**Downsized Discourse: Classroom Management, Neoliberalism, and the Shaping of Correct Workplace Attitude**

**Faith Agostinone-Wilson**

*Aurora University, Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, USA*

**Abstract**

*This paper examines the school-based implementation of neoliberal worldviews via the creation of correct worker attitude. Whether promoting classroom management as a way to build "teamwork" or steering students toward "self-regulation," these efforts work together to ultimately shape attitude and dispositions toward a capitalist ethos, embodied in the modern corporation. Excerpts from classroom management texts such as Harry and Rosemary Wong's The First Days of School are included for their connections to the neoliberal agenda. In addition, the philosophy of "school-to-work" and the corporate project of minimizing worker solidarity through "team building" are brought to light.*

Consider the U.S. class war, where 70% of increases in corporate income growth goes toward profits and only 30% of said growth to wages, where 1.1 million people have fallen below the poverty line since last year, and where the wealthiest 0.1% of the population (roughly 129,000 people) have reaped the benefits of 25% of the increase in national income in 2003 alone (Sustar, 2005, para. 2-8). One-fourth of the workforce between 18 and 64 years of age earns less than $9.04 an hour, or $18,800 per year, assuming that's full-time work. Most of those without health insurance (45.8 million) are of the working poor. Sustar sums it up succinctly: "The U.S. now ranks behind only Mexico and Russia in social inequality" (para. 5).

Education's role in the class war might be more subtle, but it is no less deliberate. Hursh (2001) argues that *" ... education in the U.S. has been increasingly transformed to meet the competitive needs of corporations within globalized markets ... reshaped*

*to support the now dominant neo-liberal economic policies promoted by government and corporations*" (para. 1). Education, being a key player in the reproduction of labor power, is now involved in the project of creating bipartisan consensus around standardization and high-stakes testing, primarily as solutions to the perceived "crisis" of the failure of public schools to create competent workers (Beckmann & Cooper, 2004; Mathison & Ross, 2004).

The "crisis" is part of a particular discourse surrounding schools, which Apple (1996) outlines as combining slogan-style talk about the future workforce, consumer choice and business needs on the one hand, and Christian family values/back-to-basics on the other. Both of these themes dominate the public discussion about education, leaving little room for alternative forms of analysis, or, more importantly, blockading people from a historical-materialist reading of schools.

The implementation of neoliberal worldviews via the creation of correct worker attitude will be the overall focus of this paper. Certainly an endless barrage of business writing extols the virtues of an educated workforce or mourns the lack thereof. But this is only a tiny part of the picture. Cultivating worker productivity involves massive amounts of behavioral and ideological management on the part of the ruling elite, knowing full well that "without workers, consumers and citizens who are well versed in and accepting of their roles in these processes, the entire capitalist system would grind to a halt" (Ollman, 2002, para. 13).

Whether promoting classroom management as a way to "team build" or steering students toward "self-regulation," these efforts all work together to ultimately shape attitude and dispositions toward a capitalist ethos, embodied in the modern corporation. One of the most popular texts used in undergraduate and graduate teacher education programs in the United States, *The First Days of School: How to be an Effective Teacher* by Harry and Rosemary Wong (2004) is in its 17th edition and ranks #873 in books on amazon.com, outselling other classroom management texts such as Jim Fay and David Funk's *Teaching with Love and Logic* (1995).

Harnish (2004) attributes the source of the book's success in the Wongs' articulation of three qualities the "effective" teacher possesses: they have good classroom management skills, they teach for mastery, and they have positive expectations for

student success (para. 2). This rationale, of course, is filled with a kind of corporate talk which resonates with the American public, for reasons we will explore below.

Harnish rightly points out that the Wongs use a well-crafted conservative Right tactic: using progressive-sounding language while essentially pushing a corporate-friendly doctrine "behind a fallacious veil of student-centered learning" (para. 3).

Harnish goes on to describe how the content of the *First Days of School* focuses primarily on teachers as agents of control versus their interactions with students. Teachers are to act and dress like professionals in the workplace to communicate that they mean business. The manner of teacher's attire is mirrored in Johansen and Steele's (1999) advice given to those participating in a job interview: "The real issue is to figure out the image the company wants to project and how to fit its defined image of tradition and professionalism" (p. 50).

An examination of the Wongs' language is essential to make the connection between corporate culture (via the use of downsized discourse) and classroom management. This will be done throughout the Worker Management section of the paper. In addition to outlining how schoolwork reflects corporate goals, this paper will also address the philosophies behind "school-to-work," No Child Left Behind, and the creation of desired worker attitude.

**Worker Management**

A major concern of schools is monitoring the conduct of its students. In the past, this was called "classroom discipline" but the term now has shifted to "classroom management." This shift in terminology is significant, because it indicates that students are undergoing a process similar to what happens in the workplace. Learning becomes something that happens only within the boundaries of classroom management rather than a process of democratic self-development and social/historical understanding. The classroom management discourse helps contribute to a lack of contextual awareness by focusing on individual conduct and achievement: obedience, self-control, high test scores, etc. (Hursh, 2001; Lipman, 2004; Jackson, 2004).

For the sake of description, terms such as "working class," "middle class," and "upper-middle class" will be used in this paper, despite the Marxist understanding that everyone other than the ruling elite resides within the "working class." There is tremendous variation within this large working class with some receiving more autonomy and higher wages/benefits than others- important implications for one's experiences in school. This division within the workforce is a continual barrier to solidarity. As opportunities for high-wage jobs with benefits diminish (such as in manufacturing), divisiveness and reliance on meritocratic ideology (personified in the use of standardized tests) only intensifies in the schools.

**Procedures vs. Rules**

Schmidt's (2000) probes the educated middle class worker's mindset by asking an important question: Could the skills professionals acquire that make them well-suited to the workplace also make them well-suited for demanding social change? He argues in *Disciplined Minds* that the two goals are incompatible, because the first seeks to support the very hierarchy that prevents the other: "What the student thought was a temporary concession to the system ... turns out to be the beginning of a forced, permanent adjustment to the system" (pp. 136-137). Eventually, the system ensures its survival by promoting students "with know-how rather than with know-why" (p. 175).

Kesson (2004) points out that management places more weight on correct procedures versus content mastery. An example of this is Salivio's (2004) description of literacy instruction that is more intent on "managing reading behaviors" than on teaching students to read through more in-depth analysis of important themes and issues (p. 68). It also has the effect of reducing the teacher's role to one of manager rather than intellectual, expecting them to be "learners of child behavior" (p. 73).

As capital intensifies, the divided workforce becomes a dominant form of social organization, along with the accompanying internalization of certain procedures. Parents who seek these higher-level careers for their children are fully aware of the necessity of learning the correct procedures. As Brosio (2003) points out, "If essentialist pedagogy favors their kids, because of the cultural capital they bring to school, then they are apt to support didactic practices and 'objective' exams that allow some to achieve at the honor grades level" (p. 7). This creates automatic divisions

between "our" classrooms and the "bad" classrooms. The middle class classroom and its procedures are therefore endorsed by capitalist logic.

For Wong and Wong (2004), "It is the procedures that set the class up for achievement to take place" (p. 169). Giving examples of making telephone calls and drivers' behaviors at traffic lights as procedures, the Wongs argue that procedures "demonstrate how people are to function in an acceptable and organized manner" (p. 170). Linking the "real life" context of procedures to the classroom (handing in papers, starting class, quieting a class down), teachers are then instructed to "Have the students repeat the procedure until it becomes a routine. The students should be able to perform the procedure automatically without teacher supervision" (p. 175). The Wongs also assert that procedures are neutral whereas classroom discipline involves rewards and punishments. Yet, great importance is placed on rehearsing and internalizing various procedures. The eventual achievement of students seems to rely upon it.

**Indirect Supervision**

A hallmark of today's classroom is an atmosphere of intense monitoring, where educator "interference is limited and surveillance is everywhere" (Salvio, 2004, p. 72). This mirrors national policy where declared promises of "smaller government" have actually only referred to the social safety net. In actuality, surveillance of the public has only intensified, as evidenced by the recent NSA domestic spying scandal. When it comes to education, Hursh (2001) points out that the State can manage from a distance, via the use of standards, testing, and accountability.

It is critical for the workforce to be able to internalize procedures and carry them out unsupervised. This requires that students learn to self-monitor their behaviors in class through the process of undergoing structured (high-stakes tests) and even less structured (hands-on group work) activities. Successful students come to see this process as maybe unpleasant at times, but ultimately scientific and objective, a view that could be carried over to a general acceptance of at-large surveillance as a normal part of citizenship (Brantlinger, n.d.; Giroux, 2004; Schmidt, 2000). Most importantly, this discourse of self-control and self-regulation is often couched in student-centered and even "humanistic" language (Salvio, 2004).

"Your very first priority when the class starts is to get the students to work" states Wong and Wong (2004), employing the rationality of the workplace:

> It is no different in the private sector. When your students go to work, as in a part time job, they are expected to begin working at the appointed hour. At the appointed hour, the part-time workers also know what to do. They do not stand around waiting for directions ... (p. 121).

It is notable that the Wongs use part-time work as an example of what awaits students in the future. A combination of detailed procedures including how assignments are posted ensures that the students learn to self-monitor —an important skill for temporary labor.

**Task Mastery**

Task mastery is directly related to self-regulation, because professional-level employers must be able to trust their employees to endorse a particular ideology without being constantly supervised. Discussing the role of doctors who often do not seek to understand the very material conditions that create medical crises, Schmidt (2000) explains that they "are oriented toward the establishment rather than toward the underrepresented majority" (p. 109). This ideological pathology extends to middle class workers who do not see themselves as promoting a set of political beliefs, but rather as people who are just following the correct procedures for their own particular jobs.

Promising that "Your students can outperform 98 percent of the regular students," the Wongs (2004) believe that mastery learning, where assignments are based on a set of objectives and students are regularly tested, is part of the high student achievement equation (p. 243). While stating that "The purpose of teaching is to help all people succeed, not to brand people as failures," the Wongs go on to say that "the effective teacher tests and corrects, tests and corrects, because the teacher wants all the students to achieve" (p. 242). Mastery is equated to testing, albeit criterion referenced tests.

**Rules vs. Procedures**

Kesson (2004) asserts that teachers are playing a central role in carrying out the training of future menial and part-time laborers, groups who are often subjected to overt and harsh rules and punishments in the workplace. This is different than the

experiences of the "student-centered" procedural classroom above, but in both cases, the focus isn't on learning other than what students can do to aid them in fitting into the global economy.   In neither case are students encouraged to critically examine the curriculum.

Though preferring the internalization of procedures versus punishment as part of effective classroom management, Wong and Wong (2004) do talk about the necessity of rules: "Students need to feel that someone is in control and responsible for their environment and not only sets limits but maintains them" (p. 151). Stressing individuality, teachers are told that "through discussion the students understand that their actions or choices result in consequences and that they will responsibly accept these consequences throughout life" (p. 153).  Instead of spending time formulating several rules, teachers are advised to talk with students about the need for rules, how following rules is tied to success, and specific examples of rule following (such as giving examples of being respectful).

**Direct Supervision**

In a recent interview about her upcoming book exposing the growing crisis of middle-class unemployment, Barbara Ehrenreich summed up one of the key distinctions among the strata of workers:  "In blue-collar work…you aren't required to be socialized, just to obey" (Neumann, 2005, para. 20).  Lipman (2004) points out that minority groups often bear the brunt of policies that promote direct supervision, starting with standardized testing.  The ideologies of supervision and punishment (the centerpiece of which are high-stakes exams which determine curriculum) are aimed at students who will eventually make up the bulk of the temporary and low-wage workforce (Lipman, 2002).

Kesson (2004) articulates how the climate of direct supervision impacts educators.  Because accountability is tied to test scores, teachers at lower-performing schools face even greater consequences for failure.  Ironically, this "tyrannical management paradigm…stifles their professional growth and thus undermines genuine and long-lasting improvement of their schools" (p. 102).  With a climate of surveillance impacting the curriculum, low-performing schools are also denied the arts, recess, and music- the very subjects that wealthier schools offer in abundance to attract affluent parents interested in enrichment opportunities for their children.

Wong and Wong (2004) discuss the importance of teacher appearance, linking casual attire to the de-professionalization of educators by stating "in the real world…our all-too-visible selves are under constant scrutiny" (p. 51). To send home the message that someone is always watching, the Wongs display a friendly handwritten letter by a fifth-grade teacher testifying to the power a set of sweat suit clad photos from a class holiday party has on one's self image: "I took a look at myself and I could not believe how I looked. I looked like I didn't care about myself…I now spend more time caring about who I am" (p. 55).

**Break Large Tasks into Small Ones**

As Brantlinger (n.d.) and Lipman (2002) note, low-performing classrooms are often dominated by testing, down to the curriculum. Because these tests are detrimental to low-income and minority populations, it can be assumed that preparations for these tests, which take the form of curriculum adjusted to include rote memorization and direct instruction, are deliberately designed to prepare these students for certain service-industry jobs (Kesson, 2004).

For writing objectives (which are the cornerstone to breaking assignments into small parts) Wong and Wong (2004) argue *against* using the following words: appreciate, be happy, beautify, celebrate, enjoy, like, love, and understand (p. 222). Bloom's Taxonomy is invoked as an important way to break tasks into smaller units, particularly for students who require additional assistance. For the Wongs, "there are many students (and adults) who want to be told what to do" (p. 225). For these individuals, they recommend writing specific questions or procedures for each class goal.

**School Reform Efforts as Business Talk- NCLB Logic**

No Child Left Behind is nothing new. As Beckmann & Cooper (2004) outline, since the Reagan administration teachers have encountered "…a plethora of centrally-prescribed directives designed to 'classify,' 'monitor,' 'inspect,' and 'judge' their activities" (para. 18). This "new managerialist discourse" (para. 62) has saturated all aspects of public education, establishing a form of rationale where bottom line thinking replaces critical reflection- all done in the name of accountability. This section will examine five key aspects of NCLB ideology, as informed by corporate

talk: the ability to appear neutral/realistic, a focus on testing/accountability, glorifying standardization, emphasizing efficiency/performance, and shaping an acceptance of discipline/repression/control.

**Neutrality/Reality**

Brosio (2000) describes the dominant, if not hegemonic, ideologies of U.S. schools—idealism and realism-- as stemming from "the historical quest for certainty" which has been translated into various systems of elite power (p. 61). This quest has meant that high stakes testing and standardized curriculum must appear neutral, or "as an immutable reality" (Lipman, 2004, para. 30). Like neoliberalism itself, the essentialist project risks suffering a crisis of legitimacy unless it can make testing, scripted instruction, and school-to-work curriculum appear to be a logical response to a 'naturally developing' economic situation.

The teacher required for this project must "know the essentialist curriculum well…have a certain kind of character and moral disposition," and ultimately view the school's role as one of "preserving and refining what already exists" (Brosio, 2000, p. 69). To this end, an ideology of control always lurks behind the essentialist project, with a strong focus on monitoring teacher conduct via testing and standards (Beckmann & Cooper, 2004; Hill, 2004; Hursch & Martina, 2004).

It is no surprise that the ruling elite have discovered the political power of science, including No Child Left Behind's use of 'scientific research' as a key example. Lipman (2004) connects the 'with us or against us' logic of the Bush administration to a containment-oriented, literalist insistence on the absolute "need" for standardized testing. The testament to the power of this logic is the lack of a collectively asked "why" in response to the claims of testing and efficiency experts throughout history, beginning with Frederick Taylor (Oncu & Kose, 2002).

The fact that most of these efforts end up promoting the very situations that conservatives lament is the height of irony. Basics-oriented, phonics-laden literacy programs result in students becoming even more detached from reading while zero-tolerance policies and graduation exams enhance nothing but drop-out rates (Brantlinger, n.d.; Leistyna, 1999). For the ideology to appear legitimate, however,

all policy makers have to do is generate a "well at least they tried to help" reaction from the public.

Audiences respond well to crisis talk and the possible salvation provided by a turn toward high-stakes testing. The solution to the educational crisis is never in making curriculum more engaging or exciting; in fact, according to the crisis talkers, schools have been entirely too *laid back* and not focused enough on marketable skills. One crisis-response example Brantlinger (n.d.) provides is the official rationale behind high school graduation exit exams as being necessary to both ensure basic literacy and to help limit access to the diploma (thus enhancing its value by introducing scarcity).

The neutral appearance of policies like No Child Left Behind also provides an important defense against the intrusion of social context as a point of analysis. This is done in various ways, such as promoting a focus on learners from a psychological perspective (i.e. using 'motivation,' 'efficacy,' etc.) to determine deficiencies, rather than examining the social institutions that enhance inequality (Giroux, 2003; Hursh & Martina, 2004; Jackson, 2003; Leistyna, 1999; Lipman, 2004; Mathison & Ross, 2004).

**Testing/Accountability**

As Ollman (2002) relates, "Education…has existed in all human societies, but exams have not" (para. 4). The accountability movement is therefore a recent phenomenon, paralleling the growth of corporate power and retreat from workers' rights. Accountability functions as an important part of business ideology which includes setting goals, using standards, creating national exams, publishing exam results, financially rewarding/punishing schools according to performance, and, if all else fails, restructuring schools (Brantlinger, n.d.; Cuban, 1992). At the heart of accountability is high-stakes testing.

The discourse of accountability via high-stakes testing also serves to rationalize, naturalize, and regulate education policy (Lipman, 2002; Salvio, 2004). While much of the crisis talk surrounding education stresses "public accountability" and an insistence that schools themselves can turn around the economy, schools are primarily accountable to *private* business interests, that don't necessarily include economic

turnaround via workers' rights as part of their agenda (Brantlinger, n.d.; Jackson, 2000; Mathison & Ross, 2004).

According to Schmidt (2000), tests place more emphasis on "unexamined production than on understanding" (p. 174).  By teaching students to work under pressure within a limited time frame and equating successful completion of a test with being "a good worker," accountability serves as an important socialization agent.  This works against the strengths of teacher-created assessments and curricula which are far better predictors of students' success than high-stakes exams (Gabbard, 2004; Hursh & Martina, 2004).

The effects of accountability are profound.  One memo in a classroom that Kozol (2005) observed described the method of classroom discussion as an "opportunity…to engage in accountable talk."  The term "producing a narrative procedure" was substituted for "telling a story" (p. 268).  Standardized test scores are used to determine whether students will be able to proceed to the next grade or graduate, even if the student has met school requirements.  Failing students often chose to drop out rather than face retention (Brantlinger, n.d.; Hursh, 2001; Hursh & Martina, 2004; Lipman, 2002).  Encouraged by NCLB, tests are now shaping the curriculum, via the use of teaching standards (listed prominently in lesson plans and teachers' editions of textbooks) that are organized by subject and grade level (Hill, 2004; Lipman, 2002).

Schmidt (2000) argues that those who favor gate keeping tests "often turn out to be the least critical of the social hierarchy and the dominant ideology…the least critical of existing power relationships and therefore the least progressive politically" (p. 178).

Who benefits from accountability and high-stakes testing?  Middle and upper class students, most of whom are white, typically experience positive results.  Test producers and publishers of study guides reap enormous profits (Brantlinger, n.d.).  Businesses also benefit by a segregated workforce, promoted by the use of high-stakes exams (Mathison & Ross, 2004; Schmidt, 2000).

This system communicates to students, teachers, and families that they had better get used to being measured, sorted, and classified by some hierarchy kept deliberately mystical and unapproachable in order to understand that while some workers deserve

additional rewards (dependent on their measurement results- at least in theory), others must move on or step aside. Worse yet, students and parents are fed a version of the same line used to justify increased surveillance and decreased civil rights: "if you have nothing to hide then what is the matter with standardized testing?" The (often) middle-class support for this sentiment is based on the assumption that *their* children will be exempt from the misuse of test scores!

**Standardization**

Jackson (2000) and Lipman (2002) describe how subject area standards are linked to business efforts to quantify and regulate the workforce, legitimizing inequality under the guise of objectivity. As Oncu and Kose (2002) describe, "the worker is no longer a subject for himself, but is converted to a subject stipulated by science" (para. 14). The alignment of state subject area standards to test questions further narrows what it means to engage in learning in the classroom (Giroux, 2003; Hursh, 2001). A similar concept comes forth in efforts to "justify" the presence of art and physical education by claiming these subjects aid in raising test scores!

Pedroni (2004) describes state standards as going beyond content to focus on dispositions and other pro-corporate behaviors, such as how to show (via facial expressions) that you are a good listener, etc. The standards serve to create a feeling that experts "know" what the appropriate behaviors are. Pedroni argues that the standards are a way of imposing pro-corporate, middle class values on certain targeted groups (blacks, Latinos, low-income whites, etc.). Parents, via a student handbook, are told that they have a "responsibility" to communicate that they, like the school district, have high academic expectations of their children. In this way, the parents are coerced to align themselves with the state's narrow definition of academic success (i.e. market-friendly attitudes and dispositions). Pedroni notes that none of these expectations are targeted toward more affluent or suburban parents, who are already assumed to have the "right stuff."

**Efficiency/Performance**

Beckmann and Cooper (2004) utilize the term "performativity" to describe the push for performance and efficiency in the classroom. The focus on performativity is part of a larger corporate effort to impose a "speed-up" on all publicly funded programs to

justify their continued existence via demonstrations of performance under lean budgets.  For example, the "failure" of FEMA to assist stranded New Orleans residents post-Katrina isn't unintentional- conservatives are all too happy to point to the inefficiency of FEMA to justify the necessity of its demise (and to replace it with private companies such as Halliburton and Bechtel) when the lack of funding has been bipartisan, systemic, and deliberate, going back several years.  Schools are no different.  Under NCLB, one can imagine the corporate sector rubbing their hands together at the inevitable mass "failure" of schools to meet AYP.

In addition to performativity, classrooms are subject to "intensification," which Kesson (2004) says occurs when "the pace and timing of labor processes are speeded up to accommodate new production demands" (p. 105).  NCLB's timetables imposes an assembly-line logic, complete with quotas in the form of test scores.  "Taken this way, rapid completion of a task means a higher increase of the value of capital" (Oncu & Kose, 2002, para. 15).  Oncu and Kose relate this concept to Taylor, who stated that the dollar should be the final measure in determining performance, which, considering NCLB's withholding of funds to "watch list" schools, takes on particular relevance.

**Discipline/Repression/Control**

 If "teachers are the most significant potential pitfall to the standards movement" (Mathison & Ross, 2004, p. 96), then it is no surprise that a function of corporate ideology as applied to schools is one of punishment and repression (Kozol, 2005).  The climax of such actions is, of course, the imminent failure of the public schools to meet AYP and the resulting corporate takeover as a consequence of noncompliance.  Decisions about public education will then be taken away from citizens and replaced by a shareholder style democracy (one dollar/one vote).  Teachers will become employees of private firms, thus enhancing their ability to be controlled via hiring and firing at will (Gabbard, 2004).  Giroux (2003) points out that this is already occurring at the university level, where the faculty governance of the past is little more than the "advisory" group of today.

The use of standards and high-stakes testing funnel educators into certain ways of thinking and teaching.  Hursch (2001) describes how districts in Florida and New York use test scores to reward and punish individual teachers and schools (para. 19).  Under the guise of "choice" teachers are really being pigeonholed into the use of

worksheets, memorization exercises, and drill and practice in order to make the best use of test preparation time.

**School to Work- Policy and Philosophy**

The neoliberal economic ethos has only intensified what was already a cozy relationship between the goals of schooling and corporate philosophy (Hill, 2004; Hursh, 2001; Hursh & Martina, 2004; Mathison & Ross, 2004). When university-based research is censored from public view because its findings conflict with energy company policies (as in the case of global climate research being edited from textbooks or from government websites), we can safely say we are entering an era where even higher education isn't immune from the influence of capital.

Cuban (1992) discusses how business executives and shareholders began organizing to publish educational policies via the formation of economic roundtables. Some recommendations were to include "the basic requirements for gaining productive employment" in K-12 curricula, emphasize "declining competitiveness in world markets," and communicate that "education isn't just a social concern, it's a major economic issue" (p. 157). Universities are also encouraged to join in by emphasizing the basics of math, English, science, social studies, and technology as the "antidote to restore schools to their rightful role in the production of highly skilled and technologically competent workers who would assure that the United States would restore its supremacy in the world market" (Jackson, 2004, p. 56).

Though conservative, the "downsized discourse" is not of a perennialist nature, as described by Brosio (2000). For the perennialist, the "great books" and liberal arts are the curriculum, and self-actualization via "the classics" is de rigueur. For the pro-business, corporatist curriculum, the great works and liberal arts is not essential knowledge and tend to be fringe enterprises, unless one is going to enter elite educational settings where perennialism reigns. Business talk replaces the metaphysical certainty of the perennialists with a metaphysical certainty of "the real world," i.e. the unchanging capitalist world order that must be internalized. "Within this closed world, the responsibility for success, or lack thereof, resides within the individual…a problem is individualized away from the social conditions within which the learning process is taking place (Leistyna, 1999, pp. 147-148).

School-to-work philosophy also embodies three commonsense assumptions from educational psychology: thinking and speaking are functions of individual minds; literacy is an individual mental skill involving the ability to read and write, and intelligence, knowledge, and aptitude are states of individual minds (Leistyna, 1999). The government, according to Jackson (2004) "is to look out for the interests of individuals and their individual pursuits" (p. 58). The educational process has to communicate to students that government will only intervene if it means strengthening the military, personal surveillance, or bolstering capitalism.

**Meritocracy and the Appeal of "Bootstrapism"**

The ascendancy of downsized discourse can be attributed to the persistence of meritocracy ensconced within the Horatio Alger myth of self-actualization. Schools, including more "progressive" ones, promote market populism through a variety of ways. For example, the field of "critical management studies" seeks to distance itself from Enron-style capitalism by claiming that greed can be "tempered" by the application of postmodern-leftist reforms a la Jeffrey Sachs. This refusal to reject capitalism paints critical management studies into a corner. Indeed, the prospect of a society entirely determined by "market discipline" isn't so enticing after all for the majority of the population, who refuses to accept it 100% for themselves but do not hesitate to impose it on others.

Mojab and Gorman's (2003) critique of the learning organizational model provides an important lesson in the appeal of meritocracy. Linking the trend in management studies of moving towards a more "participatory" style of leadership to neoliberal goals, they argue that in practice, "this illusion of worker autonomy appeals to elite, upwardly mobile professionals (p. 232). Most importantly, the model starts with the assumption that the organization should own the fruits of the workers' labor, albeit appearing to do this more "humanely."

Kesson (2004) reminds us that when one's labor is owned by others, alienation is inescapable. A function of bootstrapism ideology is to counter Marx's understanding of work. This is done via a naturalization of capitalism through a) consensus building, b) communicating that there is no alternative, c) promoting a failure/success narrative, and d) glorifying the power of the individual to solve problems. All four strategies promote allegiance to the hegemony of meritocracy.

***Consensus.*** A recent *New York Times* survey found that 80% of Americans believe that the possibility of the Horatio Alger myth still exists (Neumann, 2005, para. 5). In a climate of declining government investment in social programs, exemplified in recent efforts to privatize social security and eliminate pensions, the failure of FEMA to adequately provide for Katrina survivors, and the closing of urban schools to make way for gentrification, for this myth to persist is quite remarkable- if not justification for the concept of "false consciousness" (or, at the very least, Stockholm Syndrome).

By simply pointing to the market, politicians can take on an "aw shucks" persona, as if inequality is "out of our hands." All the while, the ruling elite continue to pull the strings to actively create a scenario where all the conditions work in their favor (while at the same time discouraging regular folk from changing things). The impartial market is a great cover for the real "wheeling and dealing."

Despite the desire of the ruling elite to reduce public sector spending, the awareness exists that education is necessary for the continuation of global capitalism (Hursh & Martina, 2004). These governments "must be careful to retain the legitimacy of the economic system and policies…replace constraints with incentives…embed their educational policies within a discourse of fairness and objectivity" (p. 105). The use of "objective" test scores helps legitimize the belief in meritocracy, that poor kids can succeed "if only they learn to read and do their sums" (Apple, 1996, p. 88).

While force is definitely an option, most governments prefer to build consensus by alternative means (Beckmann & Cooper, 2004; Brantlinger, n.d.; Hill, 2004). Governments must also naturalize capitalist relations while at the same time "demonize resistant/anti-capitalist hegemonic oppositional ideologies, actions, and activists" (Hill, 2004, p. 183). Democratic notions of education, where students and teachers interrogate existing practices, cannot be allowed to exist.

Another means of building consensus involves the presentation of social problems such as discrimination, "as if it were the product of ignorance or personal acts of mean-spiritedness, rather than the result of socially sanctioned practices and institutions" (Leistyna, 1999, p.15). The handling of the Abu Ghraib scandal where lower-ranking soldiers were tried and even lampooned by the media (leaving the higher ranking military officials untouched) illustrates the "bad apple" theory of social

problems, where intent seems to be all that matters, not the social structures which create such results.

***"No Alternative."*** Lipman (2003) describes "the discourse of inevitability" which results in "the denial of human agency and paralysis of social action" regarding neoliberal policies (p. 96). In schools, this discourse is part of a larger effort to present the "war on terrorism," domestic spying programs, bloated military budgets, and the continued occupation of Iraq as rational policies (Lipman, 2004). Because the public is presented with multiple privatization schemes as the only solutions to societal problems, the discourse of inevitability is a convenient way for corporations to both deny intentionality and avoid accountability.

Another aspect of "no alternative" is the inability to view human beings as having value outside of usefulness to capital (Oncu & Kose, 2002). This leads to the erosion of social solidarity networks--both inside and outside of the classroom--that seek to resist conceptions of society as consisting only of human capital relations (Beckmann & Cooper, 2004; Giroux, 2003; Hursh, 2001). The faux democratic appearance of market populism aids in building consensus.

***Failure/Success Narrative.*** Meritocracy is predicated on the notion that the playing field is even, and that failure or success is entirely the result of individual action. Inequality is seen as a good thing and a sign of "progress." The emphasis on diligence sends the message that some people are naturally lazy and "pull the rest of us down" (Brantlinger, n.d.; Goodman & Saltman, 2002). Gabbard (2004) describes the process of people accepting a 'myth of the metals' which then transforms education into an "ingenious lottery, designed to ensure that the inferior ones will blame their lot on bad luck and not the rulers" (p. 33).

The insistence on viewing education through a meritocratic lens has depended on the refusal of people to consider social context as a factor influencing failure and success (Brantlinger, n.d.; Brosio, 2003). This creates a situation "making individuals accountable for their own quality of life, while denying any kind of possible public action in defense of a wider public good" (Goodman & Saltman, 2002, p. 146). The American obsession with self-help books and workshops saturated with upbeat thinking pushes the ideology of individualsm where even those who discover they have cancer are told to "think positively" (Neumann, 2005).

It's no surprise that the dominant class enjoys promoting the failure/success narrative of meritocracy via testing. The results of high-stakes tests interpreted on a normal curve "normalizes" the logic that for some to succeed others automatically must fail. If too many people succeed, then the task isn't worth doing. Ollman (2002) argues that the tendency of such tests to reward the same group of people (i.e. white, middle and upper class) only enhances inequality. Those who benefit from tests tend to be adamant in their belief that "high achievers are entitled to rewards and failing students deserve negative school and life outcomes" (Brantlinger, n.d., para. 3.2). This has profound implications for continued national support of public education, particularly for low-income and urban areas who receive the brunt of market discipline.

***Individualism.*** Oncu and Kose (2002) discuss how capitalism determines virtually every aspect of a person's life via the process of commodification. Yet, ironically, people are not allowed to consider social context in assessing their life chances! In many ways, the meritocratic insistence on individualism and force of will is impossible, because under capitalism, "the worker can exist only in so far as they exist for capital…the sovereign Subject, in turn, is indifferent to all human attributes of human beings to the extent that these remain outside the domain of use and utility" (para. 8). The logic of consumerism persists in upholding free will so much so that "the very notion of power and politics is all but wiped out" (Goodman & Saltman, 2002, p. 155).

The discourse of individualism promotes neoliberal and neoconservative interests by casting the state in the role of an enemy that seeks to interfere with individual will, or what conservatives prefer to present as a choice between "liberty or equality." Inequality becomes a function of personal deficit rather than something society is structured around. This works to make inequality a legitimate byproduct of society (Hursh & Martina, 2004). Hill (2004) describes how school "choice" and "competition" are promoted as 'free' but remain "confined to those with the economic and cultural capital to be chosen" (p. 183). "In effect," Pedroni (2004) argues, parents are then "empowered to exclude themselves, to participate in their own exclusion" (p. 139), which, of course, makes little sense.

Ehrenreich (2005) in her recent book *Bait and Switch*, reveals how, going undercover as a white-collar job seeker, she came face to face with a long-standing American

idea: "that circumstances count for nothing compared to the power of the individual's will" (p. 81). Whether coming from career coaches, fundamentalist Christian job support networks, or skills-building "boot camps," the prevailing message she encountered over and over again was a metaphysical one: "It's not the world that needs changing…it's you. No need then, to band together to work for a saner economy or a more human-friendly corporate environment, or to band together at all" (p. 85). Schmidt's (2000) analysis of working professionals reveals a similar analysis. Because most workers *do* sense that "the gig is up," they bet their last chips on the system of capital rather than chose the route of solidarity, the ultimate Faustian bargain.

Leistyna (1999) presents several examples of debunking the individualistic myths of assimilation and equal opportunity, another aspect of meritocracy. African Americans, who have been in the country longer than many white groups, still face discrimination. Even if African Americans do attempt to assimilate, the racism remains. The United States has a consistent history of legal limitations on who is or isn't a citizen coupled with a citizenry ignorant of such history. In other words, it wasn't a matter of "hate" or "evil," it was laws that kept people out.

### *Bootstrappin'- A Curriculum Example*

Robertson (2003) articulates how "curriculum writing by and for the market" finds its way into schools, typically linked to state and subject-area standards. Aspects of market philosophy, which Robertson calls "market populism," override notions of solidarity among teachers, students, and the public: "Thus it is not just our money that the market craves; it is our recognition of its authority, its superiority to democracy, and its domination over everything that matters" (p.731).

O'Hara and O'Hara (1998) provide just such an example of market philosophy curriculum in their description of a project called "Corporation Learning (CL)." For the O'Hara's, CL is a way to transform virtually any subject area classroom into the environment of "the typical white collar, knowledge worker today" and to "link the process to the Workplace Readiness Standards recently developed in New Jersey and other states" (p. 9).

Motivated to action by nagging perceptions of an inadequate school system and a desire to "start all over from ground zero and revamp," the O'Hara's, not surprisingly, conclude that Adam Smith's model of the pin factory "no longer yields the quality of work needed for a business to survive" (p. 10). Students have to now become "active participants," who will "engage in teamwork and become responsible members of the learning center" (p. 10). The assertion that "corporation learning views every student as a resource, not as a product" is promoted as somehow being an *improvement* over the rigid and unthinking classroom of the past (p. 11).

In CL, "students become the employees, or associates of the firm; the teacher is the CEO." In order to secure a place on one of eight potential "teams," students are involved the first two weeks of class with writing a resume and cover letter listing "their unique qualifications for the team." They are informed that "Associate performance reviews," i.e. grades, take place throughout the semester. Grades are determined by how well students do on tests (which may be retaken for better grades and sometimes taken as a team), as well as other "assessments." "The remaining 20% is determined by the student's performance on the team and all other corporate activities" (p. 11).

To welcome associates to the CL classroom, the CEO "stands outside the classroom on the first day of class and greets each student with a robust hello and handshake." Once seated and ready to roll, the CEO "begins an activity that will introduce the students to the theme of change," which involves "moving watches from one wrist to the other and leaving it until the next class" or "arranging students alphabetically, but by first name, reinforcing the change theme" (p. 13). Students and teacher are supposed to talk (interface?) about common reactions to change: "helping them realize that change may be uncomfortable and disturbing, but that it is often necessary" (p. 14).

Once resumes are reviewed and teams established, "the members and the CEO must work closely together to establish goals and expectations…clearly defined…and communicated to all team members" (p. 11). Schedules are set up for presenting assessments for the associate performance reviews (p. 12). The culmination of CL are the "annual reports" where student-developed "corporate newsletters are mailed to more than fifty interested business people and educators" (p. 13).

The authors maintain that in the CL classroom, students "cease to exist; they become associates in the corporation" (p. 13). In many ways, the teacher also ceases to exist, acting "as a CEO, providing coaching and guidance as necessary, and only when requested to do so" (p. 11). "Relinquishing control" is part of the task of the teacher, where "students learn early" to "bring the teacher solutions, not problems" (p. 12).

**Worker Attitude**

Jackson (2000) discusses how at once time attitude and skills development was seen as a short-term solution to the unemployment of the 1970s. Now, however, it has become a central part of neoliberal ideology and macroeconomics, which seeks to create the image of consensus on a highly contested terrain of worker/employer relations. Indeed, the idea of pulling together as a team is an attractive alternative to blatant top-down management styles. However, "an organization worker's friendships become a vehicle for the organization to increase its profits…in similar fashion to the way the worker's labor is appropriated by the organization" (Mojab & Gorman, 2003, p. 236).

The development of worker attitude involves the ever-present boundaries of capital, where people are given the illusion of choice between several "innovative" management styles. In this section we will examine the construction of worker attitude via the team player, and the creation of the "lifelong learner."

*The Team Player*

According to Froiland (1993), three-fourths of U.S. companies currently have teams. 76% of organizations actively refer to their worker groups as teams. Of those organizations that have teams, 38% classify these teams as "self-managed," "self-directed," or "semi-autonomous" (p. 60). The most common management task performed by self-directed teams (72%) is creating work schedules. Training has become the second most common function, followed by conducting performance appraisals (p. 61).

Clearly corporations are sending the message that future workers will need to be team players, described by Ehrenreich as "someone cheerful, upbeat, and very social" (Neumann, 2005, para. 21). Concerns about future workers' attitudes (in the form of ability to take directions and customer service skills) and productivity are also highly

racialized (Lipman, 2003). Regulation and control are two hoped-for outcomes of the emphasis on being a team player since the team itself provides discipline and surveillance.

In the corporate-written *Exploring Inclusion Training Manual* (2003), the text emphasizes the goal of using teamwork to uphold performance and productivity: "Consciously examine the impact of how people treat you and others to prevent it from debilitating performance" (p. 24). "You can substantially influence the quality of your position through the strength of your disposition" the text asserts. Every now and then team members have to ask themselves, "How can I use this assignment to improve our processes and build my skills?" Readers are told to "Influence your position: partner with your manager to ensure your assignments are providing you the opportunity to build your skills and overall contribution to the team" (p. 17).

As Jackson (2000) explains, "During the 1990s, it became commonplace in international management theory to argue that the 'culture' of the workplace is a resource to be managed just like other aspects of production" (p. 204). Postmodernists have cast this "new" workplace as an open environment where employees are "free" to be self-managing and to create cultural meanings. However, Jackson points out that the learning organization model overlooks the fundamental conflict of interest between boss and employee. The team player is nothing more than a revamped proletariat, all "decision-sharing" with the boss aside.

For the team to dissent via "independent political activism" on the part of the workers would be unspeakable, indicating a "crisis" of leadership (Gabbard, 2004, p. 41). To prevent this, Schmidt (2000) notes that certain professional-level jobs automatically exert "ideological discipline" where workers follow a path of subordination disguised as open choice or shared decision-making (p. 21). The employer has to rely on the employee to be able to work unsupervised yet still carry out the goals of the organization. To do this, the team is used as a way to shape behavior. Even if an infraction isn't illegal to the letter of the law, it could be viewed as an "attitude crime." Schmidt provides an example of how talking back to a police officer isn't illegal, but it can result in a ticket versus a warning, "because the spirit of the law says 'respect authority'" (p. 33). In the service industry, not having a perpetually upbeat

persona would be seen as an "attitude crime," especially if the "perpetrator" happened to be African American or Latino/a.

 All democratic language aside, the cultivation of team players has one ultimate aim: to ensure an alliance with the employer's interests.  As hooks (2003) notes, the use of multicultural language in the workplace is only allowed if it furthers capitalism and tacitly acknowledges that Western culture remains the standard by which others are measured.  The enhancement of worker productivity drives the quest to build alliances with the boss via teamwork (Hursh & Martina, 2004; Jackson, 2000).

Mojab and Gorman (2003) explain that the focus on corporate team values interferes with the development of class consciousness.  Feller (2003), in his defense of the team player, attempts to cast self-management and self-directed learning as paths to liberation, when, in actuality, they are tradeoffs that further one's allegiance to the boss.  Neumann's (2005) interview with Ehrenreich found her appalled that during her research of the middle class unemployed, she was unable to locate a single place for these workers "to come together that wasn't an evangelical recruiting session or a money scam" (para. 32).

### The Lifelong Learner

An artifact of the "flexible" economy, the lifelong learner embodies "the appearance of opportunity" necessary to legitimate capital (Mojab & Gorman, 2003, p. 234).  Mojab and Gorman discuss the fact that the lack of skills or credentials on the part of the workforce isn't the cause of underemployment- it's the capitalist system itself.  In attempts to make the system legitimate, the field of adult education has advanced an "enterprise education" rationale.  In this view, the job hunter/learner is a consumer with an array of choices:  "As free agents, these learners compete for educational units that seem to have the highest exchange value" (p. 234).

The term "skills shortages" seems to refer more to employers' challenges in finding eager people to work for low pay and zero benefits than an actual lack of people willing to work in a particular career field.  The rhetoric of "lifelong learner" shifts the problem away from the accumulation of wealth by capitalists onto the worker, who is charged with continual training and re-training to keep up with the latest skills

shortage. To make matters worse, many employers no longer provide the funds or even time off for the very "updating" of skills that they require.

The fear generated by the all too real specter of unemployment or underemployment propels the lifelong learner. This has important implications for shaping curriculum as students become reluctant to "waste time" on courses that do not translate into immediate monetary gain. Much like preparing for a test, "there is always something more to do, students often feel guilty for reading materials or engaging in activities unrelated to the exam" (Ollman, 2002, para. 24-25).

Schmidt (2000) discusses how the higher education system handles graduate students who don't experience career success. The system incorporates an automatic "cooling out" strategy, where "those who have been disappointed do not become opponents of the hierarchical system itself and enemies of its power elite" (p. 196). Failures, therefore, are "carefully produced" by upholding the objectivity of gate-keeping qualifying and exit exams. The laid-off worker also enters a "cooling out" by displacing blame and continually "upgrading" their skills in the hopes that it will lead to a better job (Ehrenreich, 2005; Neumann, 2005). One has to wonder about the cooling out that laid-off factory workers experienced in the 1980s when they were told to view their situation as an "opportunity" to retrain for fields like computer technology. Now that computer jobs are being outsourced, what will the next cooling out strategy be? Learning to build customer relations by practicing phrases such as, "would you like fries with that?"

Feller's (2003) defense of the lifelong learner doesn't mince words when he suggests that students not expect job security: "Increasingly, the new workplace is more dynamic, entrepreneurial, and less patient with workers unable to add value quickly" (p. 100). Amazingly, Feller goes on to recommend that student career plans "need to include an apprenticeship in democracy" (p. 104). He then ties democracy to "a strong foundation of developmental assets and competencies needed to be self-reliant career managers," thus removing any potential for democracy to be more than service-to-capital (p. 104).

**Conclusion**

There remains the potential for a resistance to downsized discourse. We have an unprecedented number of low-income workers who are feeling the combined hit of decaying schools and lack of access to basic services such as health care. The recent immigrant rights demonstrations in March and May of 2006 that numbered in the millions illustrated the potential of a renaissance in labor, including non-immigrant allies who participated in the marches. Escalating fuel prices are affecting everyone and causing an anger not previously seen toward overpaid oil CEOs. The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina put a halt (at least briefly) to bootstrapism as biographical narrative. Even the middle class is now more anxious than ever regarding their slipping status. The key is to direct this anxiety into positive rather than the usual directions of fascism.

When academics write off the ability of the public to grasp socialist alternatives and refuse to communicate beyond what feels safe, they shouldn't be surprised when people gravitate toward the only groups willing to speak to their needs, as Giroux (2006) articulates:

> Locked in a privatizing language that only recognizes the social when it fortifies
> the power of the military, police, and others who equate politics with control,
> the public is left on its own individual fears, insecurities, and resources in order
> to address the myriad problems that now shape everyday life (p. x).

Challenging corporate discourse in all forms is a major task facing educators. Because such language has become common sense and automatically linked with democracy, it often sounds startling when it is called to task. Interrogating classroom management discourse is essential because while many of its strategies do indeed work and may be appropriate to use in various situations, to do so without critical examination is to put the rubber stamp of approval on all of corporate talk.

Ultimately, of course, it becomes impossible to utilize classroom management techniques and not expect them to be in the service of capital in some way, shape, or form. Only when capitalism ceases to exist will the trend of downsized discourse be abated.

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**Author's Details**

Faith Agostinone-Wilson teaches at the College of Education, Aurora University Lake Geneva Campus in Wisconsin.

**Correspondence**

College of Education

Aurora University

Lake Geneva Campus

350 Constance Boulevard

Williams Bay

WI 53191-8567


fwilson@aurora.edu