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# **Education: Neoliberalism's Next Victim**

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The 1980s ushered in a global economic revolution, driven by the rise of neoliberalism. The 1979 election of Margaret Thatcher as the United Kingdom’s Prime Minister in 1979, followed by Ronald Reagan’s presidency across the pond a year later, placed two of the world’s superpowers under hyper-conservative, free-market leadership. This decade saw a shift toward trickle-down economics, marked by the vilification of government intervention and the glorification of private industry. Neoliberal politicians championed deregulation and corporate empowerment, encapsulated by Thatcher’s infamous quote, “*Economics are the method. The object is to change the soul*”. Neoliberalism asserts that the government's role is to actively maintain the existence of a market economy, a sentiment that has found its way into public institutions, including education. By reframing societal success from collective progress to an individual competition, these policies have made everything quantifiable. As a result, a good education has measurable with quantitative barometers for success just like a business.

As neoliberalism promoted an individualistic culture, it embedded itself into the structure of public education. Schools were reshaped to function like a competitive marketplace, prioritizing producing high-quality workers over equity and diverse learning. The 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* was “the opening salvo of the neoliberal education agenda” (Lipman, 46), marking the first of a wave of corporate-backed reports that framed education as a tool for “U.S. economic competitiveness and ‘human capital development’” (Lipman, 46). These reports approached education as a matter-of-fact, results-based industry, looking to standardize public education to make it clear which schools were succeeding and which were failing. In 2002, the neoliberal agenda achieved its crowning jewel when the Bush administration passed the No Child Left Behind law (NCLB).

NCLB mandated state-administered proficiency tests attached to achievement standards as set by individual states. Schools were required to show year-over-year improvement on these tests, with the threat of disinvestment looming if they fell short of benchmarks. However, these rigid mandates were implemented without accompanying policy measures to support schools in meeting them. As a result, many districts failed, creating “a narrative of unaccountable teachers and schools and unresponsive and change-resistant public institutions” (Lipman, 46). By placing blame on individual teachers, this approach ignored systemic problems such as poor resource management, outside-community imposed curricula, segregation, and broader structural poverty and racial inequality.

The market-driven response of education was a focus on charter schools, often staffed by non-unionized teachers allowing administrators to easily punish educators they deemed inadequate and offer “merit pay” to those who met their expectations. This transformed small and charter schools into “instruments of the market” (Lipman, 47), representing competition for the “status quo” of public schools. Corporate actors began getting directly involved in the education system, embracing the capitalistic assumption that competition breeds quality, further entrenching neoliberal ideology in the public education sector.

One of the first great neoliberal experiments in education emerged in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. Seeing opportunity in disaster, President George W. Bush declared the Gulf Coast a “taxpayer subsidized ‘enterprise zone’”, using the crisis to “implement the free market fundamentalism that is not yet politically palatable in the rest of the country’” (Lipman, 48). The city quickly restored tourist and middle class areas while privatizing public services. The state-funded gentrification of historically poor Black areas, seizing public housing in these communities and converting it into market rate developments.

The final nail in the coffin for this shift came with the privatization of the city’s public schools. The state took control of 100 public schools and transferred them to private organizations, and in the process, “fired all 4,500 public school teachers, broke the city’s powerful Black-led teachers’ union, and dismantled the school system’s administrative infrastructure” (Lipman, 49). In the years following Katrina, the Department of Education invested over $60-million to open charter schools in Louisiana. Between 2006 and 2007, 31 of the 55 newly opened schools in New Orleans were charter, compared to just five before the disaster. This sweeping privatization effort was headed “by fiat by the governor, guided by think tanks such as the Urban Institute and backed by corporate foundations such as the Gates Foundation” (Lipman, 49). As a result, public school enrollment in New Orleans plummeted from 63,000 students before Katrina to just 24,000 afterwards.

The underlying goal of this reconstruction was clear: to create a whiter, middle-class, more “capital and developed friendly” New Orleans (Lipman, 50). This wasn’t hidden, with the Director of Housing and Urban Development Alphonso Jackson saying “New Orleans is not going to be as black as it was for a long time, if ever again,” (Lipman, 50). The neoliberal advocates turned disaster into an opportunity to reshape public education in favor of corporate interests.

Chicago’s Ren2010 plan also advocated for a a neoliberal marketplace of schooling. The original proposal was to replace 60 Chicago public schools with 100 new ones, ⅓ charter, ⅓ contract, and ⅓ performance schools– schools operating under five-year performance contracts contingent on meeting performance barometers. Following protests, the city opted not to relocate students but instead replace all teachers and administrators of schools that didn't meet their criteria. Additionally, the city elected to consolidate and phase out low enrollment schools on the grounds of improving “efficiency” and “cost effectiveness” (Lipman, 51).

This created direct relationship between education and market, as “the stage for Ren2010 was set by an accountability regime that normalized labeling, sorting, and classifying schools, and meting out penalties without regard for inequities in resources, opportunity to learn, teachers’ ideologies, cultural marginalization in curriculum and instruction, the social context of the school, or the strengths children bring to the school setting.” (Lipman, 52). Ren2010 allowed the city to easily classify schools as good or bad, and, instead of helping the “bad” schools improve, allow the city to take them over and privatize them.

However, the schools most at-risk were identifiable before the policy came into practice. Decades of structural divestestment of these institutions set them up to fail under this policy, resulting in privatized education in low-income, minority communities compared to selective enrollment public schools in gentrified areas. Public schools, previously anchors for communities, were set to fail, with charter schools recruiting their students, putting them at higher risk of losing funding due to low enrollment. The overall goal of Ren2010 was clear: the full-scale privatization of education.

Market-driven education has created competition not only between schools but also students. As shown in *The Lottery*, students must compete in a lottery for limited selection to charter schools. This results in a self-fulfilling prophecy: those who get chosen receive a “good” education, while the rest are resigned to underfunded public schools and likely staying in poverty.

The Education Freedom Act, passed in Tennessee earlier this year, shows this at play. The law established a scholarship program allowing qualified students to receive vouchers to attend private school instead of their zoned public schools (Kent). Rather than investing in improving universal public education for all students, this system allows middle- and upper-class students to benefit from either a strong public education or to pay for private alternatives, while only the “best” low-income students are honored with quality education.

Additionally, since the students that test well are the ones who get the vouchers for private schools, they will leave struggling public schools and further decrease the district’s performance. This results in a two-tiered education system based on a state-created market where private schools are synonymous with quality, public schools with failure, and little room for movement.

While market-driven education policies have commodified schooling, they’ve also centered “good education” as productivity-centered. The Trump administration has been at the forefront of this with its war on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). The anti-DEI agenda is a two front war with attacks based in both cultural and economic opposition.

Culturally, conservatives have framed DEI as a discriminatory practice that simply blames White people for the world’s problems and attacks White identity. They take offense to any idea of America as a structurally inequitable nation and view policies that address fundamental inequalities between people as inherently anti-American. As part of their anti-DEI movement, the Trump administration has sought to attack schools that teach “divisive ideologies” and “indoctrination”, calling these teachings “illegal discriminatory practices at institutions of learning.” (*Schools…*).

Economically, conservative policy makers have framed their opposition to DEI in a way that appeals to the neoliberal, establishment base that Republicans have formed since Reagan. At its core, they argue, DEI is an unproductive learning style. They contest that social sciences and humanities are not tangible, skill-based topics and do not improve students’ ability to compete in the job market. Contrastly, STEM and business curricula promote valuable skills that can immediately give students the leg up on their peers and create more productive workers. For those who struggle with STEM or business classes, vocational-technical schools—offering direct job training in trades like electricity and plumbing—are the next best option.

The late comedian George Carlin captured this sentiment: “They don’t want well informed, well educated people capable of critical thinking…They don’t want people who are smart enough to sit around a kitchen table to figure out how badly they’re getting f–ked by a system…They want obedient workers” (Goodreads). Identifying America’s systemic failures does not create more jobs, but threatens the neoliberal economy and is inherently inefficient.

While DEI faces resistance, neoliberalism selectively embraces diversity when it can be used. Diversity as a commodity that can be monetized and marketed rather than a lived experience is an incredibly valuable tool for neoliberal education. The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley positioned itself as the first bilingual university. They promoted the Spanish language as an economic asset that can be commodified instead of a cultural identity held by human beings. This practice of converse racialization rebranded the language as a neutral tool, not linked with any group of people, aligned with market values. It inherently shifted language from being a cultural expression to a tool for economic competition. (Mena & Garcia).

As neoliberalism shapes education policy, the consequences of treating schools as corporations become clear. A fully marketized and privatized education system will mirror the modern economy: one of deep inequality, where those born into privilege receive quality education and only the luckiest few achieve social mobility. Thatcher’s assertion that, “Economics are the method. The object is to change the soul” will have, in turn, been realized.

Neoliberalism has spent the past half-century casting private corporations as the bastions of progress and the government as standing in the way of the future. It has transformed the public perception of government from something that should uplift and provide a foundation into something that should operate with efficiency. Housing, labor unions, and environmental protections have already fallen in the name of the free-market, and education is just the next frontier in this cultural and economic takeover.

This is no longer just a political issue; but a cultural reckoning. Without a radical change to the way Americans perceive the government’s role and movement from neoliberalism’s manufactured measures of success, America will continue to move further from the meritocracy neoliberals pretend we have and into the oligarchy their actions have constructed.

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