

Corporate Education Reform and the Rise of State Schools

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Abstract

*The election of Barack Obama appeared to signal a shift in U.S. policy toward the Left, particularly since Obama has been framed as a “socialist,” but the education discourse and policy pursued under Obama and voiced by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has shown that education reform remains in the midst of a powerful corporate model. This essay examines the corporate model for education reform against Kurt Vonnegut’s *Player Piano*, Foucault’s (1984) confronting “the present scientifico-legal complex” (standardized testing), and the corrosive call for improving teacher quality—all of which work to replace public education with free-market competition and teachers as service workers. The piece ends with a call for educators and professional organizations to raise their voices against these reforms.*

Key words: education, education reform, Michel Foucault, U.S.

Department of Education, corporate reform

Few people could have imagined the acceleration of corporate influence that has occurred in the first two years of Barack Obama's presidency (Carr and Porfilio, 2011). The election of Obama, who was repeatedly

demonized by the Right as a socialist, on the heels of an economic downturn appeared to insure a renaissance of valuing public institutions. More shocking, possibly, has been the corporate influence on the public discourse about universal public education, driven by Secretary Arne Duncan and promoted through celebrity tours by billionaire Bill Gates (Thomas, 2010, December 28) and ex-DC chancellor Michelle Rhee (Thomas, 2010, December 17)—competition legislation such as Race to the Top, teacher evaluation and pay linked to test scores, and the rise of corporate charter schools such as Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP).

Bessie (2010, December 29) has speculated about the logical progression of the current accountability era built on tests and destined to hold teachers accountable for their students' test scores (despite the evidence that teachers account for only about 10-20% of achievement [Rothstein, 2010])—hologram teachers. And Krashen (2011) believes that the corporate takeover of schools is at the center of the new reformers' misinformation tour and an extension of the corporate takeover of the government. While Bessie's and Krashen's comments may sound like alarmist stances—possibly even the stuff of fiction—I believe we all should have seen this coming for decades.

The stated and implemented goals of federal and state government in the U.S. have shifted away from our democratic roots and the potential for publicly funded entities as foundational avenues to human agency and empowerment and toward the direct interests of corporations. This shift is now best seen in the current education reform movement being driven by and flourishing under the Obama administration—personified by Duncan. Education reformers have framed the need for national standards, increased testing, and greater teacher accountability as essential for

creating a world-class work force and to keep the U.S. competitive internationally. But this narrative serves as a mask for the ultimate results promised by such reform—shifting the locus of authority and expertise away from teachers, professors, and scholars and to state created and enforced instruments that render people powerless and interchangeable.

Just as the corporation seeks to reduce costs (including the cost of human labor) and to increase productivity in order to increase profit, universal public education has been co-opted by corporate interests seeking to create compliant workers through an efficient school system staffed by teachers not as professionals but as a service industry, typified by low wages and de-skilled workers; for example, the rise of replacing certified and experienced workers with Teach for America (TFA) recruits exposes the corporate commitment to costs over teacher quality. The result will be the eradication of universal public education and the formation of state schools dedicated to corporate interests and managed by those corporations through the federal government.

Calculating the Corporate States of America

The science fiction genre has always been one of my favorites and, within that genre, I am particularly fond of dystopian fiction. Kurt Vonnegut spoke and wrote often about rejecting the sci-fi label for his work—but Vonnegut's genius includes his gift for delivering social commentary and satire wrapped in narratives that *seem* to be set in the future, *seem* to be a distorted world that we could never possibly experience.

In 1952, Kurt Vonnegut published *Player Piano*, offering a biting satire of corporate American from his own experience working at GE in mid-

twentieth century (Reed, 1995; Sumner, 2011). A review of the novel in 1963 describes Vonnegut's vision of our brave new world:

The important difference lies in the fact that Mr. Vonnegut's oligarchs are not capitalists but engineers. In the future as he envisages it, the machines have completed their triumph, dispossessing not only the manual laborers but the white collar workers as well. Consequently the carefully selected, highly trained individuals who design and control the machines are the only people who have anything to do. Other people, the great majority, can either go into the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps, which is devoted to boondoggling, or join the army, which has no real function in a machine-dominated world-society. (Hicks, 1963)

Yes, in Vonnegut's dystopia computers are at the center of a society run itself like a machine, with everyone labeled with his or her IQ and designated for what career he or she can pursue (although we should note that women's roles were even more constrained than men's, reflecting the 1940s/1950s sexism in the U.S.). Where corporations end and the government begins is difficult to discern in this society that, today, is a slightly exaggerated version of the life Vonnegut had witnessed while working at GE before abandoning corporate America to be a full-time writer.

And Vonnegut's computerized world allows numbers to mask social forces, presenting a world to us not unlike the one in which we live—especially as the growing charge for student and teacher accountability driven by national standards and testing gains momentum.

For me, however, Vonnegut's *Player Piano* is as much a warning about the role of testing and labeling students and teachers in our education

system as it is a red flag about the dangers of the oligarchy that we have become. Today, with Gates speaking for not only corporate America but also reforming public education, how far off is Vonnegut's vision?

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, how different is Vonnegut's world from what we have today, as income equity and the pooling of wealth accelerates (Noah, 2010)?

We have witnessed where political loyalty lies during federal government bailouts as corporate America collapsed at the end of George W. Bush's presidency. With corporate American saved, and most Americans ignored, the next logical step is to transform publicly funded education to state education by increasing the corporate model that has been crippling the system since the misinformation during Ronald Reagan's presidency grabbed headlines with the release of *A Nation at Risk* (Holton, 2003; Bracey, 2003). If Vonnegut had written that storyline, at least we could have been guaranteed some laughter. But this brave new world of public education is more grim—like George Orwell's *1984*.

In *Player Piano*, we watch how successful corporate life disorients and consumes workers in order to keep those workers under control. And in the relationship between the main character Paul and his wife Anita, we view the power of corporate life—and the weight of testing and reducing humans to numbers—being magnified by the rise of computers when Paul pleases with his wife:

“No, no. You’ve got something the tests and machines will never be able to measure: you’re artistic. That’s one of the tragedies of our times, that no machine has ever been built that can recognize that quality, appreciate it,

foster it, sympathize with it.” (Vonnegut, 1952, p. 178)

In the novel, Paul's quest and the momentary rise of rebellion appear to be no match for corporate control. Today, I have to say I am no more optimistic than Vonnegut about the prospect of saving public education from statist ends.

When Secretary Duncan (2010, December 7) offers misleading claims about international test scores and bemoans the quality of public schools for failing to provide us with a world-class workforce, and almost no one raises a voice in protest (except those within the field of education, only to be demonized for protesting [Michie, 2011]), I am tempted to think that we are simply reaping what we deserve—like Paul at the end of *Player Piano*: "And that left Paul. 'To a better world,' he started to say, but he cut the toast short, thinking of the people of Ilium, already eager to recreate the same old nightmare" (Vonnegut, 1952, p. 340).

The corporate reform paradigm for education echoes and reinforces cultural norms that feature standardization, measurement and quantification, and accountability as objective—thus not political—and rigorous (a misused term that is popularly embraced as having high expectations, despite the essence of the word suggesting inflexibility). However, the reality of these corporate commitments includes a powerful partisan agenda, one that merges the corrosive aims and needs of corporations with the inherent leverage of government to implement laws and policies that the government can also monitor and impose through the judicial and penal systems.

“The Present Scientifico-legal Complex”: The Meritocracy Myth, Science, and the Rise of New Gods

In order to expose and understand the ultimate consequences of corporate education reform, we must also expose and confront the intent of that reform, the assumptions that drive the discourse and the policies. About the education reform debate, Jim Taylor (2011) asked Duncan and Gates a direct question: “I really don't understand you two, the U.S. Secretary of Education and the world's second richest man and noted philanthropist. How can you possibly say that public education can be reformed without eliminating poverty?” Taylor’s discussion raises an important element in the reform debate when he addresses Gates: “Because without understanding the causes of problems, we can't find solutions,” explains Taylor, adding. “You're obviously trying to solve public education's version of the classic ‘chicken or egg’ conundrum.”

Here, recognizing the reform debate as a chick-or-egg problem is the crux of how this debate is missing the most important questions about social equity—and as a result, insuring that Duncan and Gates are winning the argument by perpetuating their uncontested claims. The essential questions about education reform should not focus on whether we should address poverty to improve education (where I stand, based on the evidence) or whether we should reform education as a mechanism to alleviate poverty (the tenet of the “no excuses” ideology promoted by Duncan and Gates); the essential question about social inequity is: Why is poverty allowed to exist and increase in the wealthiest and most powerful country in recorded history?

As a basic point of logic, any organized entity—a society, a business, a school—has characteristics that are either created or tolerated by those in power controlling that organization. All entities are by their nature *conservative*—functioning to maintain the entity itself. In other words, institutions resist change, particularly radical change that threatens their hierarchy of power. Thus, if the power structure of the U.S. is stable while social and economic inequity exists, that power structure has little motivation to address poverty unless that poverty threatens the elite's position at the top.

In the U.S., then, poverty exists in the wider society and fuels a corrosive influence on the education system (among all of our social institutions) because the ruling elite—political and corporate leaders—need poverty to maintain their elite status at the top of the hierarchy of power. While the perpetual narratives promoted by the political and corporate elite through the media elite have allowed this point of logic to be masked and ignored, we must face the reality that people with power drive the realities of those without power. Yes, the cultural narratives fostered by the privileged suggest that people trapped in poverty are somehow in control of that poverty—either creating it themselves due to their own sloth, deserving their station in life, or failing to rise above that poverty (and this suggestion allows the source of poverty to be ignored) because they refuse to lift themselves up by their own bootstraps (the manifestation of the deficit perspective).

But that narrative has no essential basis in evidence. Of course, the powerful must allow those without power to have some token autonomy—as parents with children—in order to create the illusion of autonomy to keep revolt at bay; this is why the political and corporate

elite use the word “choice” and perpetuate the myth that all classes in America have the same access to choice (such as daily ads creating the urgency to choose between a Honda Accord or a Toyota Camry—but never no car at all). Or the illusion of choice that is used to pacify people living in poverty who often are left outside of any real choice and who are reduced to *aspiring* to the possibility of idealized choice enjoyed by the privileged.

How does social and economic inequity, then, benefit the powerful in the U.S.?

- U.S. cultural narratives depend on Utopian portrayals of democracy, meritocracy, and individual freedom. Those ideals form the basis for most of the cultural narratives expressed by the political and corporate elite in the U.S. Poverty works as the *Other* in those narratives—that which we must all reject, that which we must strive to avoid. If the Utopian goals, including eliminating poverty, are ever achieved, however, the tension between the working-/middle- class and those in poverty would be eliminated as well, exposing the artificial perch upon which the ruling elite sit. The necessity of poverty works both to keep us from attaining the Utopian goals and to make the Utopian goals attractive.

- Poverty contributes to the *crisis motif* that keeps the majority of any society distracted from the minority elite benefitting disproportionately from the labor of the majority. Crises large and small—from Nazis, Communists, and Terrorists to crime to teen pregnancy to the achievement gap and the drop-out crisis—create the perception that the average person cannot possibly keep these crises under control (crises that would plunge otherwise decent people into the abyss of poverty) and,

thus, needs the leadership of the privileged. The majority of average people can only be carried to the promised land of Utopian peace and equality by the sheer force of personality held by only a few; these ruling elite are the only defense against the perpetual crises threatening the ideals we hold sacred.

- Along with Utopian promises and the refrain of crisis, the ruling elite need the pervasive atmosphere of fear—whether real or fabricated—in order to occupy the time and energy of the majority (Foucault, 1984, p. 144). Poverty becomes not just a condition to be feared, but also those people to be feared. The cultural narratives—in contrast to the evidence (Gorski, 2008)—about poverty and people living in poverty connect poverty and crime, poverty and drug abuse, poverty and domestic violence, poverty and unattractiveness, and most of all, poverty and the failure of the individual to grasp the golden gift of personal freedom afforded by the United States *through its corporations* and not the will of the people through government.

Just as we rarely consider the sources of inequity—who controls the conditions of our society—we rarely examine the deficit perspective we are conditioned to associate with poverty and people living in poverty. Are the wealthy without crime? Without drug abuse? Without deceptions of all kinds? Of course not, but the consequences for these acts by someone living in privilege are dramatically different than the consequences for those trapped in poverty. The ruling elites have created a culture where the consequences of poverty are revealed but the inequities that create privilege are masked.

Winners always believe the rules of the game to be fair, and winners need losers in order to maintain the status of “winner.” The U.S., then, is a democracy *only* as a masking narrative that maintains the necessary tension among classes—the majority working-/middle- class fearful of slipping into poverty, and so consumed by that fear that they are too busy and fearful to consider who controls their lives: “those who are stuck at a machine and supervised for the rest of their lives” (Foucault, 1984, p. 177).

In the narrow debate about education reform, we are being manipulated once again by the ruling elite, within which Duncan and Gates function, to focus on the chicken-and-egg problem of poverty/education so that we fail to examine the ruling elite creating and tolerating inequity for their own benefit. By perpetuating the debate desired by the privileged, they are winning once again. And that success derives in large part from their successful propaganda campaign about the value of standards, testing, and teacher accountability as mechanisms within education to end poverty.

Now that I have suggested shifting the discourse about poverty and education away from the chick-and-egg problem to the role of sustaining and tolerating poverty for the benefit of the ruing elite, let’s look at the central role testing plays in maintaining the status quo of corporate privilege in the U.S. And let’s build that consideration on a couple pillars of evidence.

First, despite decades committed to the science of objective, valid, and reliable standardized testing, outcomes from standardized tests remain most strongly correlated with the socio-economic status of the students.

As well, standardized tests also remain biased instruments (Thomas, 2011, July 21)—for example, by race (Santelices and Wilson, 2010) and gender (Spelke, 2005). Next, more recently during the thirty-year accountability era, the overwhelming evidence shows that standards, testing, and accountability do not produce the outcomes that proponents have claimed (Hout and Elliot, 2011). Thus, just as the poverty/education question should address who creates and allows poverty and why, the current and historical standards and testing obsession should be challenged in terms of who is benefitting from our faith in testing and why—and how that testing obsession perpetuates, not alleviates, a stratified society.

The history of power, who sits at the top and why, is one of creating leverage for the few at the expense of the many. To achieve that, often those at the top have resorted to explicit and wide-scale violence as well as fostering the perception that anyone at the top has been chosen, often by the gods or God, to lead—power is taken or deserved. “God chose me” and “God told me” remain powerful in many cultures, but in a secular culture with an ambiguous attitude toward violence (keep the streets of certain neighborhoods *here* crime-free, but war in other countries is freedom fighting) such as the U.S., the ruling elites need a secular god—thus, the rise of science, objectivity, and testing:

[A] correlative history of the modern soul and of a new power to judge; a genealogy of the present scientifico-legal complex from which the power to punish derives its bases, justifications, and rules; from which it extends its effects and by which it masks its exorbitant singularity. (Foucault, 1984, p.170)

As I noted above, testing remains a reflection of the inequity gap in society (Thomas, 2011, June 26) and the high-stakes testing movement has not reformed education or society, so the rising call for even more testing of students, testing based on a national curriculum and used to control teachers, must have a purpose other than the Utopian claims by the political and corporate elite who are most invested in the rising testing culture in the U.S. That purpose, as with the perpetuation of poverty, is to maintain the status quo of a hierarchy of power and to give that hierarchy the appearance of objectivity, of science. Standards, testing, and accountability are the new gods of the political and corporate elite.

Schools in the U.S. are designed primarily to coerce children to be compliant, to be docile (Thomas, 2011, July 27); much of what we say and consider about education is related to discipline—classroom management is often central to teacher preparation and much of what happens during any school day:

The exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation; an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power in which, conversely, the means of coercion make those on whom they are applied clearly visible. (Foucault, 1984, p.189)

In education reform, the surveillance of students, and now the surveillance of teachers (and ultimately of all citizens of a corporate state), is not covert, but in plain view in the form of tests, that allow that surveillance to be disembodied from those students and teachers—and thus appearing to be impersonal—and examined as if objective and a reflection of merit.

Testing as surveillance in order to create compliance is central to maintaining hierarchies of power both within schools (where a premium is placed on docility of students and teachers) and society, where well-trained and compliant voters and workers sustain the positions of those in power:

[T]he art of punishing, in the regime of disciplinary power, is aimed neither at expiation, nor precisely at repression. . . .It differentiates individuals from one another, in terms of the following overall rule: that the rule be made to function as a minimal threshold, as an average to be respected, or as an optimum toward which one must move. It measures in quantitative terms and hierarchizes in terms of value the abilities, the level, the “nature” of individuals. . . .The perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institution compares, differentiates, hierachizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it *normalizes*. (Foucault, 1984, p. 195)

The political and corporate elite in the U.S. have risen to their status of privilege within the “scientifico-legal complex” (Foucault, p. 170) that both created the privileged and is then perpetuated by the privileged. As I noted above, the winners always believe the rules of the game to be fair and will work to maintain the rules that have produced their status.

The Expanded Test Culture—“The Age of Infinite Examination”

Foucault (1984) has recognized the central place for testing within the power dynamic that produces a hierarchy of authority that includes those in privilege and those trapped in inequity: “The examination combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of normalizing judgment. It is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes possible to

qualify, to classify, and to punish” (p. 197). Thus, as the rise of corporate paradigms to replace democratic paradigms has occurred in the U.S. over the last century, notably in education reform, we can observe a rise in the prominence of testing along with the uses of those tests. From the early decades of the twentieth century, testing in the U.S. has gradually increased and expanded in its role for labeling and sorting students. In the twenty-first century, testing is now being wedged into a parallel use to control teachers. The result of that test-based control is to render all people powerless and interchangeable—in other words, ideal workers because they are inexpensive, compliant, and efficient.

Those in power persist in both cases—testing to control students and teachers—to claim that tests are a mechanism for achieving Utopian goals of democracy, meritocracy, and individual freedom, but those claims are masks for implementing tests as the mechanisms of powerful gods (science, objectivity, accountability) to justify the current hierarchy of power—not to change society or education: “[T]he age of the ‘examining’ school marked the beginnings of a pedagogy that functions as science” (Foucault, 1984, p. 198). Foucault, in fact, identifies three ways that testing works to reinforce power dynamics, as opposed to providing data for education reform driven by a pursuit of social justice.

First, testing of individual students and using test data to identify individual teacher quality create a focus on the individual that reinforces discipline:

In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them. It is the fact of their being constantly seen. . .that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection.

And the examination is the technique by which power. . .holds them in a mechanism of objectification. (Foucault, 1984, p. 199)

This use of testing resonates in President Obama's first term as Secretary Duncan simultaneously criticizes the misuse of testing in *No Child Left Behind* and calls for an expansion of testing (more years of a student's education, more areas of content, and more directly tied to individual teachers), resulting in: "We are entering the age of infinite examination and of compulsory objectification" (Foucault, p. 200).

Next, testing has provided a central goal of sustaining the hierarchy of power—"the calculation of gaps between individuals, their distribution in a given 'population'" (Foucault, 1984, p. 202). Testing, in effect, does not provide data for addressing the equity/achievement gap; testing has *created* those gaps, labeled those gaps, and marginalized those below the codified level of standard (a perverse demarcation that is reflected in the tension being realized between the 1% and 99%). What tends to be ignored in the testing debate as it impacts those in poverty is that some people with authority determine what is taught (national standards), how that content is taught (scripted lessons, pacing guides), what is tested (national tests), and how that testing is conducted (private testing corporations, rubrics). *In short, all testing is biased and ultimately arbitrary in the context of who has authority over what is tested and how—and for what ends.*

And finally, once the gaps are created and labeled through the stratifying of students and teachers: "[I]t is the individual as he[/she] may be described, judged, measured, compared with others, in his[/her] very individuality; and it is also the individual who has to be trained or

corrected, classified, normalized, excluded, etc.” (Foucault, 1984, p. 203). Within the perpetual education and education reform debates, the topics of poverty and testing are central themes, but too often we are missing the key elements that should be addressed in the dynamic that exists between inequity and testing.

Yes, standardized tests remain primarily reflections of social inequity that those tests perpetuate, labeled as “achievement gaps.” But the central evidence we should acknowledge is that the increased focus on testing coming from the political and corporate elite is proof that those in privilege are dedicated to maintaining inequity as central to their hierarchy of authority. Standards, testing, accountability, science, and objectivity are the new gods that the ruling class uses to keep the working-/middle-class in a state of “perpetual anxiety,” fearing the crisis *de jure* and the specter of slipping into poverty—realities that insure the momentum of the status quo.

"Paddle Your Own Canoe"?: A Case for Education

Wilbur Rockefeller-Swain and Eliza Mellow Swain, twins, are the central characters in Kurt Vonnegut's autobiographical novel *Slapstick*. Alienated by their appearances, ostracized by their parents, and misunderstood by nearly everyone, these siblings are assumed to be intellectually challenged, but are in fact brilliant—although their brilliance depends on their being together.

Dr. Cordelia Swain Cordiner, "a woman [with]...three doctor's degrees and [who] heads a testing corporation which bills three million dollars a year" (Vonnegut, 1976, p. 100), is charged with examining Wilbur and

Eliza. Her plan is to test them both, but separately. Dr. Cordiner offers this to the siblings when they ask to be tested together:

"In case nobody has told you," she said, "this is the United States of America, where nobody has a right to rely on anybody else—where everybody learns to make his or her own way. "I'm here to test you," she said, "but there's a basic rule for life I'd like to teach you, too, and you'll thank me for it in years to come."

This was the lesson: "Paddle your own canoe," she said. "Can you say that and remember it?"

Not only could I say it, but I remembered it to this day: "Paddle your own canoe."

Hi ho. (pp. 102-103)

In his novel from 1976, Vonnegut never intended to speak to the corporate education reform debates that now dominate public and scholarly examinations of U.S. public education, but that is in fact what Vonnegut has done with his portrait of the twins and the decision to evaluate them both by tests *in isolation*.

At the heart of the scene above, Vonnegut has exposed the essential conflict that exists between the cultural myths in the U.S.—rugged individualism, pulling oneself up by her/his own boot straps, and a rising tide lifting all boats (or canoes)—and the stated and ideal purposes for universal public education.

Like Dr. Cordiner, the current crop of self-proclaimed education reformers—Duncan, Gates, Rhee, and corporations existing like people, Teach for America (TFA) and Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) charter schools—all endorse and reflect the cultural myth of rugged

individualism. Unlike Dr. Cordnier, this same crop of so-called reformers have either no or little experience or expertise in the field they seek to reform, education—driven as they are by an ideology eerily Stalinist:

Educational reforms currently underway in America promise to trade the uncertainty of the “creativity of the study” for measurable, prescribed outcomes. As proven by the Soviet educational reforms of the 1930s, the goals of a nationalized curriculum, a focus on STEM, measurable outcomes, stronger accountability for teachers, and increasingly militarized schools are, indeed, attainable. But, these goals are gained at enormous costs—to schools, to children, and to democratic ideals. Once “the creativity of the study” goes, the “the creative spirit in life” cannot be far behind. (Baines, 2011).

Since the new reformers have access to both exorbitant funding and positions of authority, they also have gained control of the education reform debate, thereby marginalizing educators and scholars as "anti-reform" or "using poverty as an excuse."

While Dr. Cordnier's "paddle your own canoe" rings hollow to readers of the novel, the new reformers' same dependence on empty slogans persists: "No excuses," "poverty is not destiny." And when educators, scholars, and researchers offer evidence to refute the empty slogans, the true experts and advocates for universal public education are themselves marginalized, demonized, and even silenced—often through the accountability mandates against which they struggle.

Since the new reformers are framing the education debate, and thus framing the positions of those who speak against them, we must be careful to identify fairly what those educators, scholars, and researchers

who are advocates for public education are endorsing as an alternative to corporate reform and outcomes.

Pedro Noguera (2011) presents a solid foundation for what advocates for democratic public education are in fact arguing:

The research never suggests that poor children are incapable of learning or that poverty itself should be regarded as a learning disability. Rather, research suggests that poor children encounter obstacles that often adversely affect their development and learning outcomes.

To ignore this reality and make bold assertions that all children can achieve while doing nothing to address the outside-of-school challenges they face is neither fair nor a sound basis for developing public policy....

Despite compelling evidence that education policy must at least mitigate the harmful effects of poverty on student achievement and child development, most state and federal policies have failed to do so. However, there is growing awareness among a number of educators, mayors, and policy advocates of the need to do so based on the realization that a great deal can be done to counter the effects of poverty on children's lives and their education. Mitigation is not the same as solving a problem, but it's nonetheless an important strategy.

Ultimately, as Noguera argues, "American policy makers and reformers must be willing to accept the obvious: School reform efforts can't ignore the effects of poverty on children's lives or on the performance of schools."

Yet, reformers such as Duncan, Gates, and Rhee along with advocates for TFA and KIPP do, ironically, ignore poverty by directly including it in the slogans that toss aside the need to address poverty. And, thus, here are the foundational ideas that must drive education reform, if our goal is universal public education as a commitment to democracy, autonomy,

and empowerment:

- Student learning that is measurable and observable is often misleading, is always complex, and is more fully a reflection of a child's life than of that student's teacher or school quality.
- Thus, the primary and most pressing reform needed to address education is social reform that alleviates poverty, that restores equity to the lives of all Americans, and that insures children access to health and eye care, to food security, and to excellent social institutions such as libraries and schools.
- Then, and parallel to social reform, we must reform school and teacher quality. But that direct education reform must not continue to dwell on implementing a national curriculum, increasing testing, intensifying teacher accountability, and pursuing education alternatives (such as charter schools)—all of which offer solutions that misrepresent or miss the root of our educational problems. (Student outcomes are not primarily suffering from a lack of standards, a lack of testing, a lack of teacher quality, or the absence of competition or innovation.)
- Instead, school reform should include raising teacher professionalism through teacher autonomy and scholarship, broadening the curriculum and breathing life into learning as discovery and experimentation, increasing student engagement in learning by shifting the responsibility and choices about learning to the students and to holistic experiences with content, reducing dramatically our dependence on tests/grades and ranking, and shifting the role of government in public education away from statist mandates to funding only.

- Teaching and learning, as well, must be embraced as a communal and collaborative effort—not a competition and not acts endured and assessed in isolation.

Schools narrowly and education broadly must not be reduced to preparing a world-class workforce or the next project for billionaire hobbyists, relentless self-promoters, or lifelong bureaucrats. An education is an essential right of a free people committed to human dignity and the promise of democracy and freedom. Those of us who advocate for universal public education respect the diversity of humans, including the recognition that the pursuit of excellent education is a process and not a goal to be completed. Universal public education as a social mechanism for democracy, autonomy, and empowerment is an experiment; it is not a policy, and not something that can be mandated or brought to fruition merely by a slogan, and it must not any longer be a political football for badgering each student to "paddle your own canoe."

Teacher Quality and Accountability: A Failed Debate

Over the past three decades, testing has spread from oppressing students to de-professionalizing teachers. "Value-added and other types of growth models are probably the most controversial issue in education today," argues Matthew Di Carlo (2011). Di Carlo carefully examines, with ample evidence and a fair hand, the most recent cycle of education reform that has targeted teacher quality and accountability by linking both to student test scores.

One essential point offered also by Di Carlo is that the leading voices in the reform movement during the Obama administration—Duncan and Gates, and others—have often framed the teacher quality/accountability argument carelessly, stating directly or implying that teacher quality is the most important and sole *causational* element in student learning. For example, the Obama administration’s blueprint for reform states: “Of all the work that occurs at every level of our education system, the interaction between teacher and student is the primary determinant of student success.” However, as Di Carlo (2010) has explained:

Now, anyone outside of the education research/policy arena who reads the sentence above might very well walk away thinking that teachers are the silver bullet, more important than everything else, perhaps everything else combined. I cannot prove it, but I suspect that many Americans actually believe that. It is false.

Two important conclusions in Di Carlo’s work—(1) teacher and school quality (both of which matter) are dwarfed by out-of-school factors in terms of influences on student outcomes, and (2) value-added approaches to judging teacher quality and holding teachers accountable are fraught with problems, particularly if policy ignores the weight of evidence—are essential for saving the teacher quality/accountability debate, a debate educators and scholars are currently failing. Di Carlo’s informed work is not enough, however; we must next take a step or two back—steps that are essential for correcting yet more of the corporate norm in terms of education reform.

First, the teacher quality/accountability debate fails in a similar pattern found when advocates and detractors address KIPP corporate charter schools. In the KIPP debate, both advocates and critics wrestle over the

measurable outcomes and characteristics of the students when comparing KIPP charters with public schools. But few rarely step back and begin with examining and critiquing the policies of the KIPP schools—practices that I feel are oppressive and classist, thus rendering moot for me any debate about the outcomes of KIPP students: The ends simply can never justify the means.

In the teacher quality/accountability debate we have failed to ask, and then answer, foundational questions that would as well render moot the subsequent argument about the efficacy of pursuing value-added approaches to teacher accountability. Those questions include:

- *What are the primary forces impacting negatively student learning? We must establish the question before we implement solutions. Since teacher quality is dwarfed significantly by out-of-school factors, our first efforts at reform must address out-of-school factors, and then teacher quality. To misrepresent the weight of teacher quality on student outcomes while ignoring the dominant factors impeding student learning is negligent and likely evidence of ulterior motives by reformers who persist down that path.*

- *What are the ethical and practical elements of being a teacher for which that teacher can and should be held accountable? Once we properly prioritize our approaches to education reform by addressing poverty, social inequity, and the range of non-school factors that primarily stifle teacher and school effectiveness, we must address teacher quality since teachers are likely the most important—although not the only—element of any child’s formal learning. Yet, here we again fail the goal if we hold one person, the teacher, accountable for the actions of other people,*

students. Student outcomes are influenced by dozens and dozens of factors including forces that prevent students from learning or demonstrating their learning, as well as any child's ability simply not to try. If we genuinely value teacher quality and believe that teachers must be held accountable for their work in order to raise teacher quality, we must re-frame what teacher accountability entails.

It is at this second question that I believe we must pause and consider carefully where to turn next. In order to re-envision teacher accountability, we must first change our view of testing, of measuring narrowly learning. Instead of tests and ranking students and teachers, we need to have students perform holistically and frequently to demonstrate learning and to support teachers as agents of expert feedback to guide those student performances.

Then, we are in a position to hold teachers accountable, not for student outcomes but for *those actions that teachers perform as teachers*. The conditions within which teacher accountability can be an avenue toward increasing teacher quality directly and student learning indirectly should include the following:

- Teachers must be held accountable only after they are allowed their professional autonomy. Holding someone accountable for implementing mandates is not conducive to the professionalism we claim teachers should have. *Without professional autonomy, no form of teacher accountability will raise the quality of teachers*, but punitive teacher accountability linked to student test scores will continue to debase and de-professionalize the exact teachers we claim must be highly qualified.

- Autonomous teachers, then, must be held accountable for the act of teaching, not the outcomes of their students. The act of teaching that can be framed and observed, lending itself to accountability, includes three key elements: (1) invitations to learn, (2) opportunities to learn, and (3) expert feedback provided to support student learning. These three elements of teaching are within the control of every teacher, and they all reflect each teacher’s level of expertise in both the content of the teaching and the pedagogy.

A system of accountability built on holding one person accountable for the behaviors of other people within mandates for which those being held accountable have little or no say is not a system that will promote professionalism, but is a system bent on imposing compliance and is ultimately coercive. As long as the bureaucracy of state education remains top-down and built upon quantifying and ranking students and teachers, we will continue to create students and teachers who are dutiful workers, uninspired drones, and people who have had their humanity denied them—in a country and within a system that claim to honor democracy and human agency.

Until we step back, confront, and address the oppressive and corrosive dynamics inherent in what currently counts as teacher accountability, we will continue to fail in our quest for high-quality teachers—and as a result, we will continue to fail literally and metaphorically the children who enter our schools each day.

The Locus of Authority: Our Time for Resistance

In a major journal from the National Council of Teachers of English

(NCTE), a teacher and scholar laments the current state of implementing the research in language: "A brief consideration will indicate reasons for the considerable gap between the research currently available and the utilization of that research in school programs and methods" (p. 87).

And the discussion of that gap between research and pedagogy leads to this conclusion:

Most thinking persons agree that the existence of civilized man is threatened today. While language is not food or drink, and will not satisfy the hungry and thirsty, it is the medium by which we must do much of our learning and planning, and by which we must think out solutions to our problems if we are not to solve them by the direct method of force. No sensible person believes that language will cure all difficulties; but the thoughtful person will certainly agree that language is a highly important factor in promoting understanding, and a most dangerous factor in promoting misunderstanding between individuals and between the countries individuals represent. Moreover, language is a significant factor in the psychological adjustment of the individual. *This is not the time for the teacher of any language to follow the line of least resistance, to teach without the fullest possible knowledge of the implications of his medium.* [emphasis added] Before we, either as individuals or as a Council, experiment with methods of doing specific things or block out a curriculum, let us spend some time with the best scholars in the various fields of language study to discover what they know, what they believe uncertain and in need of study. Let us go to the best sources and study the answers thoughtfully. The game of Gossip is not for us. (p. 94)

While those of us living our lives as teachers, especially teachers of literacy in K-12 settings or in teacher education, may recognize many points above in our current debates about education reform—including some of the debates that simmer below the surface of the workings of professional organizations such as NCTE—this piece is by Lou LaBrant

and was published in the January 1947 issue of *Elementary English* (now *Language Arts*).

Sixty-four years after LaBrant wrote about the gap between research and practice, sixty-four years after she implores us that "[t]his is not the time for the teacher of any language to follow the line of least resistance," educators across the U.S. are faced with the failure of leaders, the public, and professional organizations in the face of the promise of universal public education and its promise to drive the great hope we call democracy.

At the 100th anniversary annual convention for NCTE in Chicago in November 2011, I presented during a panel on the Council's century of leadership in the field of literacy—reading from the essay above by LaBrant and suggesting how she would have responded to the current calls for Common Core national standards, increased testing, intensified teacher accountability linked to those tests, and accelerating mandates driving teacher preparation and accreditation of colleges and departments of education.

I know from my work as the biographer of LaBrant (Thomas, 2001) that she was a powerful voice for the professionalism, scholarship, and autonomy of teachers—including herself and every teacher with whom she interacted. LaBrant, in fact, during the early 1930s when enrolled in her doctoral program at Northwestern University, faced pressure while teaching English to implement required reading lists, textbooks, and benchmark testing, all of which she knew to be flawed practices.

What did LaBrant do?

She fabricated lesson plans with her roommate, the foreign language teacher, and submitted them each week while practicing the pedagogy she embraced—student choice in what they read and wrote, holistic instruction and assessment of literacy. At the end of the year, LaBrant and her students (yes, in the early 1930s) faced end-of-course testing, and LaBrant's students received top scores. Consequently, she was praised by the principal in front of the entire faculty for her dedication to the prescribed policies.

This tension between bureaucratic mandates that seek to shift the *locus of authority* (consider Freire's distinction between "authoritarian" and "authoritative") away from the teacher and within the standards and tests designed and prescribed by the state is not entirely new (except for the intensity), but neither is the need for teachers to own their autonomy, their professionalism—to be that resistance.

Also at the most recent NCTE annual convention, a convention of celebration, Susan Ohanian, Stephen Krashen, Carol Mikoda, Bess Altwerger, Joanne Yatvin, and Richard J. Meyer proposed a resolution: NCTE will oppose common core standards and national tests (2011). This act of resistance, this act of teacher autonomy and professionalism resulted in what Catherine Gewertz (2011) in the Curriculum Matters blog at *Education Week* describes as: "The National Council of Teachers of English was asked by a group of its members to take a strong stand against the common standards, but it declined to do so."

This is a time when political leaders, the public, and national organizations have abdicated their moral obligation to create and maintain universal public education for all children as a sacred trust between a free

people and the promise of democracy. Calls for national standards, increased testing, and stringent teacher accountability tied to those standards and tests are in fact efforts to dis-empower and dehumanize students and teachers in ways that feed a corporate/statist machine that sees people as cogs, interchangeable cogs that are valuable only as much as they promote efficiency and profit.

The corporate and political elite have successfully high-jacked publicly funded essential institutions, such as public schools, and are now creating in their place state education that protects the rising oligarchy and inevitable merging of corporate America and government.

"This is not the time for the teacher of any language to follow the line of least resistance, to teach without the fullest possible knowledge of the implications of his medium."

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