

The Neoliberal Rhetoric of Workforce Readiness

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Abstract

In this essay I review an important report on school reform, published in 2007 by the National Center on Education and the Economy, and written by a group of twenty-five panelists in the USA from industry, government, academia, education, and non-profit organizations, led by specialists in labor market economics, named the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce. These neoliberal commissioners desire a broad overhaul of public schooling, ending what is now a twelve-year high school curriculum after the tenth-grade with a series of state board qualifying exit examinations. In this plan vocational education (also known as career and technical education) has been eliminated altogether in the secondary-level schools as curricular tracks are consolidated into one, signifying a national trend of ratcheting-up prescribed academic competencies for students. I argue that college-for-all neoliberals valorize the middle-class values of individualism and self-reliance, entrepreneurship, and employment in the professions. Working-class students are expected to reinvent themselves in order to succeed in the new capitalist order.

Imperatives in workforce readiness

Elected officials in state and national legislatures and executive offices share a neoliberal perspective that public school students are academically deficient and under-prepared as future global workers. Their rhetoric has been used to re-establish the role of evidence-based measurement notably through report cards of student's grade-point-averages and test-taking results. Thus, states are tightening their diploma offerings and consolidating curricular track assignments. Proposed graduation rule

changes and tougher exit exams, for instance, force incoming high school students to take a core in English, math, science and social studies, emphasizing basic skills preparation for college-bound pathways but squeezing out room for art and music and foreign languages and career training credits. Equipping students for the new economy is defined in narrower terms of efficiency, accountability and standards-based measures, as trumpeted in the federal passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001. Newer small-scale models of public-private partnerships, such as charter schools, now encourage students to satisfy required academic classes that promise success in further education and in the workforce. Challenging course taking is derived from neoliberal rhetoric on risk management, promising employability for those who have made proper choices, exhibited motivation and effort at studying, and carefully planned their educational and workplace pathways.

Enter the New Commission on Skills of the American Workforce (National Center, 2007). The commissioner's report, entitled *Tough choices or tough times*, insists that educators must do a better job of workforce readiness in transitioning youth to college. Key goals in the report are: (a) revitalize the economy by educating all students for high-skills jobs, and (b) elevate our share of the college-educated global workforce. A meritocratic model for success asks young people to achieve at world-class literacy levels and commit to lifelong learning and further education. "To the extent that our skills are the foundation of our economic dominance," the commissioners contended, "that foundation is eroding in front of our eyes, but we have been very slow to see it" (National Center, 2007, p. 16). The commission's projected benchmark is the state board qualifying examination for all students at the end of their tenth year; an exit exam that serves as a national sorting machine. This is a performance-based model as opposed to the laissez-faire model where "most American students [who] avoided taking tough courses and studying hard" can bide their time in age-graded levels awaiting social promotions (National Center, 2007, p. 51). The commissioners envisioned a core curriculum with scaled tests only for two possible destinations leading to post-secondary education. On one path, high-pass students could continue on for two more years of upper-secondary schooling where they are directed into rigorous academic programs, such as in the International Baccalaureate and advanced placement curriculums in anticipation of admissions to selective colleges. On the other path, low-pass students unable to transition into

advanced study would be cleared for entry (as early as age sixteen) into post-secondary vocational and technical education. Ending the latter group's taxpayer supported public education after tenth-grade will save close to \$70 billion, claim financial analysts associated with the report (National Center, 2007, p. 57)—a factor the commissioners clearly hope will sway neoliberal stakeholders to their proposed restructuring of secondary education.

Most troubling to the commissioners were the increasing numbers of developing nations that succeeded in credentialing their workforces in high-skilled professions, clearly threatening to out-compete the U.S. in the global marketplace. “Whereas for most of the 20th century the United States could take pride in having the best-educated workforce in the world, that is no longer true,” according the report; “over the past 30 years, one country after another has surpassed us in the proportion of their entering workforce with the equivalent of a high school diploma” (National Center, 2007, p. xvi). These are echoes of earlier nativist panics of “the outsider,” reflected in the alarmist educational report *A Nation at Risk*, published in 1983, that claimed America would be surpassed by superior foreign powers and outpaced in technology and science. A similar contemporary viewpoint is promulgated by global investment bankers Goldman-Sachs, who suggest that by the year 2050 the countries of Brazil, Russia, India and China (the BRICs) will dwarf the USA (along with the other five richest countries that make-up the G6: France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK) as the largest economic bloc in the world. Neoliberal futurists conjecture BRIC countries would gain in power, status, per capita income, strong currencies, market capitalization, high levels of education, rising middle classes, and the like (Wilson & Purushothaman, 2003). True, countries like India are favored for corporate offshoring due to high skills *but* at very low pay within their labor force. What really drive capitalists to outsource are the huge wage differentials, ratios over eight to one in salaries abroad. For instance, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) has shown that a Silicon Valley (California) worker earning \$78,000 is comparable to an Indian information manager/technologist paid about \$8,000 (Bernstein, 2004). Yet the question of skills mismatch between countries obfuscates the fundamental problems of the global capitalist order.

Neoliberals in this report argue that a college education is necessary to ready future workers, even though the forecast for new job development in high-performance workplaces is bleak. Since the beginning of the Bush presidency, about 2.6 million private sector workers have lost their jobs primarily to outsourced or off-shored manufacturing (Shaft, 2005, p. 154). Economists explain that growing wage differentials are due in large part to industry shifts toward more low-paying retail jobs, downturns in union membership, and a drop in the real value of the minimum wage (Mishel, Bernstein, & Allegretto, 2003). One has only to review BLS workforce projections in order to gather a better picture that service-sector jobs continue to outpace professional jobs. Health care support and personal care or social assistance are two of the fastest growing occupational groups; next in line are food preparation and serving; then buildings and grounds clearing and maintenance (Hecker, 2005, p. 73). These working-class careers mainly are filled by young people just out of high school, many of whom receive short-term on-the-job training. In 2004, 47 percent of all jobs were held by those in the high-school-or less-categories (Hecker, 2005, p. 80). Only 27 percent of all jobs in the U.S. by the year 2014 will actually require a four-year college degree, the high-school-or-less cluster will fill 37 percent, with the rest having some college experiences. The service providing occupations will grow exponentially during that timeframe. Neoliberal discourse of monolithic college attainment and lock-step entrance into professional occupations is misguided and misleading; the future of work is in the lower-paying service economy.

Valorizing the middle class

Neoliberals in advanced industrialized countries use the middle classes to buttress elite positions in governance. Conservative politicians such as Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the USA successfully courted the middle classes, according to Harvey (2005, p. 40), for the public “construction of consent” that legitimized widespread dismantling of welfare state policies. Neoliberal rhetoric of individual freedoms and personal responsibility is appealing to true believers of meritocratic success and widening market-based opportunities. The idea of risk is embedded in neoliberal discourse in making an entrepreneurial project of one's self—even interpreted as a “moral obligation to be employable” in the new economy (Brown & Hesketh, 2004, p. 232). Individuals are told to either work hard or they

suffer the consequences of failure with no one to blame but themselves. Neoliberal governments psychologically police citizens to become enterprising selves irrespective of class barriers (Rose, 1990). Middle-class values of proper parenthood meld into a neoliberal outlook that quality public schooling compels active engagement among teachers, parents, and educational leaders. Charter schools favored in my country are quasi-public institutions that by law are mandated to include parents on their advisory boards, who are instrumental in directing the goals and objectives of the schools. In fact, charters represent the rescaling of city-wide district school boards into smaller, locally-run, sole enterprises “serving broader neoliberalizing governance goals in the process” (Hankins & Martin, 2006, p. 530). Tomlinson (2001, p. 137) showed that with the rise of school-choice policies in the UK “privileged parents had the required cultural capital and education knowledge for them to emerge as winners in local school markets.” Brantlinger's (2003, p. 20) study of middle-class mothers in the USA confirmed that parents who believed in high educational and occupational attainment for their children rushed into “monopolizing the best neighborhoods, schools and courses.” High-profile parents desiring choice for schooling their children are a fixture in educational policymaking these days (Reay, 2004).

Yet a closer look at the middle classes suggests that they are struggling to stay afloat too. “Caught in a vise of stagnant incomes and rising costs” and saddled with unregulated consumer credit, Warren (2007, p. 2), an expert in bankruptcy law at Harvard Law School reported, “the economic rules have changed ... leaving millions of hard-working, play-by-the-rules families caught in a battle for economic survival.” For example, family budgets are strained due to rising fixed expenses: home mortgage payments, private health insurance costs, and transportation, childcare, and tuition for college. Add to this the outsourcing of jobs and corporate restructuring, and whole divisions of white-collar workers have been laid-off, made redundant, a result of mergers and acquisitions that decimate the ranks of salaried employees. Newman (1988, p. 11) described the downwardly mobile trend among white-collar professionals in the emotional abyss: “to lose your place in the social landscape, to feel that you have no coherent identity, and finally to feel, if not helpless, then at least stymied about how to rectify the situation.” The new anxieties created by

neoliberalism are described in Hacker's (2006) book as a *great risk shift* due to crumbling economic security.

But income decline among the middle classes is not confined to the North American experience alone. It is a global problem caused by advanced capitalism that destabilizes nation-states through trade imbalances. Multinational corporations favor strategies of flexible accumulation that feature production at the local or regional level, aided by information technologies and horizontal organizational models. Economic globalization has resulted in disinvestments in unionized labor markets in wealthier countries, for instance, leading to either mass unemployment or declining real wages (see Greider, 1997, p. 24). Developing nations are subject to loan practices imposed by the International Monetary Fund or World Bank that require structural adjustments from the neoliberal playbook. Witness the rise of offshore processing zones that entice multinational corporate investments but create rising wealth gaps, depletion of natural resources, and devaluation of agricultural lands. Globalization has enriched a few at the expense of many by creating one hegemonic ruling class, according to Robinson (2004, p. 48); they are a transnational managerial elite “based in the centers of world capitalism” and “at the apex of the global economy” that “exercises authority over global institutions, and controls the levers of global policymaking.” Social classes are widening due to globalization, not shrinking.

Reinventing the working class

The neoliberal message of individualization and flexibility implores the public to take risks and be self-reliance above all else. Those who need assistance from the state in whatever form now are viewed as dependent or weak—denigrated as social “parasites dragging down the more dynamic members of society” (Sennett, 1998, p. 139).

Within this advanced capitalist ideology of personal responsibility is a deep resentment of unions in particular and of the working class rank-and-file in general who engender what might be considered family values of brotherhood and sisterhood, and mutual sharing and trusting community building. Obviously neoliberals have to dismantle the power of organized labor in the new economy, a strategic advantage that allows corporations to freely move capital without honoring long-standing union contracts. But unions and working people also represent the successful struggles of engaged social justice, an artifact of activist, agentic and politicized democratic

citizenry that has no place on the neoliberal landscape of atomized competition. In fact, social institutions such as schools must continually reinforce and maintain the ethic of globalized business by disseminating messages of selectivity and individuality, limited opportunity, and fierce rivalry over education and employment on the road to upward mobility.

Educational institutions offer advice in curricular decisions and career pathways, for example, and working-class families are at an extreme disadvantage in a neoliberal everyone-for-himself/herself-environment. Connell's (2004, p. 231) recent work in Australia reported that the hidden injuries of class are “not very hidden” and remain the same as in Sennett and Cobb's (1972) time over three decades ago. Working-class parental distrust of educational authorities often evolved from their own bad experiences in schools, as well as their lack of time and monetary resources to become involved in children's homework, after-school functions, or teachers and counselor's meetings, and the like. This leaves working-class parents in a weak position when it comes to advising “their children on educational strategies, or to negotiate on their behalf” (Connell, 2004, p. 238). Families are told to financially support their offspring and manage their risks. Neoliberal governments have constructed moral panics around subalterns for purposes of tightened state intervention in parenting. Contemporary populations of working-class youths labeled at-risk increasing are viewed as ungovernable by the state, deemed to jeopardize the future polity because they rejected the good life by constructing pathological biographies. Popular apprehension of disconnected and excluded youth fuels talk of regulation and control and disciplining over a rising public menace (Kelly, 1999).

No groups more affected by the neoliberal turn in education are working-class males who are told to reinvent their identities under advanced capitalism. Re-gendered labor markets require changing masculinities, as young males contemplate their school-to-work opportunities in a service economy. Favorable employees manage emotions, control interpersonal communications, regulate personal attitudes, and police bodily presentations—all the while valorizing a gender regime that subordinates traditional waged employment (McDowell, 2003). Nayak's (2003) study of adolescent peer groups in the UK found that the working-class boys upheld visible and vocal chauvinisms displays of toughness, confrontation, sexual harassment and homophobic

violence, derived from inflated claims of gender privilege and class authority. Remnants of working-class identities still are refashioned through lifestyle and leisure-time activities such as drinking and watching football, consumption practices reified in the media and popular culture. But to what end? The neoliberal canard that “one can achieve anything if they are committed enough,” is a psychic challenge to young people faced with the realities of low-skilled employment—there are too many qualified applicants for a few jobs, mainly part-time and contingent labor (McDonald, 1999, p. 41).

Newer gendered constructions exhibit what Connell (2005, p. 84) termed “transnational business masculinity”; meaning global elites living a cosmopolitan and consumptive lifestyle but exhibiting social distance and detached loyalties. One can picture this sort of neoliberal male in the ruthless corporate world. Trend (2001, p. 135) described their daily work life in virtual communities that use “computer networks to manipulate labor markets, facilitate plant closures, enable just-in-time production, capitalize on currency fluctuations, subvert import/export regulations, and generally exploit less powerful populations around the globe.” Working-class youths hoping to succeed as business neoliberals must learn to align their emotions with new gendered forms imbricated into global capitalist culture. Otherwise they are destined to become *peripheral workers*, defined by Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996, p. 45) as the “growing hordes” of young people “who sell not knowledge but the brute delivery of services connected to the ever newly designed lifestyles of the 'winners' in the new capitalism.” Lipman (2004, p. 8) viewed their probable destinies as servants for the professional classes living in global cities, gentrified “bourgeois playgrounds”—a result of the neoliberal restructuring of space.

Attracting economic development

Transnational capitalist firms are lured to regions where relocation packages offered by economic development state agencies promise a number of important tax-free perks, including custom-trained workers, up-skilled in the manufacturing and technical processes unique to that regional cluster. In addition, business decisions to relocate encounter few bureaucratic or environmental regulations or labor contracts that might hamper start-up. Workforce training accommodates mobile capital into regions of industry growth. Under neoliberal “locational policies,” Brenner (2004, p.

207) clarified, capitalist firms “promote territorial competitiveness by maintaining and continually expanding the capacities for profit-making and economic growth that are embedded within specific political jurisdictions.” A flexible model of global production divides the core labor force into small and manageable business clusters of sub-contractors, suppliers and franchisees, noted as “the new geography of capitalist activity,” in a report on management of higher education institutions published in 1999 by the Paris-based Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD, 1999, p. 18). Nation-state borders are regularly crossed in the search for cheap labor and infrastructures for manufacturing and assembly. With flexible transportation nodes and electronic communications network, however, economic developers are forced to compete for jobs on a level plane regardless of strategic location. Geographic regions now nurture industry clusters to share resources and technical expertise and know-how in a competitive global business environment. Cluster firms rely upon a pool of workers who are knowledgeable about the components of specialized production there. And business firms expect a variety of customized training services from public institutions—mainly involving technical and community colleges—including skill-based assessments for vetting future workers and for evaluating and monitoring those already employed. These postsecondary institutions have become very aggressive in seeking public-private partnerships for customized training, while asked to manage costs with declining support from the taxpaying public (Levin, 2001).

Going to college

Today's youth are set-up with vague offers of college success without really knowing the complexities for degree completion. Educational authorities reproduce the neoliberal rhetoric of the knowledge economy, and favor discontinuing programs in manual labor and work-based learning as curricular cul-de-sacs (Grubb & Lazerson, 2004). Discourses of human capital development instead privilege a core set of testable subjects for transitions of school-to-school, based upon future employment predictions in the new economy. In the name of efficiency a common core is easier to control and measure established standards of performance. It offers neoliberals greater surveillance and accountability over educators, schools, and pupils and parents (particularly from the low-income and working classes). Well-funded, right-leaning

think-tanks have fooled the public into believing academic indicators measure comparative advantage in the world. Lind (1996, p. 158) charged that neoliberals actually invented a myth of the achievement gap, promulgated by “the well-funded conservative propaganda machine” that resulted in “a new political consensus” on school reform. Reformers demand greater evidence-based data collection, research and evaluations that measure student progress on academic achievement, cognitive skills associated with subject-matter mastery—even though they wrongly assume transferability to work settings (Stasz, 2001).

The college-for-all movement shows little capacity for equalizing schooling or narrowing the achievement gap for students. Those disadvantaged by social class may have no idea what steps they need to take to be successful in transitions to further education, or how to remedy their past low grades and poor achievements, or whether tertiary planning is even a realistic and likely attainable scenario. “The college-for-all norm can inadvertently encourage a deception that hurts many youths,” Rosenbaum (2001, p. 57) noted, because students are set-up with vague offers of post-secondary success without really knowing the requirements for degree completion. Although community and technical colleges generally attract working-class students earning sub-baccalaureate degrees or industry certificates, the profile of these institutions does not match-up to the neoliberal public policy ideal of teaching full-time, tuition-paying students on a clear path to matriculation at selective higher education institutions. “The college-for-all norm is highly misleading and does great harm to youths,” Rosenbaum (2001, p. 82) charged; “It offers big promises to students without warning that few low-achieving students will get a college degree.”

Pushing high-tech skills

Neoliberals view skill formation “in the frontline battle for economic competitiveness” and human capital theory continues to inform their policies that talented individuals are technical machines benefiting from formal education and training (Brown, Green, & Lauder, 2001, p. 11). Human capital theorists suggest that investments in the labor force through education and training will result in improved earnings potential over a lifetime and benefit the country through greater productivity and economic growth (Becker, 1993). Neoliberals uniformly claim schooling is preparation for middle-class, white-collar jobs—even though economists continue to

debate the future of high-skilled labor and industry shifts that favor increases in the low-skilled service sector (Brown, Green, & Lauder, 2001). These educational reformers promulgate discourses about organization learning in postindustrial workplaces, telling us that new conceptualizations of labor are flexible and readied for a knowledge economy. Know-how resides in the workers' brain, which is transportable and negotiable in a knowledge-based society (Drucker, 1993). The global firm asks workers to be flexible and fluid—time is “unchained from the iron cage of the past” (Sennett, 1998, p. 59). No longer are workers expected to engage in routine and degrading labor with fixed shifts on the shop floor. Teamwork is the new organizational design, we are told, and authority structures have shifted to accommodate information-sharing and troubleshooting at work. Front-end workers are asked to exhibit satisfying customer relations behaviors and emotional labor is valued in high performance settings.

A number of critics wonder whether work-related attitudes, such as motivation and commitment to the firm, should be based upon such a one-dimensional, rational model of human nature that defines individuals solely by incentives such as rewards and punishments. “Cultural understandings of 'being' and 'becoming' can lead young people to restrict their commitment to education and training,” Brown, Green, and Lauder (2001, p. 14) asserted, “irrespective of a cost-benefit analysis of whether it is in their self-interest.” Young adults do not simply conform to a set of neoliberal economic or civic objectives imposed from above. A person actively engaged in jobs where working knowledge defines their skills-set is quite different from neoliberal pronouncements that mastering core subjects makes you smart and employable. Credentials or formal schooling “play only a small portion of what enables workers in many fields to successfully confront the ambiguities of practice” (Stasz, 2001, p. 391). Individuals motivated by extrinsic means alone often confuse “learning to know and learning to display knowledge for evaluation” (Lave & Wegner, 1991, p. 112). Anthropologists of work illuminate the notion of situated learning, the shared process of knowing that resides in communities of practice. Stories and community lore comprise an essential subjectivity and aide in the transmission of soft skills, where new members, apprentices or novices, learn ways of knowing that lead toward legitimate group or team membership en route to mastery. What energizes situated

learners is striving for full participation and a sense of belonging through social activity.

The economic definition of skill as rigid and formal, rational and measurable is narrowly conceived and shortsighted, but buttresses the meritocratic beliefs of elites who favor high-tech solutions that bring uniform measurement of pupil achievement and instructional effectiveness to all—without the messiness of having to deal with human emotions and agentic behaviors. Yet standardized testing is inequitable because those most likely to score poorly are the ones who face a heightened regime of testing and test preparation. Authentic education cannot be reduced to competence on tests of discrete bits of information. The complexities of work life are not reductive to pronouncements that academic skills trump all others, or that individualism rules over interaction and competition over reciprocity. Problem-solving processes have “greater intensity and scope” through work experiences than in the classroom alone (Bailey, Hughes, and Moore, 2004, p. 166). Case study evidence from school-to-work program evaluations has shown that applied learning enriches secondary-level academics, even facilitating the transfer function to post-secondary institutions (Castellano, Stone, Stringfield, Farley, & Wayman, 2004). Beyond technical skills training all students could benefit from experiential practices through career development, contextual learning and engagement in real-world activities that complement academics. High schools that honor learning differences should not have to conform to a procrustean one-size-fits-all neoliberal agenda.

Conclusion

Neoliberals in public education have created prescriptive curriculums for vocationalizing ends. Recently introduced into the state legislature where I reside is a workforce readiness bill under discussion titled *Building resourceful individuals to develop Georgia's economy* (BRIDGE), which targets low-income, working-class students and their parents, and provides a template for controlling career pathways, stipulated industry certifications and credentials, and diagnostic and assessment models for employability, all tools for supervising and disciplining the further education and training goals of this subpopulation of youths. Just one more example of how public policymakers reinscribe the neoliberal compact between statehouse political managers and corporate capitalists in the common drive for regional

accumulation and massive wealth. According to Robinson (2004, p. 81), neoliberals provide the “grease” under globalization, then proceed to dismantle “all nonmarket structures that have in the past placed limits on, or acted as a protective layer against, the accumulation of capital.” “And the state cedes to the market,” he continued, “as the sole organizing power in the economic and social sphere.” Business reformers, Cuban (2004, p. 123) wrote, rely upon a series of causal assumptions that failing schools have “caused wage inequalities, unemployment, low worker productivity, slow economic growth, and reduced global competitiveness.” Giroux (2004, p. 106) decried a “culture of corporate public pedagogy” that “cancels out or devalues gender, class-specific, and racial injustices of the existing social order by absorbing the democratic impulses and practices of civil society within narrow economic relations.” There is no place in this new regime for a critical pedagogy of work that questions quality of life issues surrounding full employment, job security, revitalized unions, and a livable wage, among others. Neoliberals resist collectivity and solidarity in all shapes and forms. They have turned the commons into a shopping mall of personal consumer desires and individualized aesthetic tastes. The hegemony of global capitalists are privatizing the schools and subverting the public trust in democracy-building endeavors.

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