

Culture and Relationship in the Neoliberal Schoolhouse

No discussion of the impact of such neoliberal-style principles and practices as commodification, efficiency, and accountability on contemporary education would be complete without due consideration to the effect those factors have on the cultural fiber of schools. This consideration of the cultural ramifications of neoliberalism includes its impact on the quality of human relationships that takes place in sites of learning, as well as the related cultural shifts and changes that transpire in surrounding communities. It is always a tenuous proposition to claim with any level of certainty, (let alone to produce proof-positive evidence), that there exists some sort of a causal link between the policies and practical environments of schools and changes in their internal culture. Yet, I can personally attest as a seasoned educator to the power of political and economic values on beliefs and behavior in schools, and the effect those influences have on school culture as it relates to teaching and learning. As Baptiste (2001) states, “pedagogical practices have deep anthropological and cultural roots and ... an understanding of those roots might greatly illumine and aid our educational practices” (p. 198). As such, at least one key source of the regressive cultural sea change we have been witnessing in education, while insidious, is the selfsame influence we have been critically unpacking from the outset of this discussion, found in the fact that education:

Has been increasingly transformed to meet the competitive needs of corporations within globalized markets (and) reshaped to support the now dominant neoliberal economic policies promoted by government and corporations. (Hursh, 2001, para 1)

As previously alluded to, an emerging culture, based on commercial competition and consumerism, is taking shape in the neoliberal schoolhouse. This culture is the result of unprecedented changes in the global political economy about which so much has been made in this writing. This culture, however, is noteworthy because it is being forced on schools and is subsuming them in fundamental ways, the least of which is an erosion in the long-established civic functions of education (Reid, 2005). As Ball (2003) relates in regard to this shift:

The ethics of competition and performance (in education) are very different from the older ethics of professional judgement and cooperation. A new basis for ethical decision making and moral judgement is erected by the 'incentives' of performance. (p. 213)

Indeed, imposing a market criteria on schools:

Challenges the traditional idea of education as a cultural asset that makes an indispensable contribution to nationhood and whose values and worth transcend economic accountability and instrumentalism. (Symes, 1998, p. 134)

No less to the point, Rikowski (2002) observes that market values have come to severely erode many of the historic values embodied in school culture.

Translated into the world of education, it is value (not values) that becomes crucial. Old traditional modes of working, professional values, notions of public service and putting community needs before the drive for profit – all become liabilities for capital accumulation as educational institutions shift from becoming public goods to private commodities. Community needs are placed within the context of the market and profit-making potential. They are reconfigured. (p. 6)

The seeping of market forces or “marketization” into the fabric of education is never a neutral process. Rather, it involves “a set of practices and relationships that reflect particular ideologies about the purposes of education, curriculum, and social relations” (Whitehead, 2005, p. 4). At local levels there is an increased accommodation and interpenetration of business management elements into the lifeworlds of schools, determining what constitutes quality and what is needed to realize the related performance criteria (Stromquist & Monkman, 2014). In his research, Lawrence Angus (2015) illustrates how key elements of the neoliberal worldview are normalized in the day-to-day practices of schools and how certain norms and values that characterize neoliberalism are shaped and reinforced in particular systems of education, (in effect how they become *cultural practices*), as well as how they exert influence on the personal, family, and social imaginaries of parents, students, and staff. Perhaps more significant is the way austerity measures and social cutbacks in neoliberal restructuring, such as those in education, to some degree promote and valorize the rugged individualist motif of Western capitalism while undermining the social and cultural support for a certain “type of person ... a person who sees collective