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Capitalism and Public Education in the United States

Abstract

The United States democratic system includes characteristics of capitalism as well as socialism. Perhaps the most socialistic endeavor of the US is its K-12 public school system; in fact, US public schools are necessary for democracy to thrive and to create an educated and well-informed populace. However, capitalism and socialism are strange bedfellows. The soft underbelly of capitalism - greed - has become a problematic influence for K-12 schools. This paper examines the history of US public schools and the influence of capitalism focusing on problems associated with greed at the individual and corporate level.

Keywords: capitalism, socialism, greed, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Race To the Top (RTTT), Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Introduction

The United States has a unique history as a capitalist country. Many Americans believe that the primary force of the US economy has always been capitalistic in nature; however, US capitalism has traditionally been shaped by the tension between socialism and democracy. For instance, US law protects public goods and property, while protecting private assets. In addition, Social Security allows many senior citizens to avoid poverty as they age, even though individual privileges allow citizens to amass and control vast properties. The Fair Labor Standards Act gives workers rights while regulating unlimited wealth-based power. Nevertheless, US democratic principles, and in particular social justice, are the essential ingredients of American public schools; however, these principles are susceptible to human and corporate weakness. This paper investigates the history of US public schools in respect to the influence of capitalism and its soft-underbelly – GREED.

A brief history of US public schools and capitalism's impact

Organized education is relatively new to the United States. In fact, the US provides no constitutional obligation for a citizen's right to an education; furthermore, the 10th Amendment implies that education is the responsibility of each state (Capel & Schneller, 2016). Regardless, about 200 years ago, efforts by Catharine Beecher and Horace Mann helped Americans organize a system of common schools based roughly on the Prussian system (Goldstein, 2014). By the early 1840s, a system of schools could be recognized in Massachusetts, but agreement on the mission of education, pedagogy, and teacher training was a persistent problem. In the western frontier states and territories, teaching had an entrepreneurial feature. The teaching force consisted mostly of missionaries, who negotiated their pay with students' parents as they traveled throughout the West often residing in their pupils' homes.

Eventually by the mid-19th Century, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton initiated concerted efforts that were inspired by the patriotic passion of education and designed to promote social democratic ideals, including women's rights and abolitionism; their efforts slowed as the fever of the oncoming Civil War began to peak (Goldstein, 2014). During the years after the Civil War and into the 19th Century, education and the US public schools took on a new cause of providing an education for freed slaves. Eventually black intellectuals, Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois hyped education as necessary for emancipation. However, the schools founded in the years after the Civil War were troubled by poor funding, entrenched poverty, racial segregation, and low expectations. These same economic issues abound in US public schools today; however, capitalism and its soft underbelly (greed) did not seem to be an overwhelming problem to education until the 20th Century.

Capitalism and US public schools in the 20th Century

The US public school system was implemented in the early years of the 20th Century. Each school district utilized local control, led by a superintendent who reported to an elected school board of local residents. Local school boards concentrated their efforts on area demands and the need to train laborers for their communities (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Almost exclusively male school superintendents controlled America's first school districts; they exercised top-down control of their district's school budget, the hiring of staff and teachers, and curriculum. This kind of control easily tempted their human impulses of selfishness and greed for wealth and power. Certainly not all superintendents of schools gave in to these impulses, but superintendents could manipulate their board and garner totalitarian power that could be wielded for financial and political gain.

One criticism of the public school system as it evolved was that it fostered capitalistic principles, which promoted the myth of meritocracy in lieu of the socialistic imperative of upward mobility. John Foster (2011, p. 3) asserts that schooling ...tends to evolve in the direction of capitalist-class imperatives, which subordinate it to the needs of production and accumulation. He goes on to claim that public schools are more concerned with compliance and adherence to rules – skills needed for unskilled factory labor – and that a high quality education that focuses on leadership skills is reserved for children of America's 'governing class' in private schools like Phillips Andover Academy (Bush's alma mater) or Punahou School (Obama's alma mater). Today the tuition at Phillips Andover is \$48,850 per year; at Punahou it is \$38,300-52,000. Unlike public schools, these are elite schools which enroll the children of US gentry.

There is a disparity in educational equity based on a family's social economic status. In 1973 the educational rights of children were debated in the US Supreme Court, which ruled in *San Antonio Independent School District vs. Rodriguez*, and asserted that, contrary to other interpretations of the 14th Amendment, education was not a fundamental right, and local property taxes could fund public schools. This decision ignored the Edgewood Concerned Parent Association's claim that this type of funding created wealth-based discrimination. Consequently education has remained contentious in respect to funding (Lurie, 2013). In fact, federal influence in education is often viewed as meddling (Capel & Schneller, 2017).

A new era of more federal influence in public schools began with President Johnson's War on Poverty and the enactment of Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. ESEA made federal funds available for school districts with a high percentage of low-income families, and also for research and development, libraries, and pre-schools. Local school districts gained access to millions of dollars in Titles I, II, III, IV, and V grants to improve schooling for all US students. Unfortunately, by 1970 few modest gains were documented and the political climate changed, and President Nixon amended the Federal funding of ESEA. However, the money that was spent in the initial efforts of ESEA did not go unnoticed by corporate entities, specifically textbook publishers saw an opportunity for profits.

By the mid-1970s California and Texas were prized by publishers for textbook adoption; publishers chased state-funded schools by designing texts to fit each state's educational standards. In the initial campaign for better textbooks, the California State Department of Education fought for an elimination of 'patriotic pablum, at the cost of honest examination of where the nation had failed to live up to its creed of equality' (Ravitch, 2004, p. 7). However, eventually the state adopters went overboard by issuing social content standards that went beyond common sense. For example, if a textbook included a disparaging reference to the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang, the textbook would also have to cite the gang's positive contributions to society. On the other hand, fundamentalists who demanded that creationism and evolution be treated through a balanced perspective hijacked Texas textbook adopters. Publishers (Scott Foresman-Addison Wesley, Houghton Mifflin, Holt McDougal, and others) chased the profits, and greed trumped sounder educational practices.

Capitalism and US public schools in the 21st Century

The 21st Century has been dominated by educational policy that has created phenomenal profits for private corporations that serve schools, but educational policy scholars recognize that teachers often challenge federal mandates that appeal to corporations (Kohn, 2011). Kohn insinuates that the corporations that are usually involved in public policy operate strictly to increase their bottom line – profits. A good example of federal policy that benefitted the corporate bottom line is George Bush's No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

In 2001 President Bush reauthorized President Lyndon Johnson's Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) with NCLB. It ushered in reforms that required standards-based testing with measurable goals that were intended to improve individual outcomes for all US public school students. NCLB included a mandate that all students in grades 3-8 be tested annually. Unfortunately, when the law was initiated, few states had state testing programs that were refined to meet the law's requirements. According to Gerald Bracey (2005), inherent costs for testing and programming for US public schools were in the billions, which lured CTB/McGraw-Hill, Harcourt Assessment, NCS Pearson, Riverside (Houghton Mifflin) and Educational Testing Services into K-12 evaluation. Few states developed their own tests, and to this day private US corporations dominate the test market in the US. Perhaps even more alarming is that educators had some modicum of control in the instruction-based companies, now marketing and business

executives, who focus on revenue and profits rather than learning, are in control. Ironically, the corporations that serve the US public receive lax treatment, while public school teacher and student performances (and the data that they produce) are scrutinized meticulously. Since 2001, billions in US federal, state, and local funds are transferred to these testing providers yearly.

It seems that profit is the main motivator of most private providers of testing and publishing. In 2014 Project Veritas set out to prove that ‘crony capitalism is taking over America’s education system’. Investigative film journalists surreptitiously filmed Houghton-Mifflin Harcourt West Coast Accounts Manager Dianne Barrow, in which she revealed, “You don’t think that the educational publishing companies are in it for education do you? No. They’re in it for the money” (Haverluck, 2016). Barrow continued to state that Mifflin Harcourt aligns the textbooks to the standards and then sells workshops to school districts to help their teachers teach to the standards (and to the text), she added, “I hate kids. I’m in it to sell books, don’t kid yourself for a heartbeat.” (Haverluck, 2016).

Capitalism run amok: An example from Newark, NJ

In *The Prize* (2015), Dale Russakoff details the problems that can occur when the greed for power in politics and temptation of big money run amok. It began with a 2009 meeting during which political rivals, Cory Booker, the Democratic Mayor of Newark, NJ and Chris Christie, New Jersey’s Republican Governor, met to discuss the sweeping problems that existed in Newark’s public schools. Despite their political differences Booker and Christies decided to work together in what appeared to be an ingenious plan to help Newark City Schools. After developing a plan for becoming a hub for charter schools that included an influx of reform-minded teachers and administrators and top-down restructuring funded by philanthropic support, Booker seduced Silicon Valley venture capitalist turned philanthropist, Mark Zuckerberg into donating an initial \$100 million to save the Newark public school system.

Although Booker and Christie touted community-based and teacher-driven reforms, they hired outside educational consultants, and in short time it became obvious that neither the publically elected Newark School Board nor city residents had voice in the process. Eventually, Cami Anderson, a no-nonsense reformer, was hired as Newark’s superintendent. She utilized a business-style management model to lead the schools with a focus on high-stakes accountability for teachers and eliminated pay raises based on seniority and offered incentives (aka merit pay) for high performing teachers. Despite Zuckerberg’s funding, draconian budget changes, and the closing of many neighborhood schools, one year into Anderson’s tenure, Newark schools had a \$57 million gap in revenue. Most school employees were resentful because she had given significant raises to her leadership team and was paying a steady stream of consultants \$1,000-a-day for services that were not visible to teachers. She reported that based on her own school-rating scale learning in Newark schools was improving, but on the mandated state-standardized tests, Newark children had declined in all proficiency ratings in mathematics and all but two of the ratings in reading. In 2014 after four years of reform efforts and \$200 million from Mark Zuckerberg, the Newark experiment was deemed a failure.

Unfortunately, the trap of political power, recognition, and money clouded the focus on the needs of children and the Newark community.

President Obama's legacy in K-12 schools and capitalism

President Obama's first campaign for the presidency touted reforming NCLB, especially accountability measures that forced students to spend inordinate amounts of time 'filling in bubbles on standardized tests' and focusing on helping schools improve by not 'focusing on punishments' (FairTest, 2008). Race to the Top's (RTTT) inspired design required financially strapped states to compete for 4 billion dollars in federal funding, and in the process, instead entrenched NCLB's heavy handedness in both accountability and assessments.

Despite a low probability of winning the funds available through RTTT, local school districts chased the money. 'Though only nineteen states won RTTT grants, two-thirds of the states changed their laws on public school teachers in order to compete, half of the states declared that student test scores would be included in teacher evaluations, and eighteen states weakened tenure promotions' (Goldstein, 2016, p. 214). Diane Ravitch's (2013) critique of RTTT revealed that it did not fulfill Obama's campaign pledge and that in fact it proved to be a mirror image of its test-based accountability predecessor, NCLB. With NCLB, *schools* were held accountable for low student test scores, and schools as a whole had to deal with the consequences of failure. With RTTT, *teachers* are held accountable for test score failures. In essence, high-test scores determine a teacher is 'effective' and low-test scores determine whether a teacher is 'ineffective' (Ravitch, 2013).

According to several teachers and educational researchers, this type of system often proves unsuccessful because of its focus on the naiveté of political adversaries on public education. Fenwick English (2010, p. 3) sums up this simple-minded perception by stating the research in the field, '... the testing advocates want to believe that tests are neutral diagnostic tools designed to "help" schools become better', which overlooks years of research that shows that test scores are more indicative of the socio-economic status of the students being tested than their academic progress.

Unfortunately, NCLB and RTTT entrenched for-profit corporate greed in US K-12 public schools. However, hope abounds. Barack Obama's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law December 10, 2015 as yet another reauthorization of ESEA. It focuses on supporting academics regarding state accountability measures, reducing standardizing tests and the high stakes associated with it, and including teachers in decision-making (Garcia, 2016). The intent of ESSA relies on Kleibard's (1992, p. 3) advice '... without teacher input, policy fails as it crosses the threshold of the classroom door'. If the US wants educational policy to succeed as it minimizes the greed of corporate America, teachers and their students need to be valued as key decision-makers. Maybe then the US will eliminate some of the corrosive effects of greed in its public schools.

Capitalism and possibility – the Trump presidency

Considering the advent of the Donald J. Trump presidency, the US is entering a time of absolute uncertainty for its public schools. The US Senate and Congress

recently confirmed President Donald Trump's choice for Secretary of the Department of Education, Betsy DeVos. Her background is not in public education; in fact, she has never attended public schools, never taught or administered education in any way; she has been a champion of private and charter schools, as well as for federal funding of vouchers and school choice. Betsy DeVos wants to initiate 'legislative efforts and ballot measures designed to expand access to vouchers, increase the reach of charters (independent schools that receive public funding) and usher in a free market vision of public education' (Edwards, 2017, p. 65). Secretary DeVos's opinions coupled with President Trump's dystopian vision of public schools may spell disaster for US K-12 public schools. Trump referred to America's public system as 'flush with cash, but which leaves our young and beautiful student deprived of knowledge' (Blake, 2017). President Trump and Secretary DeVos share a dismal view of America's public schools and may open it to the free market, where greed abounds.

Conclusion

Some years ago I researched global mindset and its possibilities regarding education. One of the informal ways that I researched globalization (and its synonyms – cosmopolitanism, diversity, multi-culturalism, etc.) was to peruse the Internet to see the ways that American businesses focused on global endeavors. On many websites, one phrase that seemed to be most associated with the internationalization of US businesses was a mission to *take advantage of* foreign markets and diverse populations. To me this was indicative of the worst of capitalism, its predisposition for the selfishness of *taking advantage*. I hope that the US can recognize its capitalistic tendencies in public endeavors and minimize greed as a detriment to its greatest socialistic endeavor – public schools.

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