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Globalization and Urban Education

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Globalization and Urban Education

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, here is the article's first paragraph:

"Globalization" has emerged as the watchword of the new millennium. We are experiencing greater movement across the globe (by people, ideas, diseases, etc.) and new connections between remote social and economic activities (for example, Chinese prison labor producing goods for Wal-Mart shoppers in Fargo, North Dakota). There is a growing economic interdependence internationally. Globalization represents the most visible face of global capitalism. Its ideological and material forms advance the interests of global capitalism and, therefore, the term *globalization* can provide a useful shorthand when discussing the contemporary period of global capitalism. Two major developments have set the pace for this current era of globalization.

Disciplines

Sociology

Comments

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Globalization and Urban Education

David Baronov

Globalization is a significant step in the dismantling of public education systems in the United States.

"Globalization" has emerged as the watchword of the new millennium. We are experiencing greater movement across the globe (by people, ideas, diseases, etc.) and new connections between remote social and economic activities (for example, Chinese prison labor producing goods for Wal-Mart shoppers in Fargo, North Dakota). There is a growing economic interdependence internationally. Globalization represents the most visible face of global capitalism. Its ideological and material forms advance the interests of global capitalism and, therefore, the term *globalization* can provide a useful shorthand when discussing the contemporary period of global capitalism. Two major developments have set the pace for this current era of globalization.

First, with the end of Cold War, the U.S. rose to a position of unchallenged global prominence, achieving hegemonic influence in the financial, industrial, and military realms. This permits the establishment of neoliberal policies and institutions that promote global trade and investment, such as the World Trade Organization, and allows U.S. officials to undermine those initiatives deemed counter to their interests, such as the Kyoto Agreement on global warming.

Second, the current era of globalization is associated with a series of advances in technology, communication, and transportation that have dramatically reduced the costs of locating production overseas and facilitated international financial transactions. This constitutes the technical and material infrastructure that undergirds a web of interlocking networks that integrates disparate social and economic activities from around the world.

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Urban Realities in the Current Era of Globalization

Over the past 30 years, these forces of globalization have radically reshaped the entire socioeconomic topography of the U.S. In this period, the gap

between the wealthy and the poor has widened. Ethnic/racial segregation has increased and tens of thousands of manufacturing jobs have left the U.S., while the remaining living-wage jobs have migrated from cities to the suburbs. Today, growing populations of disenfranchised and impoverished ethnic/racial minorities find themselves concentrated in large urban areas. The impact of these trends on cities in the U.S. has been profound and points to major challenges regarding policy options for those striving to improve urban education. Of particular concern are three developments stemming from globalization with direct consequences for urban education policy: (1) global migration from rural to urban areas and from poor to wealthy nations; (2) transformation of the U.S. economy (alongside de-industrialization); and (3) social and economic polarization within the United States.

Global Migration from Rural to Urban Areas and from Poor to Wealthy Nations

The processes of globalization have contributed to two major migration patterns. First, there has been a massive movement of people from rural to urban areas. As a result, growing rings of poverty and despair have surrounded major cities of the world, such as São Paulo, Bombay and Johannesburg (Sassen 1988; Abrahamson 2004). Today, great masses of displaced agricultural communities have taken refuge in urban centers teeming with shantytowns. Second, the movement of people from poor to wealthy nations has continued at a strong pace (Sassen 1988). The dream of a better life remains a potent motivator among the world's poor. As a result, those who can, migrate from poor to wealthy nations. Invariably, the world's poor must take the lowest paying and least desirable jobs when they arrive. This entails either seasonal agricultural work which tends to keep workers constantly on the move or, more typically, low-wage jobs in the urban-based service industry.

Given this pattern, most immigrants in the U.S. tend to disproportionately settle in urban areas and, consequently, urban school systems are increasingly asked to assist students both with their academic needs as well as their cultural adjustment to U.S. society. In addition, given the proximity of the U.S. to

Latin America and due to changes in U.S. immigration policy in 1965, Latino and Asian immigrants are especially prominent among these newcomers. While contributing to an exciting and vibrant multicultural learning environment, additional resources and time are required to meet bilingual needs and to facilitate adjustment.

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Beyond differences tied to ethnicity and language, however, a large number of urban immigrant families represent displaced agrarian families. Thus, many students' families operate within the cultural norms of a rural household. Often the parents have little or no formal education and there is little in their backgrounds to orient either the students or their parents to the expectations and norms of the U.S. educational system — such as study habits or peer interaction. Compounding these cultural issues, many of these students reside in areas of significant poverty in the U.S. that often require both parents to work double shifts.

Transformation of the U.S. Economy

One of the central roles for any K–12 educational system is to prepare students to be responsible citizens and productive members of society. This entails, in part, developing a skilled workforce for the national economy (Bowles and Gintis 1976). However, given the pace of de-industrialization in the U.S. over the past few decades, and the accompanying occupational shifts, it is no longer clear what skills to emphasize or even what social role education plays in contemporary society. For example, preparing a workforce for the future was much easier during an era of onerous, yet steady manufacturing jobs when employers' fortunes were tied to local community development. In light of the expanded role of low-wage, unstable jobs in the U.S. economy, it is difficult to tell students that working hard in

school will reliably result in a set of employable skills and abilities (Wilson 1996; Anyon 1997). As part of a global workforce, the reality is that a student's future is one of uncertainty and change.

The urban/suburban divide is further exacerbated by these developments. The movement of wealthy whites from urban areas to the outer suburbs over the past few decades has accelerated the movement of jobs and resources away from the urban poor. Both the loss of urban manufacturing jobs along with the growth of exclusive, wealthy suburbs have hurt urban educational systems by shrinking the tax base and by moving living-wage jobs to the suburbs. As a result, the poorest of the poor remain concentrated in large urban school districts that feature a stark socioeconomic homogeneity and depleted and fragmented communities (Kozol 1991; Massey and Denton 1993).

This picture is further complicated by government policies designed to deter poor youth from illicit behavior in an era of great uncertainty and dismal job prospects. In 2002, the number of African-Americans in prison topped 800,000. A labyrinth of anti-crime measures targeting the urban poor — including curfews, three-strikes legislation, zero-tolerance drug laws and anti-gang units with sweeping powers — are in force in urban areas across the U.S. (Wilson 1996). Urban educators must work with students whose daily lives involve interaction with punitive police tactics in their neighborhoods. The disruptive and dispiriting impact of these policies on students (and their families and friends) is a further obstacle for urban educators to overcome.

Social and Economic Polarization within the U.S.

The reason that urban education has fallen as a public priority in the U.S. is largely tied to the enormous gap between the wealthy and the poor. By the late 1990s, the poorest 20% of U.S. families had an average income of \$14,620, while the wealthiest 20% of families had an average income ten times this amount, \$145,990 (Bernstein, Bouskey, McNichol, and Zahradnik 2002). Today, the interests of the wealthy in the U.S. are tied more closely to the interests of the wealthy classes in other nations than to the interests of the poor in their own nation. Global trade and finance link their fortunes. One result of this

wealth gap has been the concentration of the poor in large urban school districts. Thus, if the interests of the wealthy and the poor in the U.S. do not coincide, it is not clear why, beyond philanthropy, the wealthy would have any concern for improving impoverished urban schools. Increasingly, the world of the wealthy and the world of the poor are separate and decidedly unequal (Reich 1991).

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Along with the increasing gap between the wealthy and poor there has been an increasing segregation of ethnic/racial minorities in the U.S. Ethnic/racial segregation in the U.S. today is of historic proportions (Massey and Denton 1993; Fossey 2003). Meanwhile, ethnic/racial minorities represent a majority (or plurality) of students in large urban educational systems across the U.S. The resource disparity between urban and suburban schools reflects this pattern. The predominantly white professional class has migrated to the suburbs and a predictable shift of political power from urban machine politics to suburban soccer moms has accompanied them (Wilson 1996). So long as their situation can be successfully sectioned off and kept from view, it is doubtful that non-minorities in the U.S. will act to improve urban schools.

Urban Education in the Context of Global Capitalism

It is impossible to provide any intelligible analysis of urban education without understanding the profound social transformation that has occurred across urban communities in light of global capitalism over the past three decades. The primary challenges presented by global capitalism for urban education today are

- increasing concentrations of poverty

- hypersegregation of ethnic/racial minorities
- disinvestment in urban areas and dwindling economic opportunities
- repressive anti-crime tactics directed at urban youth
- concentration of political and economic power in the suburbs, and
- educational aspirations of Asian and Latino immigrant students with diverse cultural roots.

The impact of globalization notwithstanding, an erroneous general consensus predominates among official U.S. policymakers that the major problems of urban education can be traced to any number of micro-level conditions: for instance, broken families, sexual promiscuity among teens, the drug epidemic, and teen violence. As a result, most urban education reforms downplay the influence of globalization and emphasize policies that address superficial, surface-level conditions. Ironically, these policies tend to be consistent with the same neoliberal, market-based solutions that provide the ideological underpinnings for globalization.

Pedro Noguera (2003, 6) has written eloquently about this persistent gap between the chronic socioeconomic conditions confronting urban public schools and the inappropriate and inadequate policy responses.

Urban public schools frequently serve as important social welfare institutions. With meager resources, they attempt to address at least some of the nutritional and health needs of poor children. They do so because those charged with educating poor children generally recognize that it is impossible to serve their academic needs without simultaneously addressing their basic need for health and safety. For this reason, those who castigate and disparage urban public schools without offering viable solutions for improving or replacing them jeopardize the interests of those who depend on them.... Most of the popular educational reforms enacted by states and federal government (e.g., standards and accountability through high-stakes testing,

charter schools, etc.) fail to address the severe social and economic conditions in urban areas that invariably affect the quality and character of public schools.

Neoliberal Reforms

In the context of the current era of globalization, neoliberal policies represent efforts by governments to create a uniform global system for economic investment. Differences between nations' laws and policies are reduced. This has resulted in deregulating financial institutions, lowering tax rates, minimizing environmental standards and eliminating labor laws. These neoliberal policies have their counterpart in policies designed to transform urban education. In fact, proponents of neoliberal education reforms argue that precisely because today we must compete in a global environment it is imperative, from the perspective of quality control, that we develop schools that produce students with a common and predictable set of skills and abilities. To gauge progress in this regard it is vital that student learning be measurable. This requires standardized testing. It is further suggested that student learning outcomes can be made more consistent and uniform by developing homogeneous teaching practices and by demanding specific teacher certification requirements. Neoliberal ideologues advocate education reform in three areas: (a) standardized testing and curricula, (b) teacher certification, and (c) focus on the three R's over extracurricular activities

Today, the movement for standardized student testing and standardized curricula is in full swing. The Bush Administration's No Child Left Behind program is just one manifestation of this larger phenomenon (Mickelson 2000; Noguera 2003). The stated purpose of standardized testing is to create a measurable set of uniform criteria by which to compare students and schools, with the ultimate goal of minimizing differences in achievement (Noguera 2003). A further benefit is greater control over each school's measures of success and its curricula. Today, testing students' retention and recitation of facts gleaned from rudimentary lesson plans is the primary measure of success. Alternative learning outcomes, such as creative problem solving, are less easily captured through standardized tests. Addi-

tionally, given the importance of these test scores for determining school rankings, whoever controls these tests controls the curricula to prepare for the test. The result is greater uniformity and standardization of the curricula. This goal of standardized learning outcomes is consistent with the aim of greater standardization and uniformity promoted by the stewards of global capitalism.

The current emphasis on teacher certification is a further example of a neoliberal policy advancing standardization through quality control measures. Teacher certification is held out as a method for guaranteeing minimal standards for teachers entering the classroom. The assumption is that the decline in urban school performance is tied to a significant degree, to teacher incompetence. Certainly it is far simpler to rectify alleged teacher shortcomings than to directly address the rapidly deteriorating socioeconomic conditions that confront urban education today. The emphasis on teacher certification provides an opportunity to downplay the social environment as a factor explaining poorly performing schools as well as a venue for ensuring greater uniformity across the teaching pool (Anyon 1997). This uniformity concerns both the knowledge of one's subject matter as well as teachers' values and attitudes. Fostering narrowly construed values and attitudes about the challenges of education facilitates efforts to downplay the role of globalization as a consideration within the learning process.

Alongside standardized testing and curricula and teacher certification, has been the perennial, national call for a return to the so-called three R's and an elimination of extracurricular activities (Firestone, Goertz, and Natriello 1997). The crude ideology that reduces K-12 education to a mere training ground for tomorrow's global workforce is most fully exposed by this emphasis on the "essentials" of education (reading, writing, math) rather than the "frills," such as art and music. Ironically, proponents of preparing a global workforce see no contradiction in cutting back on opportunities to study foreign languages, comparative religion, cultural anthropology, international politics, etc. At the same time, those pushing for lesson plans that emphasize reading, writing, and math tend to prefer a rather narrow ap-

proach to these subjects that discourages creative problem-solving and emphasizes rudimentary, rule-based understanding (Firestone, Goertz, and Natriello 1997). This further advances the agenda

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of generating standardized learning outcomes designed to produce students prepared to join a homogeneous and interchangeable global workforce.

Market-Based Reforms

Along with promoting neoliberal policies, advocates of globalization have actively championed the role of market-based solutions to social problems. Third World poverty and underdevelopment are attributed to government restrictions on free trade (Gilpin 2002). It is argued that creating free markets will lead to a more efficient allocation of resources which will attract foreign investment and spur economic development. The magic of the competitive marketplace, it is argued, should replace government-directed social engineering in these poor countries. By analogy, many education reformers believe that the best solution to poorly performing urban schools is to introduce market-based reforms. Advocates of market-based solutions contend that once schools are forced to compete with one another, educational improvement will follow (Noguera 2003; Cookson 1994; Henig 1994; Rasell and Rothstein 1993; Mickelson 2000). Magnet schools and privatization (charter schools, school voucher programs, outsourcing administrative services) are the primary examples of market-based reforms.

The basic purpose of magnet schools is to foster competition between schools within the public school system by developing a specialization in a

particular academic field (math and science) or a pedagogical style ("open" classrooms) (Mickelson 2000). A common criticism of magnet school programs is that they tend to marginalize those schools that are less successful within a district and that this disproportionately impacts students from the poorest areas. Roslyn Mickelson (2000, 134) recounts developments in Charlotte's magnet school program in the early 1990s.

Soon after the [Charlotte, NC school] district replaced its mandatory desegregation plan with a voluntary one built around choice among magnet schools, it became apparent to many parents and other citizens that there were gross inequalities in resources available in magnets, newer schools, and older schools primarily in the urban core. They noted that the magnet strategy for reform left many schools in dire need of attention and additional resources. In the view of some critics, these inequities exacerbated existing race and class disparities in opportunities to learn. People complained that the magnet program, rather than addressing educational inequality, was exacerbating it by draining funds that could be spent for all schools.

The cornerstone of market-based urban school reform is privatization, the process whereby private corporations receive contracts to provide services traditionally delivered by government. In the field of urban education reform there are three primary forms of privatization:

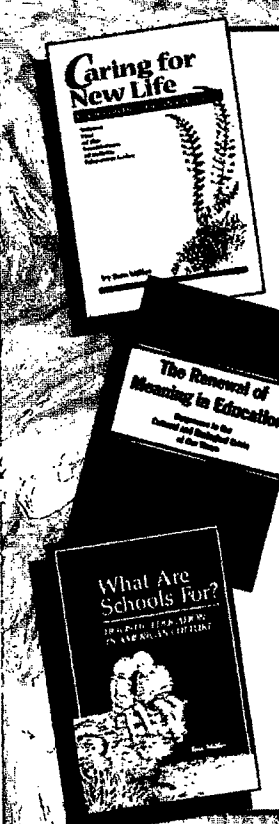
- Charter schools are privately established and administered schools supported with public funds. Proponents of charter schools argue that this structure permits greater freedom for school administrators to experiment with innovative approaches (Rasell and Rothstein 1993).
- School choice provides publicly funded vouchers for students to attend private schools. As with charter schools, it is argued that allowing students to choose between attending public or private school will pressure public schools to improve (Cookson 1994; Ridenour and St. John 2003).
- Outsourcing the administration of schools to private companies involves hiring private firms — such as Education Alternative, Inc. or Edison Project — to actually run an individual school or potentially an entire school district. The rationale for outsourcing such services is that corporate leaders can bring efficiencies and best practices from the bottom-line world of business to public education.

The basic premise for each of these reforms is that the educational process is basically a commodity and that a school is, therefore, analogous to a company in the business of providing a service (Henig 1994). Teachers are service providers and students are their clients. It follows that, given their expertise in the field of effectively and efficiently providing services, businessmen and women should serve as the leaders for education reform. Because free markets and competition shape the guiding ideology of the U.S. business class, these are the strategies they emphasize for public school reform. Magnet schools, charter schools, school vouchers, and outsourcing are all designed to promote competition between schools and to spur innovation and improvement. This fits conveniently with the tenets of global capitalism which advocate the broad privatization of traditional government functions so that the number of collective goods can be cut to a minimum (Kuttner 2000; Kuttner 1997; Falk 1999). Any restrictions on private enterprise (such as government-provided medical care) are considered obstacles to progress through free market competition. In this respect, public education systems represent a major target for the ideologues of globalization. If the superiority of privately run school systems can be demonstrated, this would mark a significant step in the dismantling of public education systems in the U.S. and around the world.

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