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Bottom-Line Choices: Effects of Market Ideology in Florida's Voluntary Preschool Policies

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The purpose of this paper is to uncover systems of reasoning and taken-for-granted assumptions embedded within Florida's Voluntary Preschool Education Program (VPK) policies and their implications on matters of social justice. Systems of reasoning based upon market ideology and assumptions of good economic actors, resulting from influences of conservative modernism, are identified and found to facilitate policies failing to ensure children's constitutional right to "high quality pre-kindergarten" (Florida Constitution [Fla. Const.] art. IX, § 1(b), 2002). The authors argue that these policies intensify exclusion through institutionalized problematizing of students and act to perpetuate discriminatory and unjust practices of schooling, in this case at the pre-school level. Florida's constitution, statutes, regulations, and other government documents are analyzed to provide insight into the systems of reasoning and taken-for-granted assumptions embedded within VPK policies. Influences from conservative modernism are identified during negotiations in policy development, issues of access within the program's choice discourses are examined, and mechanisms for exclusion embedded in these policies revealing institutional problematizing practices are analyzed. Implications for children and families historically marginalized and disempowered are discussed along with recommendations for more socially just policies and practices.

Introduction

Luis is a four-year-old who lives with his mother, father, eight-year-old brother, and six-month-old sister. Seven years ago his parents left Mexico and moved to Florida where his father has been employed on an agricultural farm since their arrival. Luis's parents lease a trailer from the farm owner and live on the property with several other farmworkers' families. Spanish is the language spoken in Luis's home. Last year, Luis was identified with speech and language impairments by the local school district's Child Find team and currently receives speech and language therapy twice a week at the local elementary school. The school is 10 miles from Luis's home. Although his mother does not have a driver's license or a vehicle, she has been able to secure rides from neighbors to take Luis to therapy sessions. Now that Luis is four, he will be eligible for Florida's Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program (VPK; 2014), and the school has informed his mother that speech services can be provided at the preschool where she chooses to enroll him. Because VPK is a choice program and is not provided at the local elementary school, Luis's mother has to find a private preschool. The closest private preschool to their home is seven miles away but has just been defunded by the State due to poor student outcomes. There are 11 private preschools in the neighboring town; the closest one is eight miles from their home. However, each of these private preschools enrolls only between 10-20 students, and preference is given to students who are currently attending the paid childcare programs. Given that Luis's mother does not have reliable transportation and does not speak English, finding an accessible private preschool has been challenging.

The above vignette serves as an example of a situation certain families in Florida face when attempting to access VPK programs. This hypothetical situation illustrates what Apple (2008) described as an act of repositioning: "to see [a policy] from the standpoint of those who have the least power" (p. 244). Many critical policy researchers have considered policy as a negotiation of power with enduring material consequences that reproduce systems of oppression (i.e., Apple, 2008, 2012; Ball, 1993, 1997; Levinson, Sutton, & Winstead, 2009). In these negotiations some voices are heard while others are silenced, resulting in policies designed to benefit those most privileged. Even well intended policies can become mechanisms that maintain social injustice and act to reproduce, or even exacerbate, inequalities for children like Luis and their families (Apple, 2008; see also Larson & Murtadha, 2002). These policy discourses are socially and culturally constructed through systems of reasoning and taken-for-granted assumptions about education (Lee, 2010). The purpose of this paper is to uncover the systems of reasoning and taken-for-granted assumptions embedded within Florida's VPK policies and their implications for children and families historically marginalized and disempowered. These policies are contextualized using Luis's story to position this analysis "from the standpoint of those with the least power."

Interests negotiated in Florida's VPK policy discourses embody what Apple (2005) coined as conservative modernism, which is "...the complicated alliance behind...educational reforms that have centered around neo-liberal commitments to the market...neo-conservative emphases on stronger control over curricula...and new managerial proposals to install rigorous forms of accountability..." (p. 11). Systems of logic underpinning such reforms are driven by a market ideology in which concepts of democracy become matters of consumer choice (Apple, 2008). For public institutions such as schools to become attractive enterprises to market interests, according to Apple, they must undergo a process of consumptive reconfiguration. This

process is publicly touted as *school choice* and is pivotal to Florida's VPK policies. Systems of reasoning based upon market ideology and assumptions of good economic actors, resulting from influences of conservative modernism, are identified and found to facilitate policies failing to ensure children's constitutional right to "high quality pre-kindergarten" (Fla. Const. art. IX, § 1(b)). The authors argue these policies intensify exclusion through institutionalized problematizing of students and act to perpetuate discriminatory and unjust practices of schooling.

Pinar (2011) suggested the promise of education is social reconstruction. Such reconstruction, as he and other social justice advocates argued (i.e., Apple, 2008, 2012; Freire, 2012; Gewirtz, 1998; Theoharris, 2007), advances equity and disrupts oppression. Conversely, a market ideology provokes another type of social reconstruction—one increasingly alarmist in policy discourses. This ideology reduces human nature to economic exploitation for personal gain and ignores other societal values existing outside of production and consumption, such as equity and social growth (Birchfield, 1999). To advance equitable social reconstruction, market ideology must be confronted and policies created that protect those oppressed by socioeconomic and historical structures.

Florida's constitution, statutes, regulations, and other government documents are analyzed to provide insight into systems of reasoning and taken-for-granted assumptions embedded within VPK policies. First, negotiations during initial development are investigated, revealing influences from conservative modernism. Next, a hierarchy of choice is exposed through an examination of access provisions within the program's choice discourses. An analysis of exclusionary mechanisms is subsequently addressed, uncovering institutional problematizing practices. Finally, implications of the identified systems of reasoning and taken-for-granted assumptions on those historically marginalized and disempowered are discussed, followed by recommendations for more socially just policies and practices framed within an ethic of care.

Negotiating Conservative Modernism

The Constitution of the State of Florida recognizes education as a "fundamental value" and "a paramount duty of the state to make adequate provision for the education of all children residing within its borders" (Fla. Const. art. IX, § 1(a), 2002), therefore implying education as a constitutional right (i.e., Alexander & Alexander, 2012; Bauries, 2011; *Bush v Holmes*, 2006). In 2002, voters of Florida extended this right to four-year-olds when they approved the Voluntary Universal Prekindergarten Education Amendment (Hartle & Ghazvini, 2014). The revised constitution reads:

Every four-year old child in Florida shall be provided by the State a high quality pre-kindergarten learning opportunity in the form of an early childhood development and education program which shall be voluntary, high quality, free, and delivered according to professionally accepted standards...(Fla. Const. art. IX, § 1(b), 2002).

While this amendment calls for the provision of *high quality prekindergarten* for *every four-year old*, it does so through an *opportunity*. By definition, opportunity is a "favorable juncture of circumstances" (*Merriam-Webster*, n.d.). Therefore, while the right to education is extended to four-year-olds, it is reduced to chance. This *opportunity* was to be available by the 2005 school

year.

In 2004, then-Governor Jeb Bush, vetoed a bill that would enact the program. In his veto letter, he outlined concerns and recommendations (Bush, 2004). That letter provided insight into a negotiation of neoliberal marketization, neoconservative standardization, and new managerial accountability interests during the development of this program's policies.

Neoliberal Negotiations

The interest of neo-liberal marketization is illustrated in the Governor's discussion of choice. Bush (2004) stated "we must...make it possible for parents to choose the best educational setting for their children from a wide variety of high quality private, faith-based, and public providers" (para. 3); and "we should...permit all types of providers, including public, private, faith-based, and family child care homes, to participate in all the VPK choices afforded to parents" (para. 5).

The reasoning illustrated in Governor Bush's desire for *parents to choose the best educational setting* shifts responsibility for children's constitutional right to *high quality pre-kindergarten* away from the State and places it on the parent. This transference from collective to individual responsibility not only relieves the State of its duty but also problematizes children and families by placing blame for any problems and social inequities on the efforts, or lack thereof, of individuals (Apple, 2008; Lee, 2010; Wright, 2012). With unquestioned faith in the market, neoliberal patterns of reasoning place the role of the State as arbiter for the educational market place and assume parents to be "good" economic actors who are "socially responsible" and "self-motivated" (Perez & Cannella, 2011). This assumes good economic actors can access and navigate the marketplace by making informed decisions from a litany of popularized choices. When an actor is not able to access, navigate, and make selections *from a wide variety of high quality* choices, the neoliberal reasoning behind Governor Bush's desire for choice ignores historically oppressive societal structures preventing individuals like Luis and his family from participating in the market. Instead, this ideology problematizes Luis's parents, attributes their marginalization to irresponsible and apathetic behavior, and brands them bad economic actors (i.e., Lee, 2010; Mora & Christianakis, 2013).

Neoconservative and New Managerial Negotiations

Governor Bush's veto letter illustrates interests of neo-conservative standardization and new managerial accountability via a recommendation for "a system concerned with performance standards, outcome measures, and a curriculum that facilitates early literacy" (para. 3). In order to develop such a system, he called for the Florida Department of Education (FDOE) to "establish performance measures and standards" (para. 5) and "refocus the statewide school readiness assessment on emerging literacy skills, develop literacy-focused curriculum standards, and lay the foundation for program integrity and accountability measurement" (para. 7).

Accountability for outcomes based upon standardized programmatic goals is touted as common sense within market discourses, and, according to Governor Bush, is *the foundation for program integrity*. Within market ideology, because states provide funding to schools for

educational services, it is perfectly reasonable for schools to provide evidence that money is utilized appropriately. State funding is increasingly predicated on students' learning as evidenced by high-stake test outcomes. However, this accountability scheme is based on several underlying assumptions working to reinforce a market ideology and assumptions of good economic actors. First, it assumes learning standards are easily identified and appropriate for all children; this also assumes all children learn the same way at the same time. Secondly, standards and accountability discourses assume it is possible to develop tools that accurately measure the extent to which standards have been "learned." Within this frame, testing equates learning and therefore more testing equals more learning. Unquestioned reliance is placed on these tests, along with power to determine the quality of teachers and schools. This leads to the third assumption: poor test scores are the result of poor effort (Thomas, 2010).

The problem with utilizing this approach is that it focuses narrowly on what can be measured. As Labaree (2011) informed us, we have become "methodologically sophisticated at exploring educational issues that do not matter" (p. 625), thus placing inordinate emphasis on test scores while discounting issues of equity and social justice. Present reform efforts and our (inter)dependency on them disregard the purpose of a socially just education system. Instead, students are increasingly valued as commodities, each bearing a market value attributed to his or her perceived educable capacity. In the program desired by Governor Bush, Luis's value would be based upon the (pre)school's perception of his ability to acquire early literacy skills.

While early literacy is a priority that few would dispute, creating a *high quality prekindergarten* program with standards, outcome measures, and curricula focused exclusively on early literacy sparked debate in the early childhood community (i.e., Barnett, 2005; National Institute of Early Education Research [NIEER], 2005; Solochek, 2006). When the Florida Legislature provided Governor Bush an acceptable bill late in 2004, there was an outcry of concern from the early childhood community regarding the statewide kindergarten readiness screening used as the accountability measure. The National Association for the Education of Young Children described the screening policy as "one of the most disturbing components of the newly elected Florida Legislation" (NIEER, 2005, p. 7). The director of NIEER, Steven Barnett, suggested the screening "...violates the cardinal rule of early educators that says, 'first do no harm'" (Barnett, 2005, p. 2). Barnett asserted that Florida policymakers are attempting to take a "simple approach" to accountability and falsely assume that a single test upon entrance to kindergarten can assess the quality of a child's experience in preschool. The path Florida is on, according to Barnett (2005), is "fraught with danger" (p. 2) and will unfairly punish programs serving the State's most vulnerable children.

Interests of neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and new managerialism were embedded throughout the legislation through provisions of choice, standards, and accountability. Choice is provided via the program's design as a voucher system (see Fla. Stat. § 1002.71(3)(a), 2014). This voucher system provides parents or guardians of eligible children with a certificate worth approximately \$2,200.00 to enroll their child at VPK providers including private preschools, private schools, faith-based programs, home childcare, or public schools (Barnett, Carolan, Fitzgerald, & Squires, 2012). Standards and accountability are evident in the high-stakes use of the statewide kindergarten readiness screening (see Fla. Stat. § 1002.67, 2014; Fla. Stat. § 1002.69, 2014).

Choice Discourses

While VPK may be about providing all four-year-olds in Florida *high quality prekindergarten*, it is designed as an *opportunity* through a voluntary program around standardized learning goals and desired outcomes. Understanding VPK's design as a voluntary choice program is needed in order to uncover the market ideology and assumptions of good economic actors embedded in this policy. Examination of enrollment provisions reveals a hierarchy of choice facilitating discriminatory practices within the program's choice structure.

Hierarchy of Choice

The Eligibility and Enrollment section of the VPK statute provides insight into the market ideology and assumptions of good economic actors within a choice discourse. Eligibility for participation in the program is determined solely by age and residence in that "each child who resides in this state who will have attained the age of 4 years on or before September 1 of the school year is eligible for [VPK] during that school year" (Fla. Stat. § 1002.53(2), 2014). Choice is provided for parents through the following provision:

A parent may enroll his or her child with any private prekindergarten provider that is eligible to deliver the VPK Program under this part; however, the provider may determine whether to admit any child. (Fla. Stat. § 1002.53(6)(a), 2014).

Not only does this Statute serve to market education framed as parent choice, it also addresses business interests within the context of choice. The words "however, the provider may determine whether to admit any child" dominate this section. While this policy may provide choice for parents, it provides choice for providers as well. The provider's choice is positioned as the qualifying decision to enrollment and overshadows the rest of the clause. By positioning the provider's choice as a qualifier, this law privileges the provider's choice over the choice of the parent. Power is established in the provider's determination and creates a hierarchy of whose choice matters. When Luis's mother chooses a preschool, his constitutional right to *high quality prekindergarten* still may not materialize. The preschool can simply turn him away.

Discriminatory Choice

The hierarchy of choice is made apparent in a complaint filed with the U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division in November of 2013 by the American Diabetes Association. The complainant asserted Florida's VPK program discriminated against children with diabetes on the basis of disability. They claimed the State failed to ensure equal opportunity for participation in the program by any and all eligible children—including children with disabilities—and this failure is a violation of the American's with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and the Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The complainants requested the Department of Justice to demand Florida takes action in ending discriminatory practices by "requiring education and the reform of laws, policies and contracts to ensure all VPK providers are aware of and required to comply with federal antidiscrimination law" (Langer, 2013 p. 3).

The complainant's accusations have been corroborated through tests conducted by the

Equal Rights Center (ERC) in Washington D.C. The ERC utilized matched-pair civil rights telephone tests to determine the extent to which providers were willing to accept and provide reasonable accommodations for eligible children with diabetes as required by ADA and Section 504. This process included female testers who contacted 75 providers via phone inquiring about availability of the programs for the fall of 2013. Each provider was contacted by a control tester, who portrayed a mother with a non-disabled child, and then was contacted four hours later by a protected tester, who portrayed a mother with an insulin-dependent child with diabetes. These tests identified discriminatory practices through findings of only 16% of providers willing to make reasonable accommodations (Langer, 2013). To date, DOE has not responded and Florida Office of Early Learning (OEL) has declined to comment (Travis, 2013), and the case has yet to be heard in court.

The refusal to admit children with special needs is not surprising, given the program's organization around choice and high-stakes accountability. Research on school choice has consistently found students from low-income families, students with disabilities, and students from non-English speaking homes to be underrepresented in choice schools, compared with community demographics (Elacqua, 2006; Frankenbery, Seigel-Hawley, & Wang, 2011; Jennings, 2010; Jessen, 2012; Miron, Urschel, Mathis, & Tornquist, 2010; Mora & Christianakis, 2013; Thomas, 2012). Choice schools have also been found to increase racial and class segregation (Bifulca, Ladd, & Ross, 2008; d'Entremont & Gulosino, 2008; Miron et al., 2010; Thomas, 2010, 2012). This exclusion and segregation appear to be intensified in choice schools run by franchises and for profit organizations (Jennings, 2010; Miron et al. 2010).

A market ideology rationalizes exclusion and segregation of students through a discourse of cost benefits. Widely accepted and unquestioned rhetoric of the achievement gap, along with high-stakes accountability practices, discourages schools from enrolling students historically perceived as low-performing. Such discourses overlook cultural bias inherent in high-stakes tests and constrict conceptualizations of learning. Instead, market logics "create the illusion that particular groups of children do not 'achieve' because their teachers and families are not adequate" (Perez & Cannella, 2011, p. 46; see also Au, 2013). Therefore, when schools have choice of whom to enroll, market ideology encourages selection of students perceived to produce the greatest outcomes while utilizing the least amount of resources, a practice known as cream-skimming (Dudley-Marling & Baker, 2012; Epple & Romano, 1998, 2008; Jennings, 2010; Jessen, 2012). Economists Epple and Romano (2008) suggested universal voucher systems encourage cream skimming based on a school's perception of student ability and family income, leaving children like Luis with limited, if any, choices. Such practices "will likely increase social inequalities by encouraging capitalist Darwinism, which leaves urban minority youth, special needs students, and English language learners at less than a competitive disadvantage" (Mora & Christianakis, 2013, p. 97).

Exclusionary Mechanisms

As of the 2011-2012 school year, Florida exceeds all other states in access to preschool programs with almost 80% of four-year-olds, totaling 175,122 students, enrolled during the fall of the 2011 (Barnett et al., 2012). Given the majority of eligible children have at least hypothetical access to VPK programs, it would appear that Florida has been successful in providing for its children's constitutional right to *high quality prekindergarten*. However,

according to data exported from OEL's Kindergarten Readiness Rate website for the 2011 -2012 school year, the total number of students included in readiness rate calculations was 115,957 (Florida OEL, 2013), leaving almost 60,000 students unaccounted for. This information suggests that up to 34% of students may not have successfully completed the program with any one provider. Successful completion, as defined in Florida Administrative Code (F.A.C.) 6M-8.601(3)(a)(1) (2012), is attendance for 70% or more of instructional hours. Further analysis is needed to understand why this constitutional right has not materialized to successful program completion for all eligible children.

Choosing Exclusion

The VPK statute allows a child to withdraw from one provider and re-enroll with another through good-cause or extreme-hardship provisions (Fla. Stat. § 1002.71(4), 2014). While the statute mentions only the withdrawal of a child from a program, suggesting a choice on the part of the parent, the OEL's Reenrollment rule includes not only the withdrawal but also the removal of students (F.A.C. 6M-8.210(2) & (3)). According to this regulation, reenrollment is defined as

...the enrollment of a student in a new VPK program type (school-year or summer) or with a new VPK provider following the student's removal or withdrawal from enrollment with a VPK provider after the student has attended a portion of VPK instruction. (F.A.C. 6M-8.210(1)(a), 2010)

The use of the word *removal* reinforces the provider's privilege in the hierarchy of choice by enabling providers to choose not only who can be enrolled in their program but also who can remain in their program. The rule goes on to provide "examples of situations which prevent a student from attending the VPK program" (F.A.C. 6M-8.210(2)(c), 2010). These examples cover a range of reasons, including illness, poor attendance, change in residence, and parental and provider disagreement, to name a few. The list concludes with the statement "another reason not expressly stipulated..." (F.A.C. 6M-8.210(2)(c)10, 2010), therefore opening the clause for unlimited possibilities for the removal of a student.

Of particular interest among examples provided for good cause include "the VPK program provider's inability to meet the student's health or educational needs" (F.A.C. 6M-8.210(2)(c)5, 2010) and for extreme hardship, "the provider's inability to meet the student's educational needs due to the student's learning or developmental disability..." (F.A.C. 6M-8.210(3)(c)4, 2010). While *educational needs* are nonspecific and can be interpreted to include a variety of demands, the standardized structure of the program suggests that educational needs of VPK students reflect the program's learning standards and desired outcomes. By including *the provider's inability to meet the student's educational needs* as preventing students from remaining in a program, this rule promotes the problematizing of students. This rule privileges the provider's choice of which students to keep in their programs and establishes the students' educational needs as justification to deny their constitutional rights. The removal of students due to *the provider's inability to meet the student's educational needs* disciplines the students through problematizing their (non)performance towards meeting standardized program goals—with no consequences to the provider. In fact, the removal of certain students has potential to increase the provider's readiness rate. These students' scores will not be included in the

calculation if they are removed before they reach 70% attendance, thereby reinforcing the systematic problematization and exclusion of students. For example, if Luis enrolls in a private preschool, and his teachers perceive his performance as problematic, especially given his identified speech and language impairments and English language learning (ELL) needs, they can remove him from their preschool. If he is removed prior to completing 70% of the program, that preschool will not be held accountable for his learning or lack thereof.

Currently, there are no publicly available data regarding removal and/or withdrawal patterns of children participating in VPK. However, a report published by the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (Civil Rights Data Collection [CDRC], 2014) indicated pervasive disproportionality of suspension rates in preschool programs offered by public schools. They found that even though African American students represent only 18% of the total enrollment, they account for 48% of multiple suspensions. While these data represent suspensions only at public schools, Gilliam (2005) examined national patterns of preschool expulsion at public and private preschools. He found expulsion rates of 6.67 per 1,000 students, which is 3.2 times that of K-12 schools. When he disaggregated the data by race, he found that for every 1,000 students enrolled, 10.04 African American, 5.77 Hispanic, and 4.42 White students are expelled annually. It is important to note that these studies represent suspensions and expulsions, not withdrawals resulting from disagreements between parents and providers, or providers convincing parents their children's needs are better met elsewhere.

Researchers found the practice of counseling out students with disabilities and ELLs to be common practice in charter schools (Jennings, 2010; Jessens, 2012; Mora & Christianakis, 2013). This practice involves presumed honest conversations between parents and school personnel that encourage the transferring of students to other schools that can better meet their needs. Also, Jennings (2010) found that charter school administrators in New York City made veiled threats to remove students based upon perceived problematic behavior in order to induce parents to withdraw or transfer their children. Thus, blame for the school's inability or unwillingness to meet a student's educational needs is framed as a problem inherent in the child (Mora & Christianakis, 2013). Regarding Florida's VPK program, the high-stakes accountability policy intensifies the practice of problematizing students through discourses of educational need.

Encouraging Exclusion

According to Florida Statute sections 1002.67 and 1002.69 (2014) and the F.A.C. 6M-8.601 (2012), evaluation of VPK programs is performed annually using the statewide kindergarten readiness screening. Results of this screening establish the quality of each provider's performance, need for corrective actions, and maintenance of funding eligibility (Fla. Stat. § 1002.67(43)(c), 2014). In other words, a provider's funding is determined by how well its students perform on the screening.

Apple (2005) argued that in the valuing of accountability measures within new managerial education reforms, "only that which is measurable is important" (p. 11). Desired measurable outcomes overshadows children's *educational needs* and constitutional rights, and, in the context of high-stakes funding within market ideology, encourages the problematizing of students for funding purposes. According to Apple (2005), when a public good such as

education becomes part of the market, it is provided in “radically unequal ways, with class, gender, and especially race being extremely powerful markers of these inequalities” (p. 18). This is not to suggest these inequalities do not exist when provided by public schools. However, they are intensified when education is put on the market.

Such inequalities were acknowledged in a 2008 report published by The Florida Legislator, Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA), pertaining to the program’s accountability practices. OPPAGA found that “providers who serve high percentages of children eligible for free and reduced lunch, and those designated as Hispanics or with limited English proficiency, were more likely to be classified as low performing than providers who served other groups of children” (p .9). What is of importance regarding this information is how it contributes to the systems of reasoning and taken-for-granted assumptions in VPK policies. Providers are driven to make rational economic investments by enrolling students who will not jeopardize their funding. This report identifies risky investments. Within market ideology, perceptions of good economic actors become those who achieve the desired measurable outcomes (Dudley-Marling & Baker, 2012). Illustrated in this report is how perceptions of achievement intersect with race, class, and language—achievement becomes that which is white, middle-class, and only English-speaking. This practice reifies the marginalization and problematizing of groups of children through perceptions of achievement. Effects of this accountability policy illustrate how the education of children from poor and non-English speaking homes, children like Luis, is an interest that has been negotiated out of this policy, thereby jeopardizing their constitutional rights and perpetuating systems of oppression.

The right of a child to access this program has been determined by cost benefit assumptions between the child’s perceived educational needs within the context of the program’s high-stakes accountability scheme. Exclusion occurs when justified by a conflict between the child’s educational performance and the desired outcomes of the program (Dudley-Marling & Baker, 2012). Children’s capacity to master the program’s standards, as perceived by providers, affords an exception to the State in providing *high quality prekindergarten* for all children and establishes a loophole for providers to remove children. Providers are forced to make a choice between including all children and risking their funding. The market ideology of this program’s design, including high-stakes accountability, forces economically driven decision-making that treat education and children as commodities for sale (Apple, 2005; Dudley-Marling & Baker, 2012).

Conclusions

This analysis illustrates how negotiations in Florida’s VPK policy discourses were influenced by conservative modernism and continue to be apparent in the program’s choice and high-stakes accountability design. When public goods such as education are marketed, the benefactors of that good, the children and families, become consumers in a society in which everything is for sale (Apple, 2005; Dudley-Marling & Baker, 2012). The marketization of public goods assumes that consumers are economically rational “de-raced, de-classed, and de-gendered ‘possessive individuals’” (Apple, 2005, p. 17) in a reality where democracy is reduced to an economic concept. The bottom-line resulting from the marketization of this program infiltrates conceptualizations of children for whom the program is intended and drives decisions about who is and is not chosen to participate.

The systems of reasoning embedded in these policy discourses reflect a market ideology based upon assumptions of good economic actors. Within a marketed system of education, working conditions focus on the production of profits and measurable outcomes in the interests of (pre)school owners and investors (Apple, 2005, p. 12). These understandings are embedded in language that works circuitously to reframe how we think about education. For example, in President Obama's *Race to the Top* (2009) initiative, the metaphor of a race implies a game that is played, and just as in races and games, there are winners and losers. Those who lose have been disproportionately "poor students who have been victimized by the government's insistence on standardized tests as the only measure of educational achievement" (Pinar, 2011, p. 17).

Systems of reasoning within a market ideology create an environment in which students are increasingly viewed as commodities, each bearing a market value attributed to his or her perceived educable capacity (Dudley-Marling & Baker, 2012). For example, Luis's value becomes reflective of the perceived impact of his education on the provider's bottom line. Within a system of (pre)schooling predicated on market ideology, students who require minimal support to perform maximal outcomes will always be given precedence. Consequently, children perceived to utilize more than their share of resources and do not perform the desired skills needed for the accountability measures will, for economically logical purposes, be problematized and excluded.

Apple (2005) argues that when public institutions become part of the market, market realities and relations begin to govern as many aspects of our lives as possible: our daily interactions, teachers' work, children's play, our hopes and desires, and so on. A travesty of the current state of public education is that it privileges some students while underserving others, which, as Noddings (2005) suggests, is "deeply offensive" (p. xvi) and does little to augment equity. Further, she asserted the current system's overreliance on students' standardized test scores creates "widespread fear among students, a possible drop in graduation rates, the demoralization of teachers, and the growing corruption of administrators who are using questionable strategies to keep their schools off the failing list" (p. xvi). Schools are institutions wherein the moral and civic development, growth, and learning of students are paramount to the continued democratization of our nation. Regrettably, we have entered into an epoch of our nation's history that seemingly devalues these ideals, reducing them instead to data used to compare, reward, and punish schools.

Within a market ideology predicated on assumptions of good economic actors, matters of social justice are ignored. By constructing its duty to provide *high quality prekindergarten* as an *opportunity* and, in effect, shifting responsibility from the State to individuals, Florida has sold the rights of its youngest citizens to the market. The transference from collective to individual responsibility relieves the State of its duties and positions blame for problems and social inequities on poor choices made by individuals (Lee, 2010; Wright, 2012). With unquestioned faith in the market, the systems of reasoning embedded in VPK program policies place the role of the State as arbiter for the educational marketplace and forces parents to vie for their children's education (Perez & Cannella, 2011). Furthermore, given that market ideology provokes a competitive ethos, providers are forced to make decisions in order to sustain themselves in the educational marketplace. The State has created a high-stakes, outcome-driven

ethos that penalizes providers who include any and all eligible children and rewards providers who problematize and exclude students based upon perceptions of educable capacity and performance. Ultimately, the resulting systems of reasoning and taken-for-granted assumptions for which VPK policies are predicated have crafted a system of institutional problematizing and encouraged exclusion that strips away the constitutional rights of children and perpetuates oppression and inequality inherent in society. We concur with Beretan's (2008) assertion that the act of problematizing children is a form of oppression.

It is imperative for Florida's VPK policies to facilitate socially just practices and ensure protections for all children through anti-discrimination and due process provisions in order to disrupt institutionalized problematizing and exclusion of children and families. Currently, anti-discrimination language included in VPK policies prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin (Fla. Stat. § 1002.53(6)(c), 2014), leaving such factors as ability, family income, and home language unprotected. In order to enable providers to abandon practices that discriminate against and commoditize students, policies must reconstruct the systems of reasoning and assumptions on which they are predicated. High-stakes accountability measures must be eliminated and replaced with practices that ensure providers deliver high quality prekindergarten education, as agreed upon in the acceptance of funds, that is inclusive of all children. To advance social justice, conditions must be attached to funding, especially with the use of vouchers (Epple & Raymond, 2008). For example, anti-discrimination language must be expanded to include consequences for discriminatory practices as well as monitoring of enrollment and removal/withdrawal patterns. Provisions for due process must be added so all children are afforded their constitutional right without prejudice.

This Florida example illustrates the effects of market-driven policies on those historically marginalized and disempowered. By repositioning ourselves via Luis and his family, we reveal how education reform predicated on the marketization of (pre)school perpetuates institutional problematizing of children and families. The climate of such reform has led those who work in (pre)schools to submit to perceived "normal" practices of problematizing students. Greene (2005) warned us that the consequence of such submission is the numbing and repressing of our values for the sake of "survival" (p. 78). Ironically, all that is preserved in this effort are discriminatory and unjust structures of schooling, and starting, as we have shown, as early as pre-school. Pinar (2011) argued "to the extent our circumstances and preferences permit, we can refuse to participate in the sadistic stupidity that is school deform" (p. 11). Those of us concerned with matters of social justice must challenge the systems of reasoning and assumptions of market ideology embedded in the policies and practices of (pre)schooling, as seen in Florida, if we are to advance equity for children like Luis.

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