

IDEOLOGICAL SUCCESS, EDUCATIONAL FAILURE?

ON THE POLITICS OF NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

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Most educators in the United States have had to confront the changed reality brought about by the federal reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, commonly known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). This represents a set of initiatives that can radically transform the federal role in policing and controlling core aspects of education in general and teacher education. Using a number of key volumes that have been written to either criticize or support major components of NCLB, I provide a critical reading of the assumptions behind NCLB and point to a number of its key negative implications for educational policy and practice. In the process, I point to areas where educators might look for more critically democratic alternatives.

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This article was more difficult to write than one might expect. This is not because I have ambivalent feelings about the topic itself. Indeed, I am strongly opposed to most of the logics and practices embodied in “reforms” such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Nor is it because this is the first opportunity I have had to state these educational, political, and conceptual concerns publicly. Rather, the difficulty lies in exactly these things. There is so much that needs to be said, so many areas that need to be focused on, that one hardly knows where to begin. And, because I have made these criticisms public in considerably more detailed ways in a series of books and articles, in particular in the new and enlarged second edition of *Educating the “Right” Way: Markets, Standards, God, and Inequality* (Apple, 2006; see also, Apple, 2000), there is a real risk of repetition.

Thus, what I have chosen to do is to state in broad outline some of the arguments I have

made more extensively elsewhere and to connect the books under review here to these concerns and arguments. Because of this, I need to be somewhat self-referential, referring the reader to more detailed analyses that I and a number of others have made before. In the process, I first show how the books compare to each other. I then detail some of the serious issues that have been raised about NCLB itself. Finally I critically examine the ways in which the logics behind the more conservative of these books—and NCLB as well—participate in a worrisome attempt to change our common sense by connecting markets to strict regimes of accountability.

The books considered here represent different tendencies and different educational and political affiliations. Their very similar titles, then, are deceptive. *Many Children Left Behind* (Meier & Wood, 2004) speaks back to NCLB and, like myself and a considerable number of

other people throughout the nation, is deeply and justifiably critical of its assumptions and effects on real schools, real educators, and real communities. *No Child Left Behind?* (Peterson & West, 2003) and *Leaving No Child Behind?* (Hess & Finn, 2004) are not uncritical of some aspects of how the legislation has worked at the level of policy and practice but support its overall commitments. By and large, the book edited by Meier and Wood (2004) contains the voices of well-known educational activists, many of whom have worked in schools for years, and thus has a more realistic and less distant feel to it. The voices of educators who have devoted their lives to building alternatives that actually work in urban and rural schools are hard to ignore, even amid the din of the constant call for more testing more often—or as some might say a situation in which “the tail of test wags the dog of the teacher.”

The books edited by Hess and Finn and Peterson and West are in general more distant from the realities of schools and are, again in general, written by academics who are well known for their more conservative leanings and credentials. For the latter, their *bête noir* is most often teachers unions, an antipathy that is more than a little evident in their discussions of what is needed to reform schools, teaching, and increasingly now teacher education. One of the more pronounced characteristics of their discussions is their thinly veiled mistrust of teachers, the voices of whom almost never appear. Teachers are simply there as embodied in teachers unions. And the unions themselves by and large are simply represented as impediments to “what we all know” are needed reforms, impediments that are shared by the widely accepted ways we educate teachers. If we were to change the language of these authors just a bit, it might echo the ways in which business leaders blame their economic woes on paid workers and their unions, at the very same time that they are making decisions that destroy the lives and hopes of so many of these very same people. The fact that part of the funding for the

Peterson and West volume comes from the Olin Foundation, one of the most conservative foundations in the country and well known for its commitments to rightist policies in the economy and elsewhere, speaks to its ideological tendencies.

As a former union leader myself, I have had enough experience with unions to know that their decisions are not always totally wise, especially when it comes to dealing with oppressed communities of color who are demanding a voice in educational decisions. This is one of the reasons that some African American activists have not totally rejected the idea of vouchers for example (Apple & Pedroni, 2005). This said, however, anti-union sentiment, at a time when so much of the organized business community is bent on destroying the collective bodies of as many workers as possible, is one of the least attractive positions I can imagine right now. The language of “producer capture”—that is, schools are organized around the needs of teachers and other educators, not “consumers,” a position that underlies a good deal of the assumptions in these two books—positions teachers who wish to defend their hard-won autonomy and skills in their schools and in colleges of education in ways that are often simply disrespectful. This shouldn’t surprise us because this too is a characteristic of NCLB.

IGNORING COMPLEXITY

Most educators in the United States, and an increasing number of government official and educators in many other nations, are of course now familiar with the key elements of the federal reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, commonly known as No Child Left Behind, passed by Congress in 2001 and signed by President Bush in January 2002. This represents a set of initiatives that can radically transform the federal role in policing and controlling core aspects of education. The major components of the legislation center on testing and accountability but

also provide inroads toward a larger agenda of privatization and marketization.

There are of course other important elements included in the NCLB legislation. It should be immediately clear that the proposals incorporate a number of progressive-sounding issues and are couched in seemingly progressive language. As a number of the chapters in the Peterson and West volume indicate, this is partly a result of the compromises made to get the legislation passed with bipartisan support in Congress. However, it also continues an established tradition of the conservative production of discourse that incorporates progressive language while advancing key elements of the neo-liberal and neo-conservative agendas. It in essence creates what Smith and others have called a "political spectacle," one in which proposals that seemingly lead to reforms that are wanted by the least powerful actors in society are instead largely used to gain legitimacy for very different kinds of agendas and policies (Smith, with Miller-Kahn, Heinecke, & Jarvis, 2004).

Indeed, NCLB is one of the best examples I can think of that documents Nancy Fraser's (1987) claims about the politics of needs and needs discourses. Fraser argued that dominant groups often listen very carefully to the worries and demands that come from below. They then attempt to capture the discourse in which such concerns are voiced. This discourse is then redefined so that the words mean different things. Reforms are then instituted that do not threaten dominant groups' agendas. Rather they respond not to the original meanings inherent in key concepts within the discourse but to policies that create the conditions that dominant groups are able to control or that extend the influence of such groups in the sector of society out of which the concerns come.

Because of the history of such political spectacles and the realities of inequalities in our society, many of the provisions of NCLB, and their hidden effects and connections to other aspects of the conservative agenda, are—and should be—controversial. Controversies continue to swirl and intensify around such

things as its redefinition of *literacy* and *reading instruction* and its emphasis on only one set of strategies for teaching such things. There are major questions as well about its budget priorities and about whether the supposed increase in funding is "real" or not. To these, others can be added. Its redefinition of *accountability* as reducible to scores on standardized achievement tests, and used inappropriately for comparative purposes, is more than a little problematic, although this agenda is pushed forward by the majority of authors in the Peterson and West book. The manner in which NCLB defines success and failure, and the shaming practices associated with these processes, has caused numerous complaints and even rebellions in some states and districts that are continuing to this day. The accompanying loss of local control has also been a consistent worry, as has its less well known linkages with the militarization of schools and the larger society.

There has been little thought about its effect as well on the ways in which the constant stress on "failing public schools" can act to make such things as home schooling—one of the fastest growing transformations in education today, with many more children and parents involved than in charter schools or voucher programs—that much more attractive. With little accountability at all in home schooling, the stress on reductive forms of accountability in NCLB and its emphasis not on improvement (moving a child from, say, a score of 20 to a score of 60) but on an arbitrary definition of *adequate yearly progress* on these same tests, can have the paradoxical effect of actually creating a situation in which ever more children are educated in institutions that have minimal if any forms of public accountability (Apple, 2006; Apple & Buras, 2006). The implications here for teacher education are serious. Anyone can teach anything, thereby undercutting the rhetorical commitment in NCLB to having "fully qualified" teachers throughout the schools of the nation.

Furthermore, the clear implication that what counts as good teaching as well is to be evaluated only on improvements in students' scores

on these tests is less than satisfactory and shows a profound misunderstanding of the complexity of the teaching act. The ways in which it tacitly defines what counts as legitimate knowledge as only that which can be included on such reductive tests flies in the face of decades of struggle over the politics of official knowledge and over the inclusion of the cultures, languages, histories, and values of a country made of cultures from all over the world (Apple, 2000). Not least, as Valenzuela and her colleagues have so clearly demonstrated in places such as Texas, this assemblage of "reforms" has had truly damaging consequences for a large number of our most dispossessed peoples, with race and/or ethnicity being a prime marker of these negative consequences (Valenzuela, 2005; see also Lipman, 2004; McNeil, 2000). All of these concerns are made public in the essays included in Meier and Wood's collection, *Many Children Left Behind*. Although this volume is less seemingly "academic" than the other two books, it does succeed in providing powerful voices of protest, often from the ground up rather than the top down.

All of these issues are crucial, and as I noted I have talked about a number of them elsewhere (Apple, 2006). As I note there, one of the key areas of contention has been the way in which, while (temporarily) limiting some aspects of the pressure to expand voucher and privatization initiatives, the underlying logic of NCLB sutures together the requirements of strong accountability measures with an even further opening toward funding for private education and marketization. The connections between strong accountability measures and a (largely uncritical) faith in marketization are more than a little evident in the Hess and Finn and Peterson and West volumes. Indeed, although there are a few dissenting voices in them that raise questions about such things, much of each of these volumes is grounded in a faith in the efficacy of strong testing regimes and/or a commitment to market logics and processes. Each of these two books is technically sophisticated. Yet this is coupled with a less-than-satisfactory political sensibility about the complexities and social and cultural effects

of the thin democracy and thin morality associated with markets and privatization.

Furthermore, and again as I showed in *Educating the "Right" Way* (2006), each is less than knowledgeable about what has happened in other nations when the combination of "audit cultures" and markets has been instituted. The results have often not been salutary. The near-total absence of international perspectives—and the failure to recognize that we may have a large amount to learn from the experiences of other nations that have tried this combination of neoliberal, neoconservative, and new managerial impulses—is worrisome. It signifies what is dangerously close to arrogance.

It is important to understand the connections between these dual emphases on markets and the regulatory state. Even though many conservative members of Congress had to back away from their original plan to include federal support for vouchers in the legislation, it would be a grave mistake to not see the connection between privatization and increased federal control and intervention through testing. As Valenzuela (2005) documented in Texas, for example, these connections are often very overt in the political actions of conservative advocates.

Elsewhere I have argued that there is no contradiction between supposedly decentralized market-based models of education and centralization through strong regimes of curricular control, testing, and accountability (Apple, 2006). Indeed, the movement toward marketization and "choice" requires the production of standardized data based on standardized processes and "products" so that comparisons can be made and so that "consumers" have relevant information to make choices on a market.

I and many others have documented the negative effects of such "reforms." Because of this, we need to focus on the logics that underpin interventions such as NCLB and similar initiatives, on the creative ideological and/or political work that has gone on to make them acceptable, and on the complicated class and raced dynamics that created them and are the effects of them. To do this, I need say a few things about the general context and shifting

logics in which NCLB operates, logics that work to place strong state models of accountability in close contact with marketization. NCLB does not stand alone and appears on a terrain on which crucial ideological work has already been done.

CHANGING COMMON SENSE

NCLB represents what has been called the politics of “conservative modernization”—the complicated alliance behind the wave after wave of educational reforms that have centered on neo-liberal commitments to the market and a supposedly weak state, neo-conservative emphases on stronger control over curricula and values, and “new managerial” proposals to install rigorous forms of accountability in schooling at all levels (Apple, 2006). The first set of reforms has not demonstrated much improvement in education and has marked a dangerous shift in our very idea of democracy—always a contested concept (Foner, 1998)—from “thick” collective forms to “thin” consumer-driven and overly individualistic forms. As I noted earlier, the second misconstrues and then basically ignores the intense debates over whose knowledge should be taught in schools and universities and establishes a false consensus on what is supposedly common in the United States. The third takes the position that “only that which is measurable is important” and has caused some of the most creative and critical practices that have been developed through concerted efforts in some of the most difficult settings to be threatened (Apple & Beane, 2007; Lipman, 2004; McNeil, 2000). Unfortunately, all too many of the actual effects of this assemblage of reforms have either been negligible or negative, or they have been largely rhetorical. This is unfortunate, especially given all of the work that well-intentioned educators have devoted to some of these efforts. However, reality must be faced if we are to go beyond what is currently fashionable.

The odd combination of marketization on one hand and centralization of control on the other is not only occurring in education through things such as NCLB, nor is it only

going on in the United States. This is a worldwide phenomenon. And although there are very real, and often successful, efforts to counter it (Apple et al., 2003; Apple & Buras, 2006), this has not meant that the basic assumptions that lie behind neo-liberal, neo-conservative, and new managerial forms have not had a major impact on our institutions throughout society and even on our common sense.

In a significant article analyzing the dangers to thick democracy associated with neo-liberal policies, Olssen (1996) made the important point that neo-liberalism requires the constant production of evidence that you are doing things “efficiently” and in the “correct” way. He critically examines the effects of the suturing together of the seemingly contradictory tendencies of neo-liberal and neo-conservative discourses and practices, and publicly worries that these effects may be very damaging to our sense of the importance of our public institutions. Yet bringing together seemingly disparate tendencies is exactly what is happening at all levels of education and is strikingly visible in NCLB. This is occurring at the same time as the state itself becomes increasingly subject to commercialization. This situation has given rise to what might best be called an *audit culture*. To get a sense of the widespread nature of such practices, it is useful here to quote from Leys (2003), one of the most perceptive analysts of this growth:

[There is a] proliferation of *auditing*, i.e., the use of business derived concepts of independent supervision to measure and evaluate performance by public agencies and public employees, from civil servants and school teachers to university [faculty] and doctors: environmental audit, value for money audit, management audit, forensic audit, data audit, intellectual property audit, medical audit, teaching audit and technology audit emerged and, to varying degrees of institutional stability and acceptance, very few people have been left untouched by these developments. (p. 70)

The widespread nature of these evaluative and measurement pressures, and their ability to become parts of our common sense, crowd out other conceptions of effectiveness and democracy.

In place of a society of citizens with the democratic power to ensure effectiveness and proper use of collective resources, and relying in large measure on trust in the public sector, there emerged a society of "auditees," anxiously preparing for audits and inspections. A punitive culture of "league tables" developed (purporting to show the relative efficiency and inefficiency of universities or schools or hospitals). Inspection agencies were charged with "naming and shaming" "failing" individual teachers, schools, social work departments, and so on; private firms were invited to take over and run "failing" institutions. (Leys, 2003, p. 70)

The ultimate result of an auditing culture of this kind is not the promised decentralization that plays such a significant role rhetorically in most neo-liberal self-understandings but also what seems to be a massive recentralization and what is best seen as a process of dedemocratization. Making the state more "business friendly" and importing business models directly into the core functions of the state such as hospitals and education—in combination with a rigorous and unforgiving ideology of individual accountability—these are the hallmarks of life today. The blame-and-shame policies embodied in NCLB, the growth of for-profit ventures such as Edison Schools and the rapid growth of the supplementary services industries associated with NCLB that are discussed in the Hess and Finn volume, the increasing standardization and technicization of content within teacher education programs so that social reflexivity and critical understanding are nearly evacuated from courses (Apple, 2001), the constant pressure to "perform" according to imposed and often-reductive standards in our institutions of education, and similar kinds of things are the footprints that these constantly escalating pressures have left on the terrain of education.

A key to all of this is the devaluing of public goods and services. It takes long-term and creative ideological work; however, people must be made to see anything that is public as "bad" and anything that is private as "good," a very real cause and effect of NCLB's emphasis on failure. And anyone who works in these public institutions must be seen as inefficient and in need of the sobering facts of competition so that they work longer and harder. When the

people who work in public institutions fight back, as in the case of the authors included in Meier and Wood's book, and argue for more respectful treatment and for a greater realization that simplistic solutions do not deal with the complexities that they face everyday in the real world of schools, universities, and communities, they are labeled as recalcitrant and selfish and as uncaring. Sometimes, as in the case of former U.S. Secretary of Education Page's public comments to what he thought was a sympathetic audience, they are even called "terrorists." And these "recalcitrant, selfish, and uncaring" employees—teachers, academics, administrators, social workers, and almost all other public employees—can then have their labor externally controlled and intensified by people who criticize them mercilessly, often as in the case of major corporations while these same businesses are shedding their own social responsibilities by paying little or no taxes.

I noted earlier that it is not just the labor of state employees that is radically altered; so too is the labor of "consumers." When services such as hospitals and schools are commodified, a good deal of the work that was formerly done by state employees is shifted onto those using the service. Examples of labor being shifted to the "consumer" include online banking, airline ticketing and check-in, supermarket self-checkouts, and similar things. Each of these is advertised as enhancing "choice" and each comes with a system of incentives and disincentives. Thus, one can get airline miles for checking in on one's computer. Or as some banks are now doing, there is an extra charge if you want to see a real live bank teller rather than using an ATM machine (which itself often now has an extra charge for using it).

The effects of such changes may be hidden; however, that does not make them any less real. Some of these are clearly economic: the closing of bank branches; the laying off of large numbers of workers, including in elementary, middle, and secondary schools and in higher education; the intensification of the workload of the fewer workers who remain. Some are hidden in their effects on consumers: exporting all of the work and the necessary commitment

of time onto those people who are now purchasing the service; searching for information that was once given by the government; doing one's banking and airline work oneself; bagging and checking out at supermarkets. The classed and raced specificities of this are crucial because the ability to do such electronic searching and education, for example, is dependent on the availability of computers and especially time to engage in such actions. It requires resources—temporal and financial, to say nothing of emotional—that are differentially distributed. Even the Peterson and West and Hess and Finn books recognize that this is not an inconsequential problem.

This all may seem so trivial. However, when each "trivial" instance is added up, the massiveness of the transformation in which labor is transferred to the consumer is striking. For it to be successful, our common sense must be changed so that we see the world only as individual consumers, and we see ourselves as surrounded by a world in which everything is potentially a commodity for sale. To speak more theoretically, the subject position on offer is the deraced, declassed, and degendered "possessive individual," an economically rational actor who is constructed by and constructs a reality in which democracy is no longer a political concept but is reduced to an economic one (Apple, 2006).

Mark Fowler, Ronald Reagan's chair of the Federal Communications Commission, once publicly stated that television is simply a toaster with pictures. A conservative media mogul in England seemed to agree when he said that there is no difference between a television program and a cigarette lighter (Leys, 2003, p. 108). Both positions are based on an assumption that cultural form and content and the processes of distribution are indeed commodities. There are few more important mechanisms of cultural selection and distribution than schools and universities. And under this kind of logic, one might say that educational institutions are simply toasters with students. There is something deeply disturbing about this position not only in its vision of education but also profoundly in its understanding of the lives of the people who actually work in such institutions

and in the often underfunded, understaffed, and difficult conditions now being experienced there. Although it would be too reductive to see educational work merely in labor process terms, the intensification that has resulted from the conditions associated with this assemblage of assumptions has become rather pronounced (Apple, 1995, 2000). Yet, like so much else, this is one of the things so clearly missed by the authors included in the Peterson and West and Hess and Finn volumes.

Of course, many of us may be apt to see such things as relatively humorous or innocuous. Aren't proposals that combine audit cultures and markets for such things as schools, universities, health care, and so much more just another, but supposedly more efficient, way of making services available. However, not only are these ideologically driven "reforms" not all that efficient, but also the process of privatization is strikingly different than public ownership and control. For example, to market something such as education, it must first be transformed into a commodity, a "product." The product is then there to serve different ends. Thus, rather than schooling being aimed at creating critically democratic citizenship as its ultimate goal (although we should never romanticize an Edenic past when this was actually the case; schooling has always been a site of struggle over what its functions would actually be, with the working class and many women and people of color being constructed as "not quite citizens"), the entire process can slowly become aimed instead at the generation of profit for shareholders or a site whose hidden purpose is to document the efficiency of newly empowered managerial forms within the now supposedly more business-like state.

The fact that such things as the for-profit Edison Schools have not generated the significant profits that their investors had dreamed of means that the process of commodification is at least partly being rejected. For many people in all walks of life, the idea of "selling" our schools and our children is somehow disturbing, as the continuing controversy over Channel One, the for-profit television station with advertising now being broadcast in 43% of all public and private middle and secondary schools in the United

States, amply demonstrates (Apple, 2000). These intuitions demonstrate that in our everyday lives there remains a sense that there is something very wrong with our current and still too uncritical fascination with markets and audits.

David Marquand (2000) summarized the worrisome tendencies I have been describing in the following way:

The public domain of citizenship and service should be safeguarded from incursions by the market domain of buying and selling. . . . The goods of the public domain—health care, crime prevention, and education—should not be treated as commodities or proxy commodities. The language of buyer and seller, producer and consumer, does not belong in the public domain; nor do the relationships which that language implies. Doctors and nurses do not “sell” medical services; students are not “customers” of their teachers. . . . The attempt to force these relationships into a market model undermines the service ethic, degrades the institutions that embody it and robs the notion of common citizenship of part of its meaning. (pp. 212-213)

I agree. In my mind, public institutions are the defining features of a caring and democratic society. The market relations that are sponsored by our economy should exist to pay for these institutions, not the other way around. Thus, markets are to be subordinate to the aim of producing a fuller and thicker participatory democratic polity and daily life. It should be clear by now that a cynical conception of democracy that is “on sale” to voters and manipulated and marketed by political and economic elites does not adequately provide for goods such as general and higher education, objective information, media and new forms of communication that are universally accessible, well-maintained public libraries for all, public health, and universal health care. At best, markets provide these things in radically unequal ways, with class, gender, and especially race being extremely powerful markers of these inequalities. If that is the case—even if the definitions of the “public” were and often still are based on the construction of gendered and raced spaces (Fraser, 1987)—the very idea of public institutions is under concerted attack. They need to be provided—and defended—collectively.

Such things are anything but secondary. They are the defining characteristics of what it means to be a just society.

Unfortunately, as the books by Hess and Finn and Peterson and West demonstrate, the language of privatization, marketization, and constant evaluation has increasingly saturated public discourse in almost all of our institutions, including as I showed in much greater detail in an earlier essay in this journal (Apple, 2001), institutions involved in teacher education. In many ways, it has become common sense—and the critical intuitions that something may be wrong with all of this may slowly wither. Yet, in many nations where conditions are even worse, this has not necessarily happened—and this is a crucial point. The growth of participatory budgeting, “Citizen Schools,” and close relations among teachers, teacher education programs, and building more socially responsive and critical curricular and pedagogical initiatives in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and elsewhere documents that there are indeed powerful alternatives to the logics embodied in reforms such as NCLB, if we but look for them (Apple et al., 2003; Apple & Buras, 2006). We can learn from these nations’ experiences, and we can relearn what it means to reconstitute the civic in our lives.

When combined with the experiences of building more critically democratic schools and curricula that are found in such things as the journal *Rethinking Schools* and in descriptions of the growing democratic schools movement in the United States (Apple & Beane, 2007), we can continue to demonstrate that education, rightly conceived, has a fundamental role to play in doing exactly that reconstitution. However, as the authors included in *Many Children Left Behind* eloquently argue, education and teacher education can only do so if they are protected from those who see them as one more set of products to be consumed as we measure them and who interpret the intellectual and emotional labor of those who are engaged in educational work through the lenses of standardization, rationalization, and auditing. With its combination of aggressive blame and shame policies and its opening toward marketization, NCLB doesn’t come close to enabling an education worth its name.

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