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## **Universality, Equality and Neo-Liberalism in Public Education**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to explore the notions of equality and choice as they pertain to present and future educational practices within the framework of the advanced capitalist structures of the United States. Our objective is to deconstruct the fallacy of equality that seems to occupy a major space in the discourse of structural improvements of the classroom, both as diagnosis of the presumed crisis of public education and as resolution of this crisis from a neo-liberal stand point. For this purpose we attempted to interrogate the logic of equality as it demonstrates itself in today's market ideology, but also in reflecting on the historical genesis of equality outside and within the domain of education.

**Keywords:** Equality, Neo-liberalism, Universality.

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## **Introduction**

Upon looking at the presently dominant narrative in education reform, neo-liberalism seems to assume a central position in arguing for notions of equality and access that are radically different from what has previously constituted a norm, as expressed in the foundational text of *Brown vs. Board of Education*. The new dimensions of equality in education appear to primarily draw upon neo-liberal market considerations, of which choice is primary. Market choice introduced to public education, through charter schools, school vouchers and other designations of choice, presumes a universality, based on the classical concept of self-regulating market rationality, which believes itself capable of redressing material inequalities, manifesting in issues such as achievement gaps, urban disadvantages, cultural mismatches etc. (Apple, 1995). This is projected as achievable through supplemental dynamics of choice. Thus by introducing charter schools and school vouchers, it is argued that parents and students are offered more choice that would circumvent structural and environmental differentials. Also perceived as response to unequal configuration of access to resources and wealth is the rampant culture of testing: standardized tests, continuously highlighted as scientific and objective, are assumed to be able to bridge the gap that exists because of class, race, and gender divisions (Oakes, 1985). In other words the standardized is mechanically seen as means to circumvent inequalities that lie at the very structures of the broader society, a magical state and federal intervention that resolves social and economic ills. In this regard the No Child Left Behind act is repeatedly invoked as the ultimate solution to the many projected ills of public education. By placing emphasis on standardization, accountability and outcome measurement, state and federal authorities believe they have found the right way to overcome the much visited crises of public education.

Our paper looks at the effects of these regulatory mechanisms on the state of public education in the US. Of specific focus to our work is the interrogation of the real meanings and the implications of the discourse of the choice and standardization, and how the latter more often than not sustains conditions of inequality and discriminatory actions in the very act and claim of engraining a natural ability to redress material differentials, which is as our paper would like to argue, a trickle-down effect of neo-liberal ideologies.

We also argue in this paper that in an attempt to understand whether public education makes any progress, one has to address the master narrative of neo-liberal reform of public education as inherently discourse that lacks to perceive in itself a transparency on whose grounds its legitimation as normalized a universal intervention gets reproduced. To measure any real progress in public education, we are proposing that a deconstructive act of the currently fashionable elements of neo-liberal efficiency and progress have to be established. Only then can one break with this domineering discourse in a sense that allows the discussion of progress that is not captive to the dictation of the market.

### **Universality and Neo-Liberal Equity**

The issue of equality also emerges as central to the discourses of the contemporary neoliberal approaches to the domain of education. But unlike the earlier versions that have sought to either institute equality at the abstract level of perfecting an existing system of rationality through expanding claims to universality, or appropriate popular legitimacy through responding to specific social demands in a restrained manner, neoliberal “equality” seems to be a trickle-down effect of efficiency, performative more than anything else, which one can describe as the driving force, projected, of macro and micro achievement. There is no shortage of examples on striving to maximize efficiency that one can come across in almost all aspects of life today. From reaching higher levels of efficiency at the personal level, through multiple means (self-help materials, therapy, spirituality, etc), to highlighting this as the ultimate goal of life activities beyond the personal (business, cultures, governments, and yes education), the infiltration of the notion throughout the whole of sociality seems to occupy a primary status similar to the one that progress and development maintained after the end of World War II. But if the reverse of progress and development was underdevelopment, failure and inefficiency seem to be the flipside of the discourse whose obverse is efficiency.

The proponents of restructuring public education, mainly by taking the route of privatization, oftentimes frame their critiques by alluding to the inadequacies of the system, its inefficiency, and failure; in short, a crisis in the system of public education. The language of the crisis of public education is now commonplace, not only in academic, political and professional circles, but also among parents and students. Public schools are failing kids; underachievement in academic subjects is rampant; violence has become constant at schools; school graduates lack the necessary skills and knowledge for them to become efficient members of the workforce; the very scientific prestige and competitiveness of many developed countries are in doubt, due to staying away from the sciences and engineering, etc.

### **Choice is the Answer!**

Perhaps the most quoted expression of this gloomy assessment of the conditions of the US educational system is the 1983 *Nation At Risk* report. “History is not kind to idlers,” the report tells us by way of bringing to light the “current declining trend – a trend that stems from weakness of purpose, confusion of vision, underuse of talent, and lack of leadership.” This trend, the report argues, threatens to put the very foundational promise of all-entitled-to-a-fair-chance-regardless at risk. The rhetoric of crisis provided a suitable ground for US administrations from Reagan onwards to promote what is self-identified as the only viable alternative: maximizing efficiency of the failing entity by injecting education with rigor, choice, accountability and competition – i.e., what has been hypothesized, in post-Fordist times, to guarantee efficient performance and accomplishments for elements functioning in the free market of unfettered capital flows. Introducing competition into government was a major reform drive for Bill Clinton when he took office: from the meager number of

one charter school, Clinton sought to increase the number to 3000 over the following ten years. “As of 2004, 2993 charter schools operated in the USA, with an enrollment of 698,142 students (Terzian & Boyd, 2004, p. 134).” This was the beginning of what has come later to configure as expanding trend of gradually taking funds away from public education and reallocating them to private education under the banner of improving parents’ choice towards the end of enabling quality education for their children. One recent example is NY State governor Pataki’s proposed budget for 2005, which promises the allocation of 400 million dollars of public monies to “public schools of choice,” i.e., publicly funded schools, though private.

Similar initiatives are defined by neoliberal advocates as providing a solution to the failing public educational system by applying to the latter the same market principles of competitiveness and choice, which are aspired to counter the chronic problem of inefficiency that public education, among other domains of the public, has become synonymous with. Charter schools and school vouchers, and other school choice plans, are seen within this context as response to structural deficiencies in the public educational body. The underlying assumption is that anything that is public is by nature doomed to inefficiency, and that only the private sector can generate perpetual improvements to individuals and society as whole. The element that the private inherently has and the public inherently lacks is competition. Competition, according to George (1999, pp. 24-26), “is central because it separates the sheep from the goats, the men from the boys, the fit from the unfit. It is supposed to allocate all resources, whether physical, natural, human or financial with the greatest possible efficiency.” In this area of social Darwinism, the public more often than not cannot compete; neither can it abide by the law of market competition and maximization of efficiency, hence George’s indication that “neoliberals define anything public as ipso facto ‘inefficient.’” In other words, there is a need, so perceive advocates of neoliberalism, to abolish the “natural monopolies” (George, 1999) that state apparatuses represent in education as in other areas of the public sphere. In their stead, market monopolies, which can operate by the laws of competition and flexibilization, must emerge for the ultimate goal of efficiency to assume precedence. In this line of argument adopted by proponents of neoliberal reforms of education, the public educational system “limits school choice” (Shaker, 1998, p. 20). And choice is elemental to overcoming the crisis and securing the fair and equal chance the *Nation At Risk* priestly mesmerizes.

### **Increasing Efficiency**

Equality, as trickle-down effect of striving to increase efficiency, could also result from stronger and more rigorous school leadership in the areas of standards, excellence and accountability. The aggressive acculturation of the whole of school-life into testing and higher standards has come as response to critiques from “Progressives” and “conservatives” alike on the grounds that schools reproduce inequality – for the former group, and that schools lack standards, rigor and efficiency – for the latter camp (Hursh & Martina, 2003). Here comes the tide of standardization to improve educational and economic efficiency, as well as making sure that students are actually learning, the measurement of which can be achieved by

“objective” and “scientific” tools. Among these students are specifically those that are said to have been disenfranchised by the previous lack of rigorous standards at school, either by reproduced inequality or the mediocre quality of education they received. In other words, standards would bridge the gaps that socioeconomic and cultural disparities and mismatches challenge education with, thanks to the objective, hence neutral, character of the scientific method of standardization of curricula, teaching, testing and assessment. The emphasis on the superiority of scientific assessment over subjective measurements, fraught with human error and inconsistency, is quite apparent. A major rationale for this standardization push is the need to have schools accountable to the public to ensure that the efficiency of their performance and achievement be maximized for the general good of individuals and society. There could be no accountability, thus goes the argument, without tangible standards that allow measurement of student performance. And based on such “objective” judgment, it becomes an effect of fairness and equality to assign rewards and penalties accordingly. As a result, strong performers – whether students, schools or school districts – in honest conjunction with the market-loaned philosophy of efficiency, would reap the fruits of success, not only academically, but also economically and socially. The greater the link between assessment and accountability, the closer the ultimate benchmark of efficiency becomes. This outcome-oriented approach presumes that what works well for the market and its players should yield similar results for education.

### **Discussion**

The neoliberal intervention thus appropriates new meanings to the concept of equality in education and the implications this will have, from a Western historical perspective, on its nominal obverse, i.e., the enterprise of universality. Mainly, there is the shift one can see in defining education, and by extension other functions of social welfare, as no longer a right more or less – until recently, an imperative source for the legitimacy of varied statist structures. Education in a neoliberal sense is primarily a matter of choice, choice that is made by and available to individuals who are capable of making rational and efficiency-driven decisions in bettering their and their children’s lives. This is no small departure by any assessment: right, as an acknowledged expression of universality, is displaced by choice. Choice is now to be perceived as the institution of universality in the name of (market) efficiency above anything else, which stands at considerable odds with the landmark precedent of instituting equality *de jure* in *Brown vs. Board of Education*. What we have here is no longer the designation of certain universality through the inscription of a text, whether the Law or Constitution, regardless of the factuality of correspondence or mismatch; rather, the articulation and marking of universality seems to have become an effect of exercising what is conceived as amenable to achieving certain outcomes, under the banner of efficiency, performativity or else. In other words, *de jure* equalization is mitigated by equalization through choice. While the former, especially with reference to *Brown*, most probably comes as response to registered material inequalities/injustices to which a certain group has been subjected, the latter establishes its jurisdiction on the very negation of material differentiation through the

liberal presumption that all possess the rational capacity to make choices that will better their conditions. The availability of choices (charter schools, school vouchers, etc.) in itself guarantees fair and universal access that can, through the process, redress any material differentials. Put differently, it is not materiality that determines the extents of availability and access, and consequently the limits to universality; rather, the quantitative presence of what can be abstractly articulated as “choice” can circumvent the material and at the same time reassign the notion of universality from a point to be arrived at to terrain to depart from, *a priori* not *a posteriori*.

A similar act of displacement occurs with regards to the second manifestation of efficiency we have discussed above. Standards are treated as impartial, neutral mechanisms that are scientifically and objectively driven rather than ideologically and subjectively motivated. One has to remember that the discourse of standards in education is necessarily supplemental to the economic in two aspects. First, standards in education are but extension of the philosophy that shapes, theoretically at least, corporate and managerial practices in the market to a new domain. Second, remedying the crisis of public education by imposing rigorous standards and accountability should serve the important objective of aligning schooling and instruction with the needs of the capitalist market economy, in a manner that schools can be envisioned as training facilities that should prepare today’s students and tomorrow’s laborers for the requirements of the “real world.” Submitting schooling to the rationalization and determination of training and employability economizes education: Nancy Fraser describes how “economic capitalist system institutions ... depoliticize certain matters by economizing them; the issues in question here are cast as impersonal market imperatives, or as ‘private’ ownership prerogatives, or as technical problems for managers and planners, all in contradistinction to political matters (Fraser, 1989, p.168).” The depoliticizing effect of technicalizing and economizing public educational crisis and its proposed cure is read by many as attempt to exclude the question of standards, excellence and accountability from the realm of legitimate debate, not only because it then becomes a premise for experts and technocrats alone to disentangle, but it also, by virtue of its being annexed by the economic, hopes to be removed from what is socially and politically open to change through voting.

To clarify the last point, one can refer to a particular aspect of capitalism: the split between the political and economic spheres of the capitalist State that Saad-Filho, among others, discusses (Saad-Filho, 2003). This separation means that economic processes are not subordinated to the political authority of the State, contrary to the case of pre-capitalist and quasi-capitalist structures of governance. The division has its consequences on the concentration of power in the two spheres, that capital, condensed in the economic domain, establishes its sovereignty in opposition to the political sovereignty of the capitalist state. “[N]eoliberalism,” explains van der Pijl (2006, pp. 28-30), “enshrines capital as the sovereign force in organizing society,” where the market economy is “bracketed off” from any real challenge of change through formally recognized political means (government, parliament, elections). This is the foundation of the neoliberalism of Fredrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman that came to be known as democracy minus economy, or

what is more commonly defined as ending once and for all every state intervention in matters of the economy.

To articulate the depoliticization of prescribing a way out of the alleged crisis of public education in terms of total “bracketing” from the political, given the market-supplementary role aspired of education today and tomorrow, is both simplistic and misleading. Misleading as it will seem negligent of the many concrete challenges the regime of standardization and accountability has come to recently encounter across the US. Nevertheless, the construct is useful in assessing the limits of universal claims such as that of equality in education. Designating equality as finished universal project of neoliberalism, thanks to the lay attributes of market efficiency, has to eventually collide with the restrictions that capitalism imposes as to what can and cannot be changed through democratic political processes. That the social-economic order is a reality that one cannot go beyond or change is an indication that for true capitalism to materialize, the only possible way is by restricting democracy and limiting politics (K. van der pijl, 2006). This provides some context to the often made critique of the undemocratic nature of restructuring efforts that target education and other aspects of sociality and polity. In other words, when limitation is characteristic interior to the system itself, then claims of expressing or representing some universal dimension, in this case equality at school and in the classroom, have to be taken with considerable doubt. The necessary reverse of the obverse of universality, especially within an inherently restrictive system such as neoliberalism, is limitation and exclusion. This is more so when we remember the displacement of the issue unto the domain of the *a priori*, the pre-material. Interrogating equality for tomorrow’s classroom thus needs to not only articulate the crisis of universality, but it also has to analyze the tendency of the system to limit, restrict, and exclude.

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