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The Assault on Public Education

by William Watkins (Ed.)

Teachers College Press, 2012

208 pp. pb edition

Review: *The Assault on Public Education*

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As William Watkins and the collected authors of *The Assault on Public Education* document clearly, the contemporary fight for democratic education within the United States is dominated by an interlocking set of ideologies and practices that cohere around central themes of privatization, commodification and standardization – all dominated by an instrumental rationality that supports hegemonic systems of power and control. Within this neoliberal conceptual and practical puzzle, students, parents and educators are discouraged from questioning reform efforts purportedly aimed at democratic ends. As families and educators across the United States know only too well, though, the emphasis on charter schools, choice, privatization, testing and accountability are altering the educational landscape in ways that exacerbate the already profoundly disturbing misalignment between our nation’s espoused educational aims and many of our school practices. Despite rhetoric that we want all students to succeed and feel intellectually as well as personally nurtured and inspired by their school experiences, public education has increasingly become morally, intellectually and emotionally destructive for many of our children and youth, especially those from the most marginalized of backgrounds.

The neoliberal focus on developing the rational, individual chooser meshes effectively with a concomitant focus on the privatization of education through the language and strategies of the marketplace. Such ideological framing of educational policy and practice has come to dominate our national educational discourse so thoroughly that critique is difficult to sustain. They become unintelligible amidst the instrumental rationality that privileges measurable data over all other forms of evidence. Amidst such conditions, mounting critique becomes incredibly difficult, if not impossible in some contexts. It is against this backdrop that William Watkins has assembled a powerful host of educational researchers to present detailed and passionate analyses of what he rightly describes as *The Assault on Public Education*. The text is invaluable because it focuses on the ways that the various threads and details of neoliberal ideology and strategies cohere to create a concerted and powerfully destructive force on public education in the contemporary United States. As a result, those new to the study of schooling, as well as those who have been studying and analyzing schooling for years, will find resources in this strong text for understanding the complexities of how details like testing and charter schools fit into the larger project of reshaping education in the service of neoliberal, corporate ends.

The book is introduced and framed by Watkins's trenchant analysis not only of the influence of neoliberal ideologies and practices on the current public educational scene in the U.S., but also on the larger socio-political and economic context as well. He sets the stage in an introductory chapter in which he contextualizes the state of public education through an analysis of the economic, social, and political landscape surrounding and infusing public education. It is a helpful if somewhat dizzying overview, but it is important as a framing device because it emphasizes how contemporary neoliberal schooling strategies must be understood within a context of a large-scale interwoven set of ideologies, practices and strategies for reworking the social, economic and political order to favor market-driven ends. Watkins then also closes the text by reflecting upon the themes collected in the seven other chapters.

Watkins's aims are clear. Rather than offering a blue-print for educational reform, the text is meant to document and to challenge the reader to engage in critical analysis. Watkins argues that responding to the crisis in democratic, public education requires "a thorough understanding of their plan" (p. 2). That plan, he argues, is "inextricably connected to the reconfiguration of the labor market, urban gentrification, and the new social order" (p. 2). Furthermore, Watkins explains:

Nested within sociopolitical and economic lenses, this book is about school, power, race, society, justice and the future. The consequences of school reform are earthshaking. The restructuring of public schools will most likely dismantle universal public education as we know it and "de-school" significant populations of Black, Brown and poor people. School closings and reconfigurations are now a fact of life in major American cities. This book provides a deep critical examination of the attack on universal, open and free education now called school "reform." (p. 2)

In the second chapter, Pauline Lipman uses Chicago as a case study to examine the ways that neoliberal urban policy impacts schooling. She convincingly supports her argument that "education is linked with an urban agenda that is producing increasing economic, social and spatial inequality and exclusion along the lines of race, ethnicity and class" (pp. 49-50). While urban development couches school reform within the seemingly neutral and common-sense language associated with renewal, innovation, and choice, Lipman documents how urban renewal projects displace families in low-income housing despite rhetoric that the new developments aim to attract a mix of incomes. Counter to claims that the new housing units would reserve spaces for current residents (e.g., 30%), Lipman documents how those displaced by the gentrification efforts are unable to secure housing, thereby altering the demographics considerably. Likewise, the schools within these gentrified zones become privatized and restructured, too, leaving the original residents displaced and only eligible for schools with the same underfunded resources and educational profiles as their original schools. Compounding the situation's complexity is an ideological overlay that such mixed housing schemes will benefit low-income

families through contact with the middle class, their norms and successful practices. Despite appeals to socially just aims, such projects draw upon long-rejected cultural deficit theories that continue to circulate and sustain racism and classism, positing race and poverty as social pathologies best treated by the infusion of middle class, white values and practices.

Kenneth Saltman extends the conversation in the next chapter through a detailed account of the influence of venture capitalism on contemporary school reform efforts through an analysis of the Broad Foundation's efforts to circumvent public education approaches to prepare educational leaders through its superintendent leadership academies. Venture capitalists like Eli Broad and Bill Gates are successfully transforming the preparation of teachers, educational researchers, and leaders through recruiting corporate and ex-military officers who embrace authoritative organizational school governance models as well as a vision of knowledge as a commodity that can be discretely disseminated, measured, and monitored.

The next chapter is a reprint of an Alfie Kohn piece in which he argues against the twin neoliberal reform strategies of testing and privatization. While originally published in 2004, the chapter retains its relevance and analytical force. Kohn both updates and validates the original argument through adding new commentary as asides within the text. Kohn is careful to situate attacks on public education against a backdrop of more complex data analyses in which he argues that the educational crisis is being manufactured by the very remedies constructed to address it. Of particular importance is that the reform agenda capitalizes upon the good will of educators and parents who are told that the combination of privatization and standardized assessments will remedy racial and social class educational discrepancies. Kohn rejects so-called reform efforts, arguing that, "we must decide whether we will obediently play our assigned role in helping to punish children and teachers" (p. 93).

Jack Gerson's chapter pushes the analysis even closer to home for teachers: While it is easy to rail against the neoliberal agenda championed by corporate moguls and politicians, Gerson amply demonstrates how the two largest teachers' unions in the United States, The National Educational Association and the American Federation of Teachers, are complicit with the dismantling of public education through capitulation to the demands of testing and privatization. Gerson documents how the leadership of these unions moved from a position of resistance to compromise to outright collaboration with the neoliberal agenda. In his argument that teachers' unions can and *must* play a crucial role in resisting and forging a new way forward, Gerson points to the work of grass-roots educational movements in California and the work of the Chicago Teachers Union:

We should recall that many of the vital public programs and the institutions of the working class that are now under attack were constructed in the worst of economic times – the Great Depression of

the 1930s. They were forged by great mass movements that fought courageously for their visions. If those movements could be built in those times, then surely we can do so today.” (p. 122)

In Chapter 6, Malila Robinson and Catherine Lugg turn their attention to the religious right’s somewhat conflicted role within the neoliberal assault on public education by documenting the struggles of both White and Black Southern Baptist churches to engage with each other. The authors examine the racial tensions between the two groups, and through a focus on school prayer and sex education, they analyze how the two groups approach matters of social justice in sometimes contradictory and at others, complementary, ways. They also situate that struggle within the larger context of public education reform.

In one of the more unique discussions in the text, Ann Winfield constructs a powerful argument for understanding the ideological commitments about individual intelligence and talent undergirding contemporary neoliberal educational reform efforts against and through the trajectory of the eugenics movement in the United States. This involved mainstream psychologists like G. Stanley Hall (an influential early curriculum theorist) who sought to develop measurement tools to identify and prove the intellectual superiority of whites. She quotes Hall as he defends the viewpoint that social class placements are the result of biological differences: “Ranks and classes are inherent in human nature... and each must accept the rating that consigns him his true and just place in the hierarchy of the world’s work” (p. 152). Throughout the chapter, Winfield deftly explores the historical and contemporary manifestations of eugenics ideology, scientific discourse and the ways that resulting policies build upon “the assumption that some are more worthy than others, or that access to wealth and privilege is indicative of moral stature” (p. 157).

Finally, Kristen Buras presents a detailed account of the charter school movement within New Orleans in chapter 8, *“Its all about the dollars”: Charter Schools, Educational Policy, and the Racial Market in New Orleans*. Coming on the heels of the analysis of the eugenics ideology at play within *No Child Left Behind*, *Race to the Top* and the neoliberal agenda, Buras’s accounting of the near complete autocratic state take over of public schooling in New Orleans is a stunning example of how far away from the democratic ideal of education the public school movement in the United States has come. She documents how state agents have dismantled public education in New Orleans, creating a system where local control and influence on what is happening in schools is nearly non-existent. Schools are being privatized, and as a result, students are being displaced as charter schools choose which students they want to enroll, leaving the most vulnerable students, those with the highest educational needs, for example, within over-crowded, under-resourced schools managed by the local district, thereby creating the conditions that they purport to want to correct. Likewise, privatization brings an accompanying focus on standardization, testing and the dismantling of teacher tenure and benefits, leaving

children taught by inexperienced and transient teaching staffs because they are cheaper to employ.

The Assault on Public Education is not an easy book to read. It does not offer strategies for responding to the current crisis in public education. That, however, is not its aim. Instead, it stands as a powerful bulwark against the obfuscation of issues, the recasting of complex educational ideas and practices within a corporatized logic that prevents critique. In the end, Watkins appeals to the power of critical thought, arguing that, “knowledge is enabling. Knowledge is our vehicle for understanding nature, ourselves, and others. Knowledge helps us put the jigsaw puzzle of life together. All actions begin with ideas” (p. 190). Rather than being a prescription for moving forward, the text offers us a powerful set of analyses in order to provide a much needed counter to the lack of information, the lack of critical analysis that moves us beyond simplistic critiques of the existing educational crisis. While a deeply disturbing text, it is hopeful in its passionate refusal to turn away, to document, and to challenge its readers to engage.