

8-2016

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Recommended Citation

Sonu, Debbie; Gorlewski, Julie; and Vallée, Daniel, "Editorial: Learn, by listening to the child in neoliberal schools" (2016). *CUNY Academic Works*.
http://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc_pubs/285

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Editorial: Learn, by listening to the child in neoliberal schools

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Perhaps unsurprisingly, this Special Issue for the Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies emerged out of a disappointed search for literature on the experiences of neoliberal education as spoken by children and youth. While there is no shortage of work on the reverberations of market ideology within the structures, policies, and practices of schooling in the United States, an overwhelming majority of this is discussed through the reflective hindsight of the adult. Given that current discussions on education are heavily centered on the student, so much so that their performance constitutes a great percentage of teacher evaluations and their failure on standardized exams could potentially result in school closures and job loss, it is bewildering that children and youth are rarely invited to voice themselves in the conversation.

Thus, we as editors, purposefully designed this issue to address the marginalization of a constituency who we believe can illuminate the state of schooling in ways that we as adults cannot. In this introduction, we put the child and youth in question by interrogating commonly held beliefs that regard such as natural, determined and predictable life stages defined by colloquial uptakes and developmental theories (for a complete Special Issue on this matter, see Farley & Garlen, 2016). With the aim of understanding these concepts as social productions, we present the following nine articles as examples of how children and youth are reclaiming discursive spaces both in and out of school sites, providing adult teachers, teacher educators, and policy-makers with experiential grounds upon which to rethink how neoliberal practices impact them as individual beings. We hope this issue not only fills a gap in the literature, but also urges others to consider the necessity of listening to all those who have been pushed aside and systematically disregarded in the conversation on urban schooling. In the end, we hope to create more compassionate and caring social conditions that rethink educational relations across differences and radical alterities (Todd, 2003). This requires us to not only interrogate the

essentialist borders and boundaries that we create, but to locate possibilities for non-violent forms of relationality in the immediacy of our encounter with those who are other.

The child & youth

As mentioned, we believe the disregard for the child arises in part from a discursive condition that first positions the child as a distinctive category, and second, ascribes to it a narrative steeped in inferiority. Since the beginning of the 16th century, conceptions of the child have been undergirded by both a Rousseauian spirituality of innocence and the Kantian rationality of immaturity, both of which continue to appear in educational theories and practices (Jenks, 1996). While a historical examination of its many conceptual iterations is beyond the scope of this introduction, Kenneth Hultvist and Gunilla Dahlberg (2001) argue that the child has never been able to exercise sovereignty by virtue of its relationship to the desires, hopes, insecurities, and fears embodied by its other socially constructed counterpart, the adult. To borrow from James Kincaid (1992), “the child carries for us things we somehow cannot carry for ourselves, sometimes anxieties we want to be divorced from and sometimes pleasure so great we could not, without the child, know how to contain them” (p. 74). Therefore, the child can be seen as governed by ideologies, institutions, and social practices that reflect adult-centered concerns over depravity, loss of innocence, future prosperity, as well as those that are tied to national security, global competition, and the future of the neoliberal world writ large.

Similar to the child, abstracted and universalized constructions produce a set of characteristics that dictate how youth and adolescence come to be known. In more common undertakings, adolescence is demarcated as the years considered to be in transition toward adulthood and are characterized by increased irrationality, turbulence, and emotional waywardness, all of which justifies a need for external guidance and control. According to Nancy Lesko (2012), such beliefs about youth began to emerge at the same time in which the United States became a modern colonial nation. The scientific arguments that supported colonial expansion and the decimation of the indigenous population carried with it racist and evolutionist bases which were then carried forward through parallel institutions such as those in education, religion, and the government. These unquestioned ideologies carry an ontological dependence on classical recapitulation theory that aligns the growth of the child to the development of humankind, equating children to savages, savages to animals and animals to children, with adolescence sitting at the very cusp of primitivism and superior Western selfhood.

This discourse has led to the discursive production of the teacher as the one who intervenes upon the child in order to bring them towards a legitimized definition of post-industrial adulthood. Today, the role of the teacher has become unabashedly bound to visions of national prosperity that, within federal educational policies such as the Common Core Learning Standards, state the purpose of their work as cultivating the highest, most effectively competitive form of young citizens/workers. Along these lines, the teacher then evaluates and manages children as subjects of broader political and economic aims, further compromising their self-defining sovereignty and worthiness as subjectively emerging individuals. Again, this is not to demonize the teacher, nor does it support any form of determinism. In effect, it surfaces the condition of possibility within which we all work and highlights the ways in which the aims of schooling cull out from both the child and teacher particular ways of being, thinking and conceiving of themselves and the other.

Youth and adolescence, as well as child and childhood, are not only forms of identification, but social spaces in which adult promises of modernity, citizenship, and rational self-determination exert play. Cities have long been regarded by state representatives as coddlers of the poor and the epicenter of depravity. Urban settings are characterized by complexity, limited resources, and density, among other things (Freudenberg, Galea & Vlahov, 2006). As the U.S. expanded rapidly with the influx of immigrants, adults funneled children into public school systems to ensure moral uprightness, acculturate immigrant children into mainstream society, and to teach literacy and numeracy for purposes of employment. With an emphasis on control and efficiency, deviation from acceptable forms of humanness were further supported by the advent of scientific study and biological determinism, beliefs that endure through the residues of social Darwinism and the Great Chain of Being. Assimilationist policies and practices in schools served to define and delimit the civilized from the uncivilized, reproducing in a Foucauldian sense, regimes of truth against which all other conceptions of the child are measured. This historicity, claims Valerie Walkerdine (2009) has always been inflected by Western class-specific gendered domesticity and its racist and classist attitudes and assumptions.

Yet, this does not imply that the subject of the child or youth is simply a result of such institutionalized truth-making. While subjectivities certainly respond to an external force or desire to construct, conduct, and negotiate the self in particular ways, the individual is always faced with the possibility to subvert, what Bronwyn Davies (2006) calls, a radically-conditioned agency. By drawing upon Judith Butler, Davies explains that the

subject does not have an existence outside of the very processes of subjecthood; it is continually made into a subject, yet not as a simple product of these forces and measure. Rather, the child and youth emerge through being recognized and its own recognition within a discourse that is always vulnerable to change. Therefore, this paradoxical condition of mastery and submission is simultaneously tied to the possibility of eclipsing the external powers that act on the subject. This acknowledges the child as more than a natural or naturally-occurring phenomenon in human development. Instead, it denaturalizes the child as a fixed and monolith category, and dissociates it from a place of immaturity and adulthood yet-to-come.

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is not a recent phenomenon; it is an extension and an intensification of settler colonialism (Tuck, 2013). Although neoliberalism is often perceived as an economic policy in which government spending is reduced, in reality it is extension and intensification of the colonization of land, wealth, culture, and power. Neoliberalism is a sociocultural philosophy in which life is subordinated to money. Policies related to neoliberalism privilege profit over people and corporate enterprise over the common good. This philosophy, when translated into action, has material consequences that result in benefits for a few and harm for many.

The ways in which the child is bound to economic aims and objectives is no more clearly seen than in the neoliberal reforms that have pushed their way through classroom doorways. Such reforms, namely those that standardize knowledge and skills, reducing students and learning into rankable data points, have influenced the societal view of what constitutes an acceptable child. Extending the notion of the neoliberal self (Vassallo, 2012), in which humans are defined through market-oriented features, neoliberal policies define the acceptable child is one who is able to successfully contribute to prosperous nation-state futurities. This has led to conceptions of the child that are tied to economic interests, particularly the rise of industrialization and more recently corporatization.

As part of the neoliberal project, global markets are exerting influence on national educational policy (Au & Lubienski, 2016). In the US, the rapid churning of federal educational reforms such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race to the Top (RttT) are indicative of several consequences of such influence. First and foremost, the churning of education reforms speaks to fear of waning economic competitiveness, particularly given the rapid economic rise of countries like China, and India (Friedman,

2005). Second, as private enterprise and market forces displace the public commons, social discontent with public institutions grows. As public entities such as schools are increasingly underfunded, satisfaction with their services diminishes. Consequently, public schools, particularly in urban settings are progressively more vulnerable to the organized and well-funded attacks on teachers and their unions by bipartisan groups of reformers (Fabricant and Fine, 2013). Finally, education reforms are a symbolic production of an *image of stability* (Harvey, 2004); education reforms are regarded as both certain and decisive fiats by leaders of state. Regardless of long-term consequences, the implementation of new policies -- particularly when tied to documentation of improvement, such as test scores -- creates an illusion of progress from which political leaders can benefit.

Educational reforms initiatives such as NCLB and RttT have done the double work of allowing the private sector to intrude profitably into resources that previously supported the public sector, while also presenting a stable image to voters. Harvey (2004) suggests that appealing to a collective desire for common values is performed through the production of stable images in postmodernity: "Corporations, governments, political and intellectual leaders all value an image of stability to maintain an aura of power" (p.288). The employment of positivist, empirical science in the production of a stable image is part of a postmodern condition in which an "individualistic society of transients" nostalgically seeks common values.

As privatization proliferates, supporters of market models in education make rhetorical appeals to such common values. For example, teachers' unions and politicians are portrayed as concerned primarily about themselves, rather than about equity, justice, or the needs of learners. This is evident in the statement by Success Academy Charter schools board member, Dan Loeb, a wealthy entrepreneur, who said: "Unfortunately, all the good things we do [at Success Academy] are contested by people in the political-union complex, that for whatever reason put their own adult interests above those of the children" (Gordon, 2016). Such characterizations undermine public trust in public institutions, thus increasing their vulnerability to forces of privatization. Initiatives that involve rhetorical choice rather than meaningful transformation increase inequity rather than ameliorate it.

In reality, the technology of charters and school choice may do little to mitigate the gross health and wealth inequalities correlated with educational outcomes (e.g., Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2008). Further, drawing a comparison between public health and education,

Woolf and Braveman (2011) have found that [medical] technological advances produce far lower benefits to historically marginalized and under-resourced populations. Just, equitable benefits require social change, not simply the implementation of progressive discourses and innovative technologies laid onto unjust social relations. In the context of neoliberalism, such social change would mean reframing public education as a public good that requires protection from the practices and ideology of the private sector, reaffirming a mandate of universal inclusion indiscriminate of language, race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, location, or (dis)ability.

The neoliberal turn to the quick-fix technologies of school choice, charter schooling, and fiscally coercive national curriculums (see RttT) are desirable in large part because they are indeed, *quick*. In *A brief history of neoliberalism*, Harvey (2007) describes neoliberalism as the belief that the free market is best able to care for the needs of the population. The rise of neoliberalism is predicated upon shifting perceptions of space and time in the postmodern period. Harvey states that financialization, or the deregulation of the finance system making it a main center of speculative, and predatory redistributive activity, has contributed to the acceleration of time and the shrinking of space. For examples of the simultaneous acceleration of time and shrinking of space, consider the speed of operation coupled with the contracting interrelations experienced in stock markets, global communication, social media, and knowledge networks. In terms of the need to amplify youth voices with respect to their experiences of schooling, two points are noteworthy: (1) public schooling is framed by some as the last “public monopoly” in need of being aggressively privatized, and (2) the compression of space and times in postmodernity is linked to undesirable changes in schooling, including the predominance of a notion of school-for-work, and the push for standardizations and high-stakes accountability. In other words, the churning of US educational reforms emerges from “a sea-change in political-economic practices” whose only possible identity is economic-based. There is neither room nor desire for subjectivity in the postmodern condition. Youth voices are neither solicited nor valued therein.

Neoliberalism, echoing settler colonialism, seeks to squelch and silence resistance. As this issue of JCEPS will reveal, however, the voices of youth are vibrant and strong - offering spaces for hope and possibility. If social change is to occur, it will happen through contingent collaboration (Tuck, Smith, Guess, Benjamin, & Jones, 2014), spaces where youth, educators, and community members work together for justice. Although the dearth of submissions highlights a need to amplify the voices of youth, the power inherent in the voices is an unmistakable beacon of change.

The articles

A simple search of the term “child” brings forth a specific etymology steeped in condescension. To act like a child is to be immature, bereft of thought, reason or rationale. Being “childlike” is used to refer to one who is irresponsible, dependent, and not worthy of genuine consideration. Against this inferiority, we believe the authors here make a discursive move that is more than simple inclusion. For us, it is critical to understand how the child and youth have been constructed as a social category, a position that essentially enabled neoliberal school reforms to act upon their very personhood (Sonu & Benson, 2016). Each article in this special issue helps us to understand how the child comes to be known and recognized as a learner, both at the intersections of normative conceptions of childhood and material expectations of the student.

Through critical discourse analysis, Nataly Chesky and Rebecca Goldstein discuss how the production of media reports in the area of STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) policy re-inscribe normative beliefs on girls which reduce their complexity and reaffirm the economic intentions laden within the field. While STEM education comprises a set of policies aimed at workforce preparation, technological innovation, market competition, and minority access, the voices of female student participants are only utilized insofar as they buttress the neoliberal agenda. Discourses that construct the child as one who must be “college and career-ready” are not merely representations of the acceptable child, but operate to produce particular knowledges about who and what can be recognized as a child, as well as solidify the functions and purposes of childhood and their eventual status as adults.

Across the pieces, and also apparent throughout a large majority of the submissions, there is concerted effort to attend to the experiences of children and youth of color, as well as immigrant, bilingual, indigenous, working-class and female students. This is expected, as the discriminatory effects of neoliberal school reform, including the standardization of curriculum and the emphasis on high stakes testing, has its most detrimental effects on these very communities (Au, 2009; Lipman, 2011; Leonardo, 2009). For example, by drawing upon narrative inquiry, Pamela Hickey shares the experiences of emergent bilingual, or English Language Learners, at two elementary schools and demonstrates how the neoliberal drive to assess and rank mediates their academic literacy and impacts their instructional lives. Her work makes clear that children are exceptionally keen to the oft-inappropriate expectations impressed upon them and exhibit deep emotions of shame, failure and frustration when unable to meet such idealizations.

Yet Julie Gorlewski reminds us that the effects of neoliberalism have material consequences that impact all students, even those in suburban contexts. In her article, she interviews students on the kinds of writing they find meaningful and juxtaposes this with the mandates of more standardized and assessed assignments in English Language Arts. By doing so, she reveals that students at this progressive first-ring high school have a very acute sense of the ways in which neoliberal demands control the language, form, and composition of their literary engagements and practices.

While reformers assert that a market-oriented education, expanded through an increase of charter schools and the closing of failing or under-enrolled public institutions will improve student achievement and narrow longstanding gaps between raced and classed students, a report by Broader, Bolder Approach to Education (Weiss & Long, 2013) found the results to be on the contrary. Since the intrusion of neoliberal policies and practices, exam scores have actually become stagnate; gaps are exacerbated; and school closures do not send our young to better schools. In the articles that follow, readers will find children and youth struggling to express themselves amid a flurry of social practices that flatten their educational experience into data points, reading levels, and abstracted admissions processes.

It is within this contradictory context that Claudia Diera introduces us to four former high school students who spearheaded collective action in the pursuit of just educational reforms. By drawing on counter public theory, she ruptures false notions of youth as passive or complacent to their school environments and instead highlights the potential for democratic partnerships as it relates to educational policy and practice. In a similar vein, Jim Burns, Jamie Nolan, Ernest Weston, Jr. and Amanda Malcolm presents us with a visually touching narrative from two American Indian students in order to theorize the connection between colonizing education and neoliberal schooling. Against domination, these narratives become examples of counter-resistance and survival amid the settler colonialism that continues to reverberate today.

In their article, Jessica Ruglis and Daniel Vallée work with four Canadian public school students who through the creation of photo essays describe how their sense of self has become fractured within conditions of unfairness and failure. As such, they call for educational approaches that not only describe, but acknowledge the nestedness of human ecologies that give rise to complex relationships such as teacher/student, private/public, individual and institution. In a powerful display of poetry, high school seniors from Urban

Assembly in the Bronx, New York City contributes what they call a written ‘variation,’ or a way of organizing a piece of music by taking a theme and repeating it in several different ways. The subject of their work is youth existence behind the metaphorical bars set up by racism, discrimination, and dehumanization. We are honored to accept a short theatrical script written by youth themselves who with raw veracity perform their ethnic entrapments.

While most of the articles featured in this issue are situated within the context of schooling, Maria Isabel Morales takes us into the cherry orchards of Washington state through the multiple narratives of children who accompany their families during summer work. In doing so, Morales documents the kinds of learning that unfolds within labor spaces of capitalist exploitation that are not about institutionalized school.

As we introduce the articles in this issue, we hope to provide the contextual terrain from which to understand the governing of children and youth as a set of social practices that not only serve to marginalize and subjugate, but also as a call to critique the very terms we use to think about this population. As readers digest the articles, we suggest that one hold in suspension the question of why certain conceptions of children and youth are so difficult to bend and reconceptualize, and furthermore, how this links to our own desperations as adults who thrust unto others such immense responsibilities and pressures.

Reflections

In the months after the call for this issue, we experienced an inundation of interest. Certainly, the absence of children and youth voices in the examination of neoliberal schooling is a common concern. However many of the manuscripts that we received did not draw upon the voices of children and youth but were rather told as adult perspectives on how neoliberal school reforms were making their detrimental effects. This, we interpret, stems from the very notion that we have not yet deconstructed the ways in which we reduce children and youth to a distinct category that cannot speak for themselves. We feel that we have further to go to mitigate the distance between educational researcher and participant. While our contributing authors have admirably chosen youth as their subject, as we write our introductory remarks, we cannot help but find ourselves in an old and familiar position, struggling with longstanding problems of occupying a space of “expertise” – a quintessentially *adult* voice. While not so naïve as to imagine, we would overcome this ongoing conundrum of social science research by

simply calling for youth perspectives, and we admit being perhaps overly hopeful that submissions would contain more youth and less adult voice.

Yet this may be only part of the explanation. In many schools, pre-scripted curricula must be followed with fidelity; assessments and test preparation consume a substantial part of the academic year; and increased social and economic disparities have required teachers to devote much of their attention to the resultant breakdown and resistances of their children. The demand on public school teachers to evidence and be evaluated on student growth has led to school cultures of unprecedented intensity whereby researchers and student teachers have experienced greater obstacles to access and collaboration.

Moreover, as we teachers, teacher educators, and field supervisors in schools, witness the anxiety heightening and tightening in many schools, particularly those in low-income communities, teacher certification exams, such as the ed TPA, have placed even greater demand on schools, requiring teacher candidates to undergo extensive video-taping and analysis. These requirements have intruded upon the classroom in ways that have led to severed relationships between universities and K-12 public schools. In a climate such as this, it is easier to write about schooling from the proverbial ivory tower, than to avail oneself to being a burden to the very institution we hope to understand, assist, and support.

Here, we have done our best to give space to those studies that raise up the voices of youth. At the same time, we have premised from the onset our belief that neoliberalism has shaped the work of teaching and research in complicated ways. Academics are increasingly finding themselves in the competitive business of producing knowledge. Less than 50 percent of faculty positions are tenured or tenure-track, and in some cases, the acquisition of research funding is regarded as more important than publications. If James Paul Gee (2016) is correct, there is more incentive for scholars to remain relatively close to the status quo. He notes that such is the case especially for those with prestigious degrees and perhaps greater influence—those with less prestigious degrees may have more room to experiment methodologically. We reiterate our point about the predominance of quantitative, mainstream research, as such research that fills in the blocks rather than presents its contradictions and challenges.

If the past days of academia allowed for more flexibility by researchers, our present time is in some ways more hostile to new methodologies. As an example, we noticed the strong inclination within submissions to favor the semi-structured interview as the primary method of investigation. Even more to the point, we received only one

submission that used Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) (e.g., Cammarota & Fine, 2010); which, in our minds, is perhaps one methodology by which to give space to youth voice. YPAR is a research approach that regards youth as co-researchers who take part in the design, planning, execution, analysis, and presentation of research findings. Participatory methods of research compress vertical power dynamics and are capacity-building in nature. However, YPAR is known to be both time-consuming and challenging in a number of diverse ways. Sharing the stage, so-to-speak with co-researchers outside of academia is one such challenge, and for scholars of education attempting to carve out a space in neoliberal times, this decision can be even more difficult to actualize. Another methodological concern is the lack of long-term ethnographic study within schools themselves. We wonder if this is another function of the compression of space and time, in which academics are in a hurry to publish quickly and frequently.

Other than these old and newer methodological issues pertaining to educational research, we are pleased to present you with what we feel is a strong contribution to studies in education. The sum total of our special issue is a poignant account of youth and child experience of public schooling in North America, primarily the U.S. We find in these accounts a compelling caution about the transformation of public schooling in an increasingly market-based world, but also a sense of hope, agency, and strength as youth participants give voice to their experience in it.

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