

# **Work-Ready Testing: Education and Employability in Neoliberal Times**

**Richard Lakes**

*Georgia State University, Atlanta USA*

**Abstract**

*Work-ready is used to measure employability levels among the working classes. This is the neoliberal era of human capital accounting, and global business pins its profits and losses on worker knowledge and job skills. Employers do not believe that school-based curriculums are capable of properly preparing future workers; and the paper diploma is viewed by most employers as meaningless when gauging human capital potential for waged labor. Foundational workplace literacy skills are considered essential for success in acquiring a first job in shrinking labor markets. Public policymakers promote work-ready testing as a tool to weed-out future workers who fail to engender positive work habits and dispositions as well. Testing vendors are contracted for the purpose of certifying employability levels of career-bound students. Driving this reform movement are the domesticating narratives of strategic business competitiveness. Yet the discourse of employability testing is tied to the allocation of jobs in scarce times, and further indicates the failure of global capitalism to provide quality work for all.*

## Introduction

Neoliberals have turned their attention to work-ready testing in an attempt to sort future labor. Academic diplomas or grades mean little to employers when making hiring decisions, instead relying upon school-based formal assessments to evaluate future workers on both basic literacy skills and work habits. This technocratic approach sits well with policy reformers intent on implementing tests for employability. The public schools have moved away from democratic visions of what it might mean to be an educated person or how a citizen thinks and acts as a member of a community. Elements of critical literacy are absent in but a few progressive classrooms (Ross and Queen 2010). One would expect to find those teachers engaging in problem-posing exercises around real-life considerations of “unequal power relations between workers and corporations, the substance and conditions of various collective bargaining agreements, social and labour market conditions, and the labour market treatment of underprivileged workers” (Hyslop-Margison and Sears 2006, 139). Apple (2006) and Hursh (2007), among others, claimed the ultimate goal of neoliberalism is to convert educational systems into markets, and as much as possible privatize educational services. This development is well underway in the form of publicly-supported vouchers for private school tuition, high-stakes standardized testing, public and private charters, scripted curricula, the deskilling of teachers, alternative teacher training, outsourcing of tutoring, the elimination of teachers unions, and in general the underfunding of public education (Hill and Kumar 2008).

Saltman (2007) offered an important contribution to the analysis of neoliberal imperatives with his study of schooling in New Orleans and Chicago, and the educational plans for post-war Iraq. For example, privatization schemes in New Orleans have resulted in termination of many unionized teaching and non-teaching personnel and support staff. After the Hurricane Katrina flood waters receded, the state of Louisiana seized the city’s public schools and fired all district employees, then rehired a smaller corps of teachers and staff, and reopened some public schools and a limited number of charters. With an unspoken desire not to welcome those flooded-out back into the city, the recovery plan was “dictated by the urban cleansing dreams of an economic and racial elite,” Saltman (2007) wrote; who noted “now that the storm has done the clear-cutting, the dream of the field of economic competition can be built” (60). Instead of improving the city’s schools, however, a neoliberal reality of post-disaster capitalism set-in, ushering forth a

business-inspired voucher plan to disperse poor black residents from the city into the Gulf Coast region. These practices are part and parcel of a calculated land-grab by realtors who eyed the potential profits to be amassed in urban renewal and gentrification of so-called “blighted” property.

Transnational corporations already are advantaged by the multibillion-dollar worldwide markets in schooling, as seen in the testing and textbook publishing industries, among instructional technology vendors, and in the food preparation and cleaning services, to name a few. Spring (1993) noted that the testing industry is driven by the profit motive, in the hands of a few major firms, and always on the watch for new ways to increase their markets. Houghton Mifflin foresaw a market potential of \$1.6 billion in delivering their tests electronically, and for \$16 million acquired Computer Adaptive Technologies of Evanston, Illinois (Sacks 1999). “There are standardized tests for wine tasters, baseball umpires, plumbers, ballroom dancing instructors, Bible scholars, and art collectors,” wrote Sacks (1999) in a book about the national obsession with the culture of testing. Yet standing behind the illusion “held by most employers that such exams can sort the capable from the incapable” (170) is the testing industry that sells the mythology one can measure a person’s job readiness or work-related performance abilities. Technological advancements in desktop computing include paperless, Internet-available exams—the latest growth area in the lucrative testing industry. There are billions of dollars in revenue to be accumulated from selling and administering educational tests, and these firms are positioned to work in concert with governments and educational reformers. At committee hearings on federal policy, in 2009, the CEO from the Pearson Assessment and Information group offered that his global firm could deliver newer online evaluation technologies to capture annual data needed to measure high school students’ college and career readiness using benchmarking tests (Kubach 2009). This is the case of elite stakeholders influencing public policy and governance. “Businesses and corporations not only collaborate intimately with state actors,” Harvey (2007) clarified, “but even acquire a strong role in writing legislation, determining public policies, and setting regulatory frameworks (which are mainly advantageous to themselves)” (76-77).

With the fear and uncertainty of continuous employment in times of job scarcity, neoliberals essentially police the working classes through a variety of disciplinary techniques. Quality working life under neoliberalism has become more conditional, temporary and uncertain, with valued good-paying jobs reserved only for those who have managed their biographies appropriately. What has resulted in post-Keynesian times is a shift from the systemic notion of full employment into the neoliberal model of contingent or casual work, meaning the focus is upon individuals to self-manage their lives for futures of mobile and uneven employment. According to Garsten and Jacobsson (2004) the term unemployment has taken on a new understanding: formerly “what came to be seen as a social risk and a collective responsibility” has morphed into “‘risk management’ now increasingly something expected from the individual” (8). As for the term employability, they continue, it “now denotes the capacity of individuals to adapt to the demands of employment. This requires skills enhancement, continuous learning and also, according to one discourse, showing the ‘right’ attitudes (initiative, flexibility, availability)” (8). Neoliberal governments wean citizens away from welfare provisions altogether by re-narrating unemployment or unemployability as widespread dependency on the state due to a weak and defective character. Under new times “the economic fates of citizens within a national territory are uncoupled from one another, and are now understood and governed as a function of their own particular levels of enterprise, skill, inventiveness and flexibility” (Miller and Rose 2008, 96).

The next section will describe the work-ready tests offered to working-class youth in secondary schools and postsecondary community and technical colleges, and to disadvantaged or unemployed youth or adults in the public sector employment and training system. A succeeding section will explain the national work-ready certificate.

### **The Test**

An employability assessment system has been implemented in the states, using a national evaluation instrument named WorkKeys®, a product of American College Testing, Inc. (ACT). ACT delivers workforce assessments worldwide, one of the major testing firms in this lucrative market. Founded in 1959, the company created a uniform entrance exam for students planning to attend college nationwide, the central product of the company until they diversified into

workforce development three decades later. Their global division was created in 2005, with field offices in Australia, China, Korea, Singapore, and Spain. As a private not-for-profit enterprise with 1,500 employees ACT reinvests revenues back into the corporation through its executive and senior management pay scales and 12-member board compensation—claimed to exceed the CEO and director salaries in most other non-profit organizations (Rood 2007). ACT is headquartered in the state of Iowa, and not required to pay federal income taxes due to its designation as an educational institution.

Since the late 1980s WorkKeys has been used to measure levels of workplace literacies and work habits (WorkKeys 2009). This work-ready test provides employers and job seekers a common language on core employability skills (Bolin 2008). The test is used to designate career readiness and signifies to individuals and employers a level of basic literacy and work-ethic (soft) skills, while noting deficiencies—termed skill gaps—that should be corrected before entering certain types of jobs or labor markets. The test also can be used in conjunction with on-site job profiling of firms to more closely match future and incumbent workers with industry needs, and for public sector employment and training programs to assist with client career exploration and job search. Seventeen state workforce development agencies have adopted the test and credential, titled the National Career Readiness Certificate (ACT 2010a). Unlike industry certifications or occupational licenses required when practicing one's profession or trade, work-ready tests are not yet mandatory but highly encouraged for career-bound students. The test-taker receives copies of their scores, a certificate, and a laminated wallet-size card. These work-ready testing programs sometimes are centrally administered through state agencies with the assessments and scoring conducted at the schools and community colleges. The tests are offered in business settings too.

The standardized tests are based upon levels of mastery in the three foundational areas of applied math, reading for information, and locating information, cognitive skills considered by businesses as essential for a well-qualified workforce. (WorkKeys also offers skill tests in the areas of teamwork, listening, writing, business writing, applied technology, and workplace observation.) Each test battery, timed and proctored, is about fifty-five minutes long, available in paper and pencil or computerized versions, and consists of over thirty multiple-choice

questions per exam covering the reading of textual materials such as memos and letters, or bulletins and policies; the calculating of mathematical formulas and multiple steps in conversions over work-related problems; and the locating of information on graphical images and figures, tables and charts, or floor plans and diagrams. ACT charges \$17.00 per exam, but costs are subsidized by the states for clients in employment and training programs. The three tests are scaled for levels of difficulty. For example, a basic test question in level-3 over “locating information” might contain an elementary workplace graphic such as interpreting an air-pressure gauge (WorkKeys 2010a). The test-taker would be expected to understand the gradations on the face of the instrument and locate one piece of information, identifying where the needle was pointing. A more challenging question in the level-4 range might contain a graphic of a laundry ticket, and the test-taker would be expected to summarize the information and answer exactly how the customer wanted their shirt cleaned—starched, dry-cleaned, folded, on a hanger (WorkKeys 2010a). An advanced question in the level-5 range in the same category might use a complex graph with a less common format, such as a crosswind scale for determining safe aeronautical takeoffs and landings (WorkKeys 2010a). The examinee must interpret at least three scales of information. And at the highest level (level-6) test-takers are asked for comprehensive answers derived from an array of multiple and complex graphics (WorkKeys 2010a). These assessments are touted as helping individuals recognize their employability, so that one can most effectively identify skills gaps in foundational areas. KeyTrain®, a recent ACT acquisition, provides online self-paced modules that can be used as pre- or post-assessment tutorials when linked to the work-ready tests. They offer an entire packaged curriculum for career exploration as well.

The WorkKeys fit, talent, and performance assessments are added employability tools that measure attitudes and workplace behaviors (ACT 2008). These three soft skills assessments are administered in schools, to assist employers with hiring, retention, and promotional decisions on a variety of personality characteristics, such as hard work, likeability, industriousness, cooperativeness, and discipline. The talent assessment, for instance, consists of 165 self-report items that require about thirty minutes to complete, and measures twelve personality characteristics: *carefulness*—the tendency to think and plan carefully before acting or speaking; *discipline*—the tendency to be responsible and follow-through with tasks; *order*—the tendency

to be neat and orderly; *stability*—the tendency to maintain composure; *optimism*—the tendency to have a positive outlook; *cooperation*—the tendency to be likeable and cordial in interpersonal relationships; *goodwill*—the tendency to be forgiving; *sociability*—the tendency to enjoy being in other people’s company; *influence*—the tendency to emerge as a group leader; *striving*—the tendency to work hard and achieve goals; *creativity*—the tendency to think outside the box; and *savvy*—the tendency to read other people’s motives. Test-takers are asked to rate their behaviors or feelings on a six-point Likert-style scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” by reviewing statements such as “I like coming up with imaginative solutions”; “It is hard for me to read social cues”; “I am not very punctual”; “I like to take initiative”; and “I am skeptical of other people’s motives” among others. These assessment measure general work attitudes and risk reduction, while attempting to identify candidates who might exhibit counterproductive work behaviors such as absenteeism, theft, violation of work rules, and workplace hostility. Employers would rather use psychological or personality tests for employee selection over traditional paper credentials signifying completion of a diploma-bearing course of study.

### **The Certificate**

ACT WorkKeys test results are bundled into a work-ready certificate and used to indicate suitability for jobs already profiled in a nationwide occupational database (WorkKeys 2010b). First introduced in the USA in 2006, the National Career Readiness Certificate is used in 37 states for assessing individual work-ready skill levels, producing over 691,000 registered certificates (ACT 2010b). (WorkKeys tests are administered worldwide, but only registered certificates authorize employers to verify the authenticity of the document and view one’s skill levels.) Work-ready certificates are awarded based on the lowest level earned in any of the three core area assessments: applied math, reading for information, and locating information. The certificate is color-coded demonstrating baseline skills for a range of occupations. Bronze indicates a minimum score of level-3 in all three core areas and signifies to employers they are ready for 35 percent of jobs in the ACT database of about 17,000 occupational profiles; Silver indicates a minimum score of level-4 in all three core areas and signifies to employers they are ready for 65 percent of jobs in the database; Gold indicates a minimum score of level-5 in all three core areas and signifies to employers they are ready for 95 percent of jobs; and Platinum indicates a minimum score of level-6 in all three core areas and signifies to employers they are



ready for 99 percent of all jobs in the database. The database consists of occupation profiles; information derived from analysis of several thousand jobs computed using the WorkKeys skill system (WorkKeys 2010b). Individuals who successfully pass these three batteries of tests are issued a portable work certificate that indicates levels of proficiency in reasoning, reading and basic math. The certificates tell employers what to expect in terms of on-the-job proficiencies and ability and willingness to perform new jobs—making transparent a uniform system for recognizing the skills and qualifications held by potential applicants. Additionally, test specialists might be asked by employers to conduct on-site job profiles.

The work-ready certificate is widely endorsed by state governors and workforce development agencies (Bolin 2008). The credential also has been used in at least one case for systematically identifying the human capital potential in communities or regions of a state (Georgia WorkReady 2009). In Georgia a community work-ready designation is awarded to counties capable of demonstrating they meet certain standards over a period of three years, including rates of career-ready workers and improvements in numbers of high school graduates. The work-ready certificate is counted among the metrics used to assess the percentage of residents in a talent pool of current and available workers. The statewide designation helps chambers of commerce showcase best practices that ensure a skilled labor force is employable for new manufacturing processes and technologies. Public policymakers believe the work-ready testing program will stimulate job creation. Transnational firms are attracted to states with strong workforce and economic development agencies that deliver upon the promises of a ready-made supply of skilled workers, particularly if they are custom trained in the manufacturing and technical processes unique to a business cluster. Global firms utilize a “multi-scalar strategy” of regionalization and knowledge production at the sub-national level that “involves developing and integrating ‘local’ assets, and using universities’ position in national and international research communities to connect regions to new markets and circuits of expertise” (Thiem 2009, 163). Area businesses are advantaged with adequate human capital holding knowledge of specialized production processes. And firms value the cost-savings that goes into employee development since most states will subsidize work-ready credentialing systems.

### **Testing Employability?**

The work-ready test and credential offer employers a *certainty* that those hired will be trainable for the new economy. Employers believe they face dire staffing needs for qualified workers. Individuals are told that to be considered work-ready before their first job they must exhibit core standards on technical and basic literacy, and show work-ethic skills, pleasing dispositions, and the like. Business leaders want some sort of training warrant that future recruits are fit for the modern workplace. And neoliberal policymakers demand “increased skill levels and more appropriate youth workplace skill preparation ... linked with a popular perception of the absence of a work ethic” (Taylor 2005, 204). ACT does not offer data on the actual numbers of employers using the certificate when hiring. Although some anecdotal employer testimony and a few selected case studies of firms on their website report significant reduction in turnovers since implementing the WorkKeys tests. Nevertheless, test-makers define the landscape of working life as static and stationary, a fallacy that job behaviors can be scientifically confirmed and objectively validated for each individual. Darrah (1997) pointed out that skill requirements “decompose workers or jobs into discrete characteristics” (252) and perpetuate a myth that work-ready individuals are interchangeable as long as they hold a named set of competencies. Missing are the nuanced meanings of workers engaged in situated learning on the shop floor. He explained at length:

The exclusion of actual workplaces from analyses of skills has important consequences for understanding work. It explains outcomes in the workplace by analyzing the skills workers do or do not possess, thereby excluding from analysis how the workplace structures the learning and action that occurs there. Workplaces are thus treated as fundamentally sound, and the main challenge for employers is to attract properly skilled individuals. It also views jobs as having objective characteristics that provide a basis for specifying the work: The person as an active, co-producer of the workplace is missing. (Darrah 1997, 252)

There are a host of contextual factors within workplaces such as the division of labor, shop-floor norms and work rules, relationships with outsiders, and the internal dynamics of teams that defy a reductive definition of employability (Billett 2006). Know-how consists of tacit understandings or what “people bring to work their entire experiential selves”—foundational to an epistemology of work (Beckett and Hager 2002, 6). And cognitive skills (as measured in the

work-ready tests) are considered minimal to what “enables workers in many fields to successfully confront the ambiguities of practice” (Stasz 2001, 391).

While employability exams are favored by employers in sizing-up individuals for their firms, “test scores are decidedly poor predictors of one’s job performance or career achievement” (Sacks 1999, 170). Critics question the validity and reliability of these assessments, the veracity of measurements on a battery of timed, work-based aptitudes that actually determine occupational success in the real world. Moss and Tilley (2001) said that judging skills is problematical due to subjectivity factors and “cannot be measured with precision”—even though psychometricians claim talented workers can be spotted and marked. And, second, due to situational factors in the workplace, skills are “profoundly dependent on context” and employers add their own “attitudes to the mix” (44). That is, human resource personnel who require face-to-face interviews with potential job candidates in the selection process bring their own biases into play. Negative perceptions of minorities’ impacts employment possibilities and helps to explain why there is a paucity of well-paying work in urban neighborhoods. Anyon (2005) charged this led to a “racial political economy,” one that “prevents opportunity for decent jobs and wages in urban areas, and thereby maintains families in poverty, it diminishes the capacity of parents to provide rich, stable learning environments for their children” (369). Gender bias also plays-out in the arena of employability testing. Castellano (1997) remarked that “standardized tests do not predict future performance so much as they assess applicants’ exposure to a certain set of experiences and their ability to display it in testing situations” (192-193). In her study of an apprenticeship program for women preparing to work in the trades, testing bias appeared in question sets on technical literacy, such as mechanical reasoning and spatial relations. Females might not have prior exposure to using tools and hands-on projects either at home or in grade-school industrial arts classes that impact their abilities to master the timed, employment exams. Low scores on standardized assessments may be an indication of a person’s lack of exposure to test-item concepts. Test anxiety disorders routinely affect examinees (Spielberger and Vagg 1995). And standardized testing adversely impacts the educational prospects of working-class kids, those most likely to score poorly are the ones who face a heightened regime of testing and test preparation—academic curriculum once available to all now are limited to well-heeled school districts (McNeil 2000).

Fetishizing over employability is essential in positioning oneself as a new economy citizen, including rectifying personality flaws. “When such traits have been identified,” one training manual advises, “steps can be taken to overcome them, making you more ‘personable’ or sociable” (Hind and Moss 2005, 3). The working classes must show evidence of enthusiasm just for the privilege of entering service-sector labor, characterized by one detractor as a scripted performance of “servile attitude with a perma-smile” (Lafer 2002, 72-73). Sennett (1998) concurred that a personal script of “friendliness” was the sole feature of portability in service work: “the masks of cooperativeness are among the only possessions workers will carry with them from task to task, firm to firm—these windows of social skills whose ‘hypertext’ is a winning smile” (112). What is different in these times is that “employers have become even more ambitious in the extent to which they seek to mold employees’ wills and personalities” (73). Employability discourses reinforce the urgent rule that one better get on with the business of autobiographical planning and career readiness. A prototypical statement from a national trade association of manufacturers (NAM 2005) reads in this manner:

Individuals must take responsibility for their employability. This is the millennium of the free-agent worker—a person who can go anywhere and do anything with the right kind of education and training. Individuals must accept their role in keeping their skills current and should understand that the value they bring to the workplace is contingent upon their commitment to lifelong learning—to keep their skills and their knowledge current. (23)

Witness the growth of job readiness classes in community and technical colleges. At Los Angeles City College (2009), for instance, one can attend a short-term, six-hour noncredit workshop titled *30 Ways to Shine as a New Employee* that covers understanding workplace culture and dealing with change. Others might reinvent themselves in a thirty-two hour *Blueprint for Customer Service* dealing with the soft topics of: self-discovery, time management, job market realities, workplace skills, effective communication, contacting employers, preparing for the interview, getting hired, and keeping your job. Educational institutions throughout the nation have become much more market-oriented in their stated missions. Levin (2001) remarked that since the 1990s community colleges responded to neoliberal imperatives “in significant

fashion” by “encompassing a greater economic development and workforce training role and institutional behaviors became more fiscally acquisitive” (239).

### **Disciplinary Neoliberalism**

The neoliberal response for a globalized workforce has turned toward state surveillance and heightened documentation of the populace, with intensive scrutiny of marginalized subgroups among those most affected by the new work order. Gill (2008) defined disciplinary neoliberalism as “a concrete form of structural and behavioural power, combining the structural power of capital with ‘capillary power’ and ‘panopticism’” (137). Panoptic power is used to see all, surveil and monitor “governments, populations, and economic activity”; and it works to “maximize predictability and minimize uncertainty” (207) in capital accumulation. At the center of the disciplinary project is the entrepreneurial self. A constant vocationalized loop of training and retraining, skilling and reskilling marks the “new citizen,” Rose (1999) clarified; “life is to become a continuous economic capitalization of the self” (161). Businesses desiring to lower recruitment costs and employee turnover increasingly turn to work-ready testing as yet one more layer of vetting young people for citizenship. For the test to remain a desired commodity, however, individuals are told continually of its importance and practical utility. Marketing, advertising, and the media are allies in this form of governmentality, used to inculcate the public through “a web of technologies for fabricating and maintaining self-government” (Miller and Rose 2008, 52). Work-ready documentation has entered the vocabulary of public education reform. Employability testing will validate your skills and provide a certificate to convince superiors you are ready for work, supporting the do-it-yourself project for each unique biography (Kelly 2001). Yet there are winners and losers in disciplinary neoliberalism. Winners are expected to plan their career pathways early on in the school years and build biographies with recognizable training credentials and a resume or portfolio that maximizes choices and varied career opportunities. They are asked to reinvent themselves as portable knowledge workers, and erase any desire for livable wages, health and safety benefits, union protections, lifetime job security, and economic justice. “As portfolio workers,” Bansel (2007) commented, “they accumulate skills, knowledges and experiences that ensure not only their mobility, but also their flexibility, as they shift through multiple careers in the knowledge economy, supported through often self-funded lifelong learning” (288). Failure to accumulate credentials and a portfolio is

interpreted as poor choice-making about education and lifestyle or desires and wants; faulty risk management that limits options and reduces freedoms.

A uniform credential already established and widely accepted is the Europass, a European Union (EU) personal skills card used by the member states to signify employability. It is a compact document or curriculum vitae that records prior work histories and language proficiencies as well as vocational certificates, higher education qualifications, and transnational learning or training experiences. The credential was initiated by EU public policymakers who spoke of closer alliances with business and training organizations, for they understood the real need for workforce improvements, with demands for up-skilling in computer and information technologies, and for workers who engendered lifelong learning (Spring 1998). Yet few question the business imperatives underpinning the credentialing process (Lakes 2008). Spring (1998) wondered aloud if the work-ready credential might create a greater social class divide between those holding paper credentials for access to elite jobs versus those holding the skills card for non-elite jobs—resulting in “an Orwellian vision of a population tied to an accrediting system linked to the needs of multinational companies” (109). What if the Europass, a compact document that indicates transnational mobility, serves the purposes of regulating working-class foreign nationals and their non-naturalized offspring crossing member states in search of work? The European Commission’s educational views on immigrants and second-generation minorities, Mitchell (2006) revealed, shows “a steady movement *away* from the spirit of multiculturalism vis-à-vis the formation of a democratic European citizen and *towards* an individualist discourse of responsibility for lifelong learning and the constant mobilization of work skills” (392).

Employability is a condition of neoliberal citizenship, according to Ong (2006), who studied the treatment of knowledge workers in marketized states of the Asia-Pacific region: “Rights and benefits are distributed to bearers of marketable talents, and denied to those who are judged to lack such capacity or potential” (16). Certain entitlements (not the formal granting of nation-state citizenship per se) were circulated to expatriates as transnational knowledge workers, with ready access to healthcare and educational institutions, residency permits, and even property ownership. Summarily excluded from meaningful labor are the indigenous or migrant classes in

developing countries, regulated in prison-like settings such as export-processing zones with little regard (if any) for human rights. “Citizens who are deemed too complacent or lacking in neoliberal potential may be treated as less-worthy subjects,” wrote Ong (2006); “Low-skill citizens and migrants become exceptions to neoliberal mechanisms and are constructed as excludable populations in transit, shuttled in and out of zones of growth” (16). Transnational capital has created large groups of disenfranchised people throughout the world, forcing them into the informal economy of underground labor. Robinson (2004) alleged these were the supernumeraries who have “no role to play in the *formal* local structures of globalized production” (105). Wacquant (2008) claimed that the lower classes were “recalcitrant to the discipline of the new fragmented service wage-labor”; and the neoliberal state imposes a carceral strategy that “neutralizes and warehouses the most disruptive elements, or those rendered wholly superfluous by the recomposition of the demand for labor” (16). Statistics from the US Bureau of Justice bear this out. Incarceration rates of 737 per 100,000 residents far surpass Russia (611), South Africa (335), Mexico (196), England/Wales (148), Australia (126), Canada (107), Germany (95), France (85), Sweden (82), Japan (62), and India (30) to name but a few (Sentencing Project 2006).

## **Conclusion**

The social control of the working classes through education and training has been a longstanding priority for the capitalist class (Bowles and Gintis 1977). The nineteenth-century common schools inculcated industrial time so that the urban masses would become docile yet disciplined citizens (Nasaw 1981). Their schooling was considered important by elites in order to defuse potential threats to the social order. In the next century a curriculum track of vocational education was deemed sufficient for working-class employability, but it too was emptied of an academic education. Some cultural critics had hoped that vocational education could become more than techno-rational skills training (Simon, Dipppo, and Schenke 1991). That would require vigorous debate in the commons, what Wirth (1992) envisioned as “a political economy and a form of education that brings high technology and democratic values into creative collaboration—a model of informing workplaces and the educational means to make them possible. A capitalism with a human face?” (207-208). There is little interest from neoliberal policymakers on reforming schools along these lines.

In the new millennium individuals repeatedly are told of their shortcomings or deficits as knowledge workers, and the corporate class does not accept responsibility for labor dislocations. Under globalization, Wrigley (2009) noted, “times have changed, but the basic principle remains: Capitalism needs workers who are *clever enough to be profitable, but not wise enough to know what’s really going on*” (62). Educational institutions have been colonized by business-driven assumptions of a high-skills nation. “The main policy objective is to outsmart other countries in the development of the nation’s human resources,” Brown Green, and Lauder (2001) clarified;

As the quality of a nation’s human resources are being subjected to global benchmarking, upon which companies will make their investment decisions, the key priority is to lift the skills base of the entire nation, rather than get side-tracked about equalizing life chances, which will be resolved by the new miracle drug of global “human” capitalism (9-10).

Recently, policymakers began studying how the PISA and TIMSS tests can become an international metric common to all 50 states in the USA, desiring benchmarking methods to raise student performance levels in the core subjects of math and reading (Sparks 2010). Educational testing companies have signed-on for this policy thrust on global competitiveness, with ACT “well positioned as one of three external organizations invited to participate as development partners in this initiative” holding expertise on “the knowledge and skills students need to succeed in postsecondary education and workforce training” (ACT 2010a, 7-8).

Public policy reforms in education have enriched the industry, with the demand for workplace credentials and related career-ready evaluations and mandated assessments in the K-12 arena. FairTest (2001), an industry watchdog group critical of standardized testing observed that the underlying motive of the major testing firms was profit-making: “The exams sold by the College Board, ETS [Educational Testing Service] and ACT certainly perform well for their companies’ bottom lines and executives’ wallets.” As in “any other self-interested business selling products,” they warned, “the rule for dealing with exam-makers should be *caveat emptor*, ‘let the buyer beware’” (¶10). This monomaniacal obsession with skills testing clouds the mind,



impeding alternative thinking about the underlying conditions of education and employability in neoliberal times.

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**Writer's Details:** Richard D. Lakes is a professor in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at Georgia State University in Atlanta. He writes about globalization, education for work, and the neoliberal politics of vocational education and training.

**Correspondence Details:** [rlakes@gsu.edu](mailto:rlakes@gsu.edu)