g., Fairclough, 2003). That is, use of such language enabled the speaker (in this case the President of the United States) to appear fully confident and self-praising while defining who is part of the group, and therefore a legitimate part of the discussion. At the same time, the speaker was simultaneously able to suppress any possibility of reasonable dissension. By using “we,” the President was able to assume the role of speaking for all of the American people, all the while presenting a ubiquitous “they” as someone or something to be feared (Lazuka, 2006, p. 322).

The explicit acknowledgement of the political and power relations employed in public discourse makes CDA a particular means to explore the implicit and explicit intentions of a speaker. Employing CDA, Dunmire (2005) examined the powerful ways in which representing the “future” can drive current understandings of social and ideological reality. By exploring President Bush’s discourse surrounding national security and the war in Iraq, Dunmire found that political actors will often position their ideological views and visions for the future “as grounded in common sense” (p. 482). Dunmire revealed that through the nominalization of certain concepts, individuals in power roles are able to frame larger issues through their ideological lens. For instance, she referred to President Bush’s use of the word “threat” in order to create an “assumed consensus” regarding U.S.-Iraqi relations, effectively eliminating any potential discussion about the relationship (pp. 489-490). Using the same dichotomy referred to by Lazuka (2006), Dunmire illustrated President Bush’s ability to position the federal government as the “we” and the uninformed public as the “you”, thereby positioning himself as the expert and the public as ignorant and unable to legitimately question his administration’s policies and decisions (p. 499). While Lazuka’s (2006) and Dunmire’s (2005) studies were limited to discourse relating to U.S. foreign policy, the analysis is similarly applicable for domestic policy like NCLB. As we will illustrate through the data, Secretaries Paige and Spellings utilized a similar tactic in order to mobilize support for and quell resistance to NCLB by manipulating public perception.

Van Dijk’s extensive work on ideology, power, and discourse, illuminates how discourse is used to manipulate, persuade, and dominate audiences in order to control them (1997, 1998, 2001, 2006). He

notes,

In this case, control does not take place (primarily) through physical or socioeconomic coercion, but by more subtle and indirect control of the *minds* of the dominated. By controlling the access to public discourse, only specific forms of knowledge and opinions may be expressed and widely circulated, and these may persuasively lead to mental models and social representations that are in the interest of the powerful. Once these mental representations are in place, the dominated group and its members tend to act in the interests of the dominant group and “out of their own free will.” The dominated group may lack the knowledge or the education to provide alternatives, or it may accept that the dominance of the dominant group is natural or inevitable, and resistance pointless or unthinkable. (1998, p. 162)

CDA enables the researcher to explore these relations, while maintaining an explicit awareness of how language and discourse practices are not neutral, regardless of the setting. It also enables researchers to make explicit connections between discourse and power and how power relations operate in multidimensional ways that can be empowering, oppressive, or manipulative.

Van Dijk (2006) further explored the relationship between discourse and manipulation to illustrate how manipulation reproduces inequality to favor the powerful groups at the expense of the less powerful, thus compromising a democratic society. One of the chief ways that manipulation is utilized and achieved is by “blaming the victim” so that “dominant groups or institutions discursively influence the mental models of recipients, for instance by the re-attribution of responsibility of actions in their own interests (p. 368).” CDA enables the researcher to uncover such practices to better understand the ways in which individuals and groups are complicit in and manipulated by discourse.

In order to identify an appropriate data set, we engaged in a recursive practice of reading and coding emerging themes. After identifying the speeches from January 2001 to June 2007 available on the Department of Education website as the potential source of our data, we isolated the speeches made by Secretary Paige, and later Secretary Spellings.<sup>11</sup> We then narrowed this initial data set to 67 speeches based on their inclusion of or allusion to one or more of the following terms: equity, equality, justice, and democracy (and related forms of the word, such as democratic), which were among the terms and themes identified during an earlier round of engaging with the data. We then separately coded for and defined those terms in the context of the speeches, and reconvened in order to compare notes. This discussion served to substantiate (or disprove) the analysis of the data. This discussion also served to triangulate our analysis and establish trustworthiness and confidence in our findings (Lather, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Once key terms and definitions were agreed upon, we then coded the data set by audience to determine how the speaker (or speech writer, for that matter) altered the message (and the discourse employed) depending upon the audience. In doing so, we were able to narrow the data set to 37 speeches to serve as samples of raw data.

## Analysis

Upon coding the data by term/theme and audience, we found that the Bush Administration developed and articulated a very specific discourse of equality/equity, justice, and democracy embedded within larger discourses of neoliberal market principles. The data reveal that both Secretaries Paige and Spellings employ a discourse that defines equality/equity in terms of *sameness*, that is, individuals should have the same opportunities as others to succeed in school and society (e.g., all students are held to the same standards for achievement and measures of accountability, regardless of academic ability, socioeconomic background, and school and community stability). The discourse of justice expressed in the speeches builds upon that of equality/equity in that justice is presented as the creation

of equal opportunity (e.g., closing the achievement gap, even though academic success is dependent upon much more than what happens in schools. See, for instance, Cuban, 2004; Kozol, 2005). Finally, the discourse of democracy evolved from and reaffirmed the two previous discourses. The third discourse, the discourse of democracy, articulated the Bush Administration's vision of an American democratic society in which an individual enjoys the freedom to act on his/her best market opportunity (e.g., choice of school and, later in life, the choice to enter the workplace based upon equal opportunity of access). The overarching message of the discourse is that the federal government has a responsibility to create an equal opportunity for all students, and, once afforded that opportunity, individuals are expected to act responsibly in their own civic and economic best interest. This perspective reflects a system in which an individual rises and falls not on societal factors, but instead on personal choices.

### ***Theme One: Equality/equity: No Child Left Behind as the Great Equalizer***

Acknowledging inconsistencies within and across public schools and communities in the United States, NCLB was explicitly designed to redress inequality in schools through accountability for results in achievement. As President Bush's ambassador of education, Secretary Paige reached out across many audiences to bring the Bush Administration's vision of education as a means to achieve equality for all children and adolescents, regardless of background, experience, and ability. He notes that students' out-of-school realities should not be used as an excuse for in-school success or failure:

I understand why teachers have sympathy for children born into bleak circumstances and who face many barriers to learning. But making excuses for poverty, race, or language breeds low expectations, and low expectations breed low achievement. The only way to raise achievement is to raise standards and assist every child in meeting them. (Paige, 7-13-01, American Federation of Teachers' Quality Educational Standards in Teaching Biennial Conference)

The discourse here reveals that achieving equality is a matter of all students' receiving the same education. It is no longer acceptable to consider who students are and where they are from; rather, what is most important is to maintain one's high standards and expectations, regardless of reality. As critical educators committed to social justice, we laud the intent, but question the underlying premise. Here, instead of using one's knowledge of students' realities to build educational opportunities and experience, those realities are to be ignored. The belief is that if one simply views students and treats them all the same (with the same standards and expectations), the achievement gap will close.

Equality (i.e., sameness) isn't just about viewing students with the same expectations; it's also about all parents having access to the same choices regarding their children's education. Paige notes in a later speech:

But I knew what you know: that giving parents greater choices and kids more chances does not hurt public education, it strengthens it. It brings us closer to equality... You stand with the children because you agree with the President that a good education is the new civil right... In our drive to make sure no child is left behind, we will make sure every child has an option, a hope, and an equal opportunity to build upon the dreams of freedom. (Paige, 2-28-02, Black Alliance for Educational Options Symposium)

Here the discourse reveals that Paige argues choice is necessary in achieving the goal of equality. In equating education as a "civil right," Paige presents a unilateral position that cannot be argued against. Indeed, if one were to do so, one would be challenging a key tenet of American society (i. e., all people are created equal).

In fact, those who are critical of NCLB are excluded from the discussion simply because they challenge the prevailing view of those in power (van Dijk, 1998), and therefore are part of the problem, not the solution:

Now I know...they will fight it anyway they can. If those who fear change defeat national reform, then division, exclusion, racism, and callousness win. This is a debate with profound consequences. If we lose this debate, millions of children will be harmed by being excluded, ignored, disrespected, and under-educated, and then sent out into a world for which they are educationally unprepared and uncompetitive. Who among us would wish that on any child? (Paige, 12-15-03, Greater Houston Partnership)

The discourse here constructs that those who challenge NCLB are not doing so based upon reasonable arguments; they are instead irrational obstructionists who don't believe in the full potential of all children. Those who challenge NCLB don't believe in equality; they want to divide the nation and maintain the current *status quo* of inequitable educational experience, no choice and no opportunity. Resistance is futile; the only choice is NCLB.

It is significant that this discourse of equality is so able to capitalize upon what are collectively understood as core American values of equality and opportunity (Parker, 2003; Sehr, 1997). While this discourse has not silenced the dissension of NCLB, it has effectively de-legitimized much of it, and relegated that dissension to the margins. This discourse is so powerful that it has been able to shape the common understanding of public education and where fault for its shortcomings lies (with schools and teachers, not with larger institutions; see, for instance, Cochran-Smith & Lyttle, 2006).

### ***Theme Two: Justice and Education as the “New” Civil Right***

In talking about education as a civil right, closing the achievement gap is a primary goal of NCLB. It was this desire to alleviate disparity in educational access (and the already existing support for standards and testing) that enabled the Bush Administration to gain bi-partisan support for this law (Cross, 2004; McGuinn, 2006). Paige capitalized on this support to speak directly to the needs of poor and minority students, families, and communities, and to garner further allegiance from African American communities:

We were in slavery longer than we've been out of slavery. And think about all of the accomplishments we've made. I think all those accomplishments are at risk if we don't deal with this achievement gap in our education issues now... This achievement gap, this un-American achievement gap that's based on the premise that all children cannot learn, that's based on the premise that some people can determine who should learn and who shouldn't. We can't make that decision. We have to make sure that every single child gets our best attention. (Paige, 7-28-03, National Urban League 2003 Conference)

While the discourse reveals great pride in achievement, it also presumes great frailty. To not “stay the course” with NCLB would quite literally jeopardize the futures of all African-American children. By employing the inclusive term “we,” Paige is implying that it is wrong for educators, parents, and communities to decide that only some can succeed. Everyone has to believe that all can succeed, and to not do so is not only “un-American,” but it is also unjust. The power of NCLB is to guarantee that every child is judged on his/her own merit and has the same chance to be successful.

Paige continues his attack on those skeptical of NCLB's intent and implications for American society in the following:

I find it staggering that the very critics, the very critics and organizations that fought so hard for civil rights could leave minority children behind. Some of the very people and very organizations that applauded *Brown* and worked to implement it are now opposing the *No Child Left Behind* reform strategies and are comfortable with leaving these children behind. Why? Is it because it exposes some of their special interests? Is it because the opposition is about power, about politics, about pride? But it's clearly not in the best interest of the children. (Paige, 1-7-04, American Enterprise Institute)

The discourse reveals that Paige and, by extension, the Bush Administration, realize what is at stake here regarding NCLB. Adherence to the law is about establishing and maintaining particular sets of power relations in terms of who is allowed to dominate educational decision-making. In presenting their view of justice (i. e., creating equal opportunity), the Bush Administration relegates the old guard of the civil rights movement to a bygone era. Paige finds it “staggering” that civil rights leaders would question the legislation as anything other than an extension of the civil rights movement. In doing so, he portrays these critics as out of touch with the needs of the current generation and clearly out of touch with twenty-first century means of achieving justice. The message is that they must either get on board or be left behind.

That justice can only be achieved by sweeping away the past is significant. Implementing and enforcing NCLB requires that all educational reforms and efforts of the past be set aside so that new practices can make right what failed before. This sentiment is particularly evident in how Paige connects NCLB to equity, justice, and inclusion:

*No Child Left Behind* is a powerful, sweeping law. It is the logical step after *Brown v. Board of Education*, which ended segregation, and the *1964 Civil Rights Act*, which promised an equitable society. The ancient Greeks used to say, "Education is freedom." Yes, it is. And *No Child Left Behind* is about freedom and equality and justice. It is about the way we learn about life; it is about life itself. (Paige, 4-22-04, Harvard University Kennedy School of Government)

The discourse reveals Paige's uncanny ability to connect with the past while simultaneously dismissing it. He cannot deny that NCLB would be impossible without the ground laid by *Brown* and the Civil Rights Act; he can, however, capitalize upon their flaws to justify the radical new direction of the Bush Administration. The *Brown* decision stated that segregation was clearly unequal, the Civil Rights Act improved access to opportunity, and NCLB will ensure that those opportunities are equal. The difference is that *Brown* and the Civil Rights Act were focused on the needs and interests of groups while NCLB focuses on the needs and interests of the individual. This important shift is indicative of the Bush Administration's larger view of democracy and what it means to live in a democratic society.

### ***Theme Three: Democracy and the Right to Enter the Marketplace***

Just as the discourse of justice built upon the previous discourse of equality and equity, so does this third theme regarding democracy. Just as Paige noted about previous efforts to advance civil rights, he also states the federal government has failed to protect democracy for all individuals:

We were separated from other students by a web of lies, by legalized violence, by prejudice inspired by hatred, by legal indifference, by the failed protection of constitutional safeguards, and by a false promise of the American Dream. And I vowed then, as I know many of you also vowed, that if I ever had the chance to change segregated education—to make it equitable, just, tolerant, and respectful for all students—I would move any mountain or bridge any division. We



will not let anyone—anyone—take away the gift of education and the right of equal educational opportunity. Some will try, wearing a concerned look and lecturing us about the trials of teaching to the test or challenging the possibility of all children learning. (Paige, 11-18-04, Annual Conference of the National Alliance of Black Educators)

The discourse reveals the Bush Administration's perspective that previous administrations were complicit in denying equality, justice, and access to the democratic ideal. The "web of lies" was sustained not only through fear but also by the legal system itself, which is supposed to enforce the Constitution and protect the public. As a result, the federal government itself failed to deliver upon the "false promise of the American Dream." Because the government could not be trusted to fulfill its responsibilities to the people, in this case to minorities and the poor, they needed to take control for themselves. As a result, the responsibility of ensuring democracy for all no longer fell on the government; rather it was placed in the hands of individuals. Because NCLB focuses on the individual child, school, and community, Paige presents it as the only reasonable remedy for our failed federal system.

This focus on the individual is rooted in creating productive citizens who are self-sufficient and do not require assistance from the federal government. While Secretary Paige served as the Bush Administration's ambassador during the first administration, there was little or no change in the overall message when Margaret Spellings took his place in the second. She continued to support the discourses of equity/equality, justice, and democracy initiated by Paige:

We have a moral responsibility to give every student the opportunity to achieve. Only a good education can build the skills, habits of mind, and knowledge for children to grow into productive citizens. This idea goes back to our founding, and is part of what has always made America a place of innovation, durable democracy, and big dreams. (Spellings, 5-22-07, Manhattan Institute Education Conference)

The discourse here continues Paige's call to moral arms, but now also ties it to the nation's need for productive citizens. Whereas before, NCLB was primarily concerned with the needs and rights of all children and adolescents, particularly those who had been underserved in the past by the federal government, this later discourse indicates a subtle shift in the moral play to include the need for individuals to engage in *their* moral duty to contribute to society, not be a drain on it. NCLB's role is to provide the foundation for such civic engagement, but individuals must seize the opportunities to participate.

This vision of democracy and democratic engagement is very different from other perspectives that currently exist in which the political sphere of public life should be debated, collectively struggled over, and engaged in the betterment of society based upon common interests (Dewey, 1916; Gutman, 1987; Feinberg, 1999). Instead the Bush Administration's theory of democracy and practice of democratic life is centered on the individual's equal right to compete in the workplace and market. Spellings carries forward this point of view and connects education to the economic health of the nation:

Education is the key to our continued competitiveness and essential to our democracy. It is indeed the new civil right. Together we can end what the President calls "the soft bigotry of low expectations." Together we can ensure America lives up to its promise and provides every child access to the same quality education. (Spellings, 5-9-07, National Summit on America's Silent Epidemic)

The discourse reveals that democracy should no longer be seen as an individual engaging in civic duty

for the good of the collective. Instead, an individual engages in democracy by actively taking part in the economic system in order to relieve the federal government of its burdens of poverty-relief and other forms of social welfare. Thus in its truest form, NCLB is an agent of the Bush Administration's agenda to shift social practice and American society from one of civic-oriented collaboration to one based on neoliberal market principles (see, for instance, Hursh & Martina, 2003).

## Discussion

What began in the 1980's with the collective call to action in *A Nation at Risk* (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) has continued into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but with an interesting paradox. The Reagan Administration, which sought to implement classic conservative ideals of smaller government, fewer social services, and a non-existent federal role in public education, has instead blossomed into what is perhaps the largest federal intrusion into the states' roles in public education (Cross, 2004; McGuinn, 2006). However, it can be argued that NCLB has finally begun to bring about what many conservatives have hoped would become a reality: a system of public education that serves market interests and not the public. NCLB as federal legislation has been able to do so because of the effective ways in which Secretaries Paige and Spellings have been able to garner and maintain support across multiple communities and audiences. This is no more evident than in the three primary audiences to which these speeches were presented.

The themes of equality/equity, justice, and democracy were prevalent in the three audiences on which we chose to focus. Those three audiences, African-American interest groups, education organizations, and business organizations, have some common interests regarding achieving an educated public, but they also have very specific interests that they hope to further. Both Paige and Spellings employed the terms of equality/equity, justice, and democracy in speeches to each of the three audiences, and, while the terms were interrelated and even interchangeable at times, the message remained amazingly constant, irrespective of the audience. This is how the Bush Administration has been able to garner the support of often competing interest groups and organizations. It manipulated the discourse to consistently fit its limited perception of democracy and public education as subservient to neo-liberal market principles.

As part of the conservative movement currently driving the discourse and policies of public education, neoliberal market perspectives position students simultaneously as human capital, those to be trained and prepared for a productive future in the global economy, and as consumers, those who should have the choice to decide which school suits them best (Apple, 2006). The effects on democracy and democratic practice are compelling:

In effect, education is seen as simply one more product like bread, cars, and television. By turning it over to the market through voucher and school choice plans, education will be largely self-regulating. Thus, democracy is turned into consumption practices. In these plans, the ideal of the citizen is that of the purchaser. The ideological effects of this position are momentous. Rather than democracy being a *political* concept, it is transformed into a wholly *economic* concept. (Apple, 2006, p. 32)

The implication for those of us who are committed to teaching equity and social justice as a democratic practice for the betterment of society, acknowledges the inherent danger in the dichotomous split between the collective and the individual. That democratic engagement now refers to economic earning potential negates the necessity for one to have the ability to contribute to the social and political well being of the country. Nor are the architects of NCLB concerned with the idea of a living wage; it is simply about the economic potential to contribute to the market place; how much one is able to

financially extract to live comfortably is of little or no interest.

## Conclusion: Bankrupting the Body Politic

A democracy, as we the authors understand it, is a society in which an informed citizenry discusses, debates, and compromises on issues concerning the body politic (Parker, 2003). This scenario is impossible in an environment defined by individual economic gain at the expense of one's neighbor. An education that promotes neoliberal policies may result in a narrow understanding of freedom and individual responsibility, but it does so at the expense of the common good. As this article has illustrated, the challenge is how to engage with these revisioned discourses of equality/equity, justice, and democracy. In applying these terms for their own political gain the Bush Administration has effectively been able to shape public perception and discussion of NCLB and public education in general. To argue against this new vision of public education is further complicated by the fact that this neoliberal revisioning harnesses the same terms that we as critical educators would utilize to demand a society that truly reflects the ideals of American public life. Instead the very language that we would use has been co-opted to meet the needs and interests of the market place, a truly amoral, if not immoral, institution. Rather than shy away from the debate and be satisfied with engaging in critique from the margins, we must re-engage with this revisioned discourse to re-assert a different possibility. Only then can we truly say we've left no child behind.

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## Notes

[1] We have only included the speeches made available to the public through the Department of Education's website. At the time of preparing this article, these speeches were available at <http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/index.html>. It is important to note that we are referring to *prepared remarks*, that is, many speeches noted "speaker frequently deviates from

text.” Therefore, for the purposes of maintaining context validity and reliability (Lather, 2001), our entire data source is derived from the actual text made available by the Department of Education, not any other media outlet. In addition, as new speeches are added to the website, we add them to the overall data set.