

## The Moral Bankruptcy of Corporate Education

by Jim Burns – September 01, 2015

*This commentary is contextualized in America's gilded age of corporate education characterized by millionaire CEO university presidents and a growing chasm of wealth inequality in our educational class system. America's deepening educational stratification mirrors and magnifies wider social, economic, racial, and political inequality and injustice. The author calls for a praxis of refusal among all educators as active public intellectuals to re-politicize education and reframe it as a way of being and becoming in the world and a force for justice and democracy.*

Recently, during my ritual morning search for news, I encountered two related articles of significance to American education, democracy, and justice. The first, a *New York Times* Op-Ed (Bruni, 2015) commented on the “shockingly lucrative deals that have become almost commonplace among college presidents.” Among those mentioned: Yale’s Richard Levin, recipient of an \$8.5 million “additional retirement benefit” in 2013 and Ohio State’s E. Gordon Gee, who received a “one-time bonanza” of \$6 million in his final year after being paid approximately \$2 million annually. Bruni concludes:

All in all, few presidents give adequate thought to the symbolism and dissonance of extraordinarily generous salaries, which are in sync with the era of lavish executive pay and glaring income inequality but out of line with the ostensible mission of academia.

Accentuating this point was the lead story in *Inside Higher Ed* entitled “Widening Wealth Gap,” which reported the rapidly increasing stratification of colleges and universities as measured by their cash and endowments (Woodhouse, 2015). The 40 wealthiest universities, led by Harvard with cash and investments of nearly \$43 billion, hold “two-thirds of all the wealth among the 500 colleges rated by [investment rating firm] Moody’s,” with the top 10 holding cash and endowments of nearly \$180 billion (Woodhouse, 2015). Approximately 4,000 other institutions unworthy of a Moody’s rating apparently comprise the higher education equivalent of the working poor. Woodhouse also notes that the percentage of low-income students enrolled in the wealthiest institutions is relatively low in comparison to less wealthy colleges. Considering 2013 Century Foundation data (as cited in Woodhouse, 2015), which found that elite institutions served 14 wealthy students for every one low-income student, and public subsidies of wealthy universities through federal student aid and the tax-exempt status of their endowment gains and land holdings, the corporate structure of American higher education replicates an unjust, undemocratic plutocracy. Where social class intersects with race and ethnicity, the deepening inequity of American education intensifies class stratification and racial injustice:

The postsecondary system mimics the racial inequality it inherits from the K-12 education system, then magnifies and projects that inequality into the labor market and society at large. In theory, the education system is colorblind; but, in fact, it is racially polarized and exacerbates the intergenerational reproduction of white racial privilege (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013).

Welcome to the gilded age of corporate education, in which education represents a private benefit rather than a public good (Boyer, 1994).

### EDUCATION FOR JUSTICE AND DEMOCRACY?

In April 2015, the American Educational Research Association presented its Social Justice in Education Award to Gloria Ladson-Billings. In her lecture she problematized the term *social justice* and challenged us to consider the issues confronting American education as issues of “justice, just justice.” Reflecting on my morning news in the context of Ladson-Billings’ lecture forced me to confront the magnitude of educational injustice in America:

- The assault on the voting rights of persons of color and racial segregation, which Rothstein (2013) demonstrates is worse now than in 1970;
- Growing economic inequality and poverty juxtaposed with the obscene accumulation of wealth by a few individuals and institutions;
  - A corporatist state at perpetual war against manufactured enemies abroad and an increasingly subjugated domestic *citizenry* through militarization of law enforcement, the proliferation of the carceral state, and the murder of people of color by police;
  - A vicious war on public education waged by unaccountable billionaires, corporate foundations and media, Congress, the Executive Branch, and state governments.

Yes, these are issues of just justice. Yet some of the most difficult dialogues in which I engage as a teacher educator concern the unreflective acceptance and promotion of neoliberal premises that threaten to destroy education, our social fabric, and our democracy. I despair when so many students, faculty colleagues, teachers, and education policymakers disavow the political role of education as a public good and a force for democracy and justice. I despair when so many educators leave oppressive

mis-knowledge (Kumashiro, 2001) about race, class, sexuality, meritocracy, colorblindness, justice, freedom, patriotism, individualism, capitalism, and the marketization of education un-interrogated. Too many educators have seemingly accepted neoliberal practices including the outsourcing of university faculty, the redefinition of education as a consumer good, the corporate structuring of education, ruthless attacks on teachers, and the framing of learning as the accumulation of "twenty-first century skills" to serve a morally bankrupt consumer economy measured solely by, you guessed it, the accumulation of wealth.

#### SCHOOLS AS WAL-MARTS, FACULTY AS ASSOCIATES, STUDENTS AS CONSUMERS

Bruni and Woodhouse illustrate yet again Giroux's (2004) analysis of America's descent into madness, which has led us to abandon public values, replaced by the worship of market principles that subvert democratic processes and victimize those who paradoxically support the system. I suppose that's how hegemony works. The enthrallment with neoliberal institutional practices illustrates what Foucault (1978/1991) called a system of governmentality. Schools and universities serve governmentality through prescribed institutional practices promulgated in curriculum, teaching, the structure of school spaces through which students and teachers move in specified ways, and disciplinary practices associated with ubiquitous surveillance. Educational institutions in systems of governmentality commodify everyone and everything through a calculus of disposability in which burgeoning groups of Others find themselves dispensable, as the work of Alexander (2011), Giroux (2014), Stevenson (2014), and Hedges and Sacco (2012) demonstrates.

The growth of inequality and the simultaneous rise of millionaire university CEOs, many of whom sit on corporate boards (Bruni, 2015; Bowley, 2010), suggest acceptance of the "Wal-Marting of America" (Apple, 2013). Wal-Mart logic produces a false narrative of market choice in education and positions educators as associates who deliver educational services to paying consumers. The public school teacher as associate is illustrated in the vicious assault on unions through *right-to-work* legislation, and the de-professionalization of teaching through standardized curriculum and the portrayal of teachers as technicians who teach by numbers to manipulate generic student fantasy figures (Taubman, 2000, 2009). University faculty associates exist in the growth of "contingent academic labor" such as adjuncts and non-tenure-track contract faculty, which Goldstone (2013) calls an "academic proletariat, where a lack of workplace control, negligible job security, and prevailing low wages define the conditions of employment." The corporate restructuring of the professoriate over the last few decades as a docile, compliant, transient pool of disposable labor bears significant consequences in terms of shared governance and academic freedom. Both are vital to the intellectual vibrancy of an abundant education and an informed critical citizenry, the lifeblood of democratic culture as a restraint on unfettered capitalism.

Corporate education "deform" positions students as "consumers of 'educational services,' not subjectively existing individuals struggling to understand themselves in the world through the curriculum they study" (Pinar, 2012, p. 44). Like contingent academic labor, students and knowledge become commodities represented by reductive metrics of accountability. Wal-Marted teaching is a market transaction driven by standardized instructional models and the learning sciences (Taubman, 2009), devotion to simplistic assumptions about learning styles (Pashler, McDaniel, Rohrer, & Bjork, 2008), mandated use of "educational" technology, and obsessive, punitive assessment, data collection, and accountability regimes. Curriculum is reduced to a to-do list (Taubman, 2000).

I often wonder about the implicit messages embedded in corporate education. What lessons are we teaching to children who are told that they are not "on-track for college and career readiness?" What values are promoted through corporatized education, and what symbolism lies in the growing stratification between schools and universities, which replicates increasing social, economic, political, and racial inequity and injustice? What possibilities are we creating and eliminating for students and teachers through what and how we teach, and do not teach? Are consumption and narcissistic individualism the epitome of citizenship? Corporate media and foundations, politicians, and too many education policymakers peddle corporatization as the cure for an education crisis manufactured through starving public schools and universities of funds and concomitant false narratives of educational failure. In that context, platitudes about equity, justice, and democracy ring sanctimonious and empty.

#### IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE THIS WAY

Pinar (2012) and others (Labaree, 2010; Kliebard, 2004; Berrett, 2015) engage complexly with history to demonstrate that American education has always been highly contested. Yet the anti-public apparatus and the "values" it promulgates have become overwhelming and threaten to subvert every public institution, including education (Giroux, 2014). Speaking at UC Berkeley in December 1964, Mario Savio presaged today's corporate university. Reacting to President Clark Kerr's comparison of the relationship of a university president to a board of regents with a corporate manager of a firm to a board of directors, Savio said:

If this is a firm, and if the board of regents are the board of directors, and if President Kerr in fact is the manager, then I'll tell you something: the faculty are a bunch of employees, and we're the raw material. (Cherumaz, 2010)

Within three years of Savio's speech, Governor Ronald Reagan appeared at a press conference and responded to California's budget crisis by assuming his most enduring political role as corporate spokesmodel for the neoliberal formula that would enthrall the U.S. and destroy its public values: austerity accompanied by lower taxes. And what of education? Reagan promised that the UC System would remain the envy of the world, but he also stressed that universities should dispense with certain "intellectual luxuries" (Berrett, 2015). Universities should prepare students for the workforce, and taxpayers, Reagan argued, should not be required to subsidize "intellectual curiosity" (Berrett, 2015).

This cannot be our future, and Pinar (2012) suggests that it may not be too late to reverse education "deform. In *Can Education Change Society?*, Apple (2013) answers the question he poses in the affirmative, and he urges reflection on how successful the "conservative modernization" coalition (2004, 2013) has been in using education as a tool of retrogressive social transformation.

Reading Bruni (2015) and Woodhouse (2015) that recent morning reminded me to vigorously contest the insidious commonsense associated with corporate education and its complicity in the destruction of public spaces, education, and democracy. The obscene compensation offered to many university administrators, the gross inequality in wealth between education institutions, the defunding of public services, the positioning of teachers and university faculty as disposable contingent labor and students as human capital to be politically anesthetized and molded into mindless consumers, suggest the abandonment of education as a public good by many in the “education establishment” itself.

Emerging from my despairing moments, I resolve that we can envision and realize an alternative. We can re-appropriate and reframe social, political, economic, and education discourses to create a counter-narrative and liberate ourselves through liberating our public spaces, including schools, colleges, and universities. Through a praxis of refusal, we can reposition education as a mode of being and becoming in the pursuit of justice and what Benjamin Barber (1984) called “strong democracy.” The growing movement to opt-out of standardized testing, the political resistance in defense of public education in Chicago and Seattle, the demands for equity and justice seen in the *I, too, am...* movement, and direct mass action in response to the murder of people of color by police in Ferguson, Baltimore, and New York, demonstrate that we can and must do better.

I agree with Bruni (2015) that higher education must rise to realize an ideal in which it operates through a commitment to public values rather than Wall Street’s moral bankruptcy. I agree with Giroux (2004, 2014) that everyone associated with education must serve as a public intellectual committed to disrupting narratives that privilege the private and separate the private from the public and political. I agree with Toni Morrison (2015) that all of us must re-understand ourselves as citizens concerned with serving each other rather than as taxpayers consumed with hoarding what we accumulate. Education is more than workforce development and corporatized credentialism; it is as Pinar (2012) demonstrates a meeting place of subjective struggle to understand ourselves in the world. Teachers and university faculty are more than contingent labor; they are public intellectuals whose creative and political work must not be limited by institutionalized disciplinary ideologies (Schmidt, 2000). We must unite and reinvigorate the public and political spirit of education through the subversion of corporate structures and practices. Perhaps in the process of reclaiming our values of citizenship and education as a public good, we can save ourselves and our future by working toward, as Ladson-Billings urged, just justice.

### References

- Alexander, M. (2010). *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. New York, NY: The New Press.
- Apple, M. (2004). *Ideology and curriculum* (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.). New York, NY: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Apple, M. (2013). *Can education change society?* New York, NY: Routledge.
- Barber, B. (1984). *Strong democracy: Participatory politics for a new age*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Berrett, D. (2015, January 30). The day the purpose of college changed. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 61(20), A18-A21.
- Bowley, G. (2010, July 31). The academic industrial complex. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/01/business/01prez.html>
- Boyer, E. (1994, March 9). Creating the new American college. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 40(27), A48.
- Bruni, F. (2015, May 20). Platinum pay in ivory towers. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/20/opinion/frank-bruni-platinum-pay-in-ivory-towers.html>
- Carnevale, A., & Strohl, J. (2013). *Separate and unequal: How higher education reinforces the intergenerational reproduction of white racial privilege*. Washington, DC: Georgetown Public Policy Institute.
- Cherumaz. (2010, August 9). *Mario Savio on the operation of the machine* [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PhFvZRT7Ds0>
- Foucault, M. (1991/1978). Governmentality. (P. Pasquino, Trans.). In G. Burchell, C. Gordon, & P. Miller (Eds.), *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality*, (pp. 87-104). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Giroux, H. (2004). Critical pedagogy and the postmodern/modern divide: Towards a pedagogy of democratization. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 31(1), 31-47.
- Giroux, H. (2014). *The violence of organized forgetting: Thinking beyond America’s disimagination machine*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books.
- Goldstene, C. (2013, August 14). The emergent academic proletariat and its shortchanged students. *Dissent*. Retrieved from [http://www.dissentmagazine.org/online\\_articles/the-emergent-academic-proletariat-and-its-shortchanged-students](http://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/the-emergent-academic-proletariat-and-its-shortchanged-students)
- Hedges, C., & Sacco, J. (2012). *Days of destruction days of revolt*. New York, NY: Nation Books.
- Kliebard, H. (2004). *The struggle for the American curriculum: 1893-1958*. New York, NY: RoutledgeFalmer.

Kumashiro, K. (2001). "Posts" perspectives on anti-oppressive education in social studies, English, mathematics, and science classrooms. *Educational Researcher*, 30(3), 3-12.

Labaree, D. (2010). *Someone has to fail: The zero-sum game of public schooling*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Morrison, T. (2015, May 12). The new progressive agenda: A return to citizenship. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/toni-morrison/the-new-progressive-agenda-a-return-to-citizenship\\_b\\_7265416.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/toni-morrison/the-new-progressive-agenda-a-return-to-citizenship_b_7265416.html)

Pashler, H., McDaniel, M., Rohrer, D., & Bjork, R. (2008). Learning styles: Concepts and evidence. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 9(3), 105-119.

Pinar, W. (2012). *What is curriculum theory?* New York, NY: Routledge.

Rothstein, R. (2013). *For public schools, segregation then, segregation since: Education and the unfinished march*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.

Schmidt, J. (2000). *Disciplined minds: A critical look at salaried professionals and the soul-battering system that shapes their lives*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Stevenson, B. (2014). *Just mercy: A story of justice and redemption*. New York, NY: Spiegel & Grau.

Taubman, P. (2000). Teaching without hope: What is really at stake in the standards movement, high stakes testing, and the drive for "practical reforms." *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 16(3), 19-33.

Taubman, P. (2009). *Teaching by numbers: Deconstructing the discourse of standards and accountability in education*. New York, NY: Routledge

Woodhouse, K. (2015, May 21). Widening wealth gap. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/05/21/rich-universities-get-richer-are-poor-students-being-left-behind>

**Cite This Article as:** *Teachers College Record*, Date Published: September 01, 2015  
<http://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 18091, Date Accessed: 10/8/2015 3:18:15 PM

[Purchase Reprint Rights for this article or review](#)