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Neoliberalism and Education

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Neoliberalism has been a significant force in the world of education, and of social policy more broadly, for several decades. Neoliberalism is a developed political philosophy. But its influence is also as a more general, not-necessarily-systematized, outlook, a set of policy tendencies, and a set of evaluative orientations (in sum, an “imaginary”) some of which shape “common sense” so that people do not recognize them to be a part of a distinct political/evaluative outlook. Neoliberalism has affected education through all of these modalities.

Origins of Neoliberal Thought

The origins of what is now understood to be “neoliberalism” are quite clear. It began with a group of German, Austrian, and American economists in the 1930’s and ‘40’s. They were looking to design an economic and social order as an alternative to communist and Nazi collectivism, but also to the Keynesian-influenced economic orders of the United States (in the Roosevelt era) and Great Britain, with their strong role for state intervention in the economy, in part to support welfare states. The Austrian Friedrich Hayek, a philosophically minded economist (who became a British citizen in 1938), and an American, Milton Friedman, were the most prominent, and were instrumental in setting up an international network of “free market” theorists (the Mont Pèlerin Society), eventually establishing a beachhead at the University of Chicago. “Neoliberal” was understood as an attempt to retrieve classical liberalism from the social liberalism and state interventionism that had taken over in the U.S. and Western Europe, seen as only different in degree from collectivist totalitarianism, as expressed in Hayek’s influential 1944 call to arms, *The Road to Serfdom*.

The social liberal and social democratic orders of the 1950’s and 1960’s with their robust welfare states and strong unions were not hospitable to neoliberal ideas in that period. But Hayek, Friedman, and their colleagues saw themselves as public intellectuals and intellectual activists, promoting classical liberal and free market ideas to intellectual elites (partly through think tanks funded by wealthy capitalists who agreed with their ideas). Their ideas began to take hold in the 1970’s; both Hayek and Friedman received Nobel Prizes in Economics in the ‘70’s. The elections of conservatives Margaret Thatcher in the U.K. in 1979 and Ronald Reagan in the U.S. in 1980 provided fertile soil for neoliberal ideas to influence public policy, an influence that very much continued in the Democratic as well as Republican US governments and Labor and Conservative governments in the UK in the ‘90s, ‘00s and ‘10s. Neoliberalism came to dominate economic thinking in international financial and trade organizations such as the IMF and WTO.

As its influence increased, neoliberalism around the globe retained, and retains, a strong commitment to introducing market mechanisms and approaches in all areas of social life—health care, housing, education, and (public) transportation—not only the economic. In addition, neoliberalism encourages using business approaches and metrics for organizations, agencies, and practices delivering public services; a preference for

private over public modalities; a competitive ethos in service and public goods provision, generally tied to, but existing apart from, the preference of private over public; a tendency to see all value as having an economic character; a valorizing of “entrepreneurial” modalities regarded as underpinning business thinking; a “consumerist” way of assessing the value of a public good; and hostility to regulation of private and business entities. This congeries of policy proposals, initiatives, and evaluative orientations is not always entirely self-consistent, but is plausibly regarded as “neoliberalism.”

At the same time, neoliberals also accord the state an important role in supporting a market-structured social order, with strong protections for property rights and market transactions. Earlier neoliberals like Hayek and Friedman also favored a role for a minimal welfare order; but in general neoliberalism joined classical liberalism in hostility to the state as a guarantor of public welfare in the face of the market’s failure to provide for it. However, neoliberals much more than libertarians see a definite role for the state in protecting the market, market processes, and market values. The market is not something that will naturally arise and flower if only the government gets out of the way, but a social order that requires construction and protection by a strong state.

Neoliberalism and Liberalism

The terminology of “neoliberalism” can be confusing to Americans. For Americans “liberalism” has come to mean a capitalist society with a central role for state intervention to promote public welfare and public goods that cannot be adequately supplied by a market. It is similar to the European idea of “social democracy,” though with a somewhat less robust welfarist regime. In Europe, by contrast, “liberalism” is seen in the classic liberal, or “economic liberal,” mode, and this tendency has been strengthened in the post-Soviet period when to “liberalize” a society means to make it more marketist, and also more civil libertarian, but not more socially liberal in the welfarist sense.

Neoliberalism, Freedom and Grounding Values

It is sometimes said that for neoliberals “freedom” is the fundamental value underlying all its other evaluative and policy commitments and tendencies. This view assimilates neoliberalism to libertarianism, in that libertarianism is officially defined as using “freedom” or “liberty” as the ultimate source and criterion of all valid policy positions. Whether or not all traditional elements of libertarianism can be so understood, neoliberalism does not lend itself to this analysis. The commitment to “marketizing everything” that is fundamental to neoliberalism only partially rests on a commitment to freedom. It sometimes (also) rests on the idea that markets are the most efficient device for satisfying human needs and desires. Hayek particularly argues that markets organize and coordinate the information needed to ensure that the products surviving in a market society are those maximally suited to meet human/consumer desires in a way that can never be accomplished by state entities. A more general point is that the drive to marketize often functions in neoliberalism as a fundamental goal in its own right, not necessarily connected in the market advocate’s mind with any further value served by it.

Neoliberalism, The Market, and Monopoly Power

A tension within neoliberalism showed itself early on in the history of the Mont Pèlerin group. In the absence of regulation, the freedom to pursue private profit through capitalist enterprise can lead to a concentration of corporate power, in particular economic sectors or even across sectors. Some neoliberals did not object to this development since it arose from the activity of purportedly free agents in a market context. But others thought it contrary to a true market philosophy, since monopolization prevented new aspiring market agents from gaining entry to the market where they could ply their wares within a competitive framework. The latter theorists saw unfettered market competition at one stage as often leading to the stifling of competition at a later stage. Monopolistic power thus ended up apparently squelching competition, entrepreneurialism, and consumer choice.

Adherents of the anti-monopolistic view thought the state should regulate markets to ensure that barriers to market entry were not too great, and such regulation would have to be ongoing, preventing excessive concentrations of power. So the two sides of this debate took quite different views of the role of the state in relation to the market. However, by and large they held to the other elements of neoliberal philosophy and evaluative sensibility. CEOs of mammoth, monopolistic corporations laud the “free market,” entrepreneurialism, consumerism, a preference for public over private, and so forth. Moreover, the two sides also agreed that the state should have no more than a minimal role in social provision for the vulnerable and needy in society, or for providing for public goods not readily provided for by the market, such as parks and road systems. Neoliberalism often presents itself, like libertarianism, as opposing a strong state overall. This is misleading as both views with respect to corporate concentration believe the state should play a strong role in upholding markets, market relations, and property rights; and the anti-monopolists further favor a strong state’s role in preventing corporate concentration.

Education

Advocates of market-based neoliberal reform tend to see the traditional public school system as captive of the ‘dead hand of bureaucracy,’ monopoly, and the power of teachers’ unions. My analysis will focus primarily on the charter sector in the U.S., a prominent manifestation of neoliberal reform. Globally, neoliberalism can take other forms as well, such as contracting out educational services to private firms, incentives for parents to use the private school system, and vouchers for private schools (Verger et al 2016).

Charter Schools as Private or Public

Charter schools come into existence through a process in which some entity proposes starting a school (or taking over an existing school) and is then granted a charter by an authorizing agent, often a state education department. The school is run by a private operator that must abide by the terms of the charter, which generally specifies certain student outcomes. But the school has leeway as to how to achieve those results. Charter

schools do not belong to their districts and are not governed by district rules. They are funded by the state with a formula, largely dependent on enrollment, that draws funds from the districts served by the school. Charter schools differ from private schools in not being permitted to charge tuition.

Charter schools (generally referred to, as I will, as “charters”) generally claim to be public schools, and, as publicly funded and free to students, one might wonder whether they are appropriate to consider as exemplifying neoliberalism. In reply, first, public entities can exemplify neoliberal principles, for example, by operating more like businesses or outsourcing to private operators. We noted that in contrast to libertarianism, neoliberalism provides for a substantial role for the state, though a state that operates according to neoliberal principles.

Second, though they are not “private schools” as standardly understood, charter schools do possess some traditionally “private” characteristics when compared with traditional public schools (hereafter “TPS”). They are run by and generally started by private operators. Their state-level authorization involves some degree of public accountability but nothing like the level of traditional local school boards. They are generally not bound by strictures of public disclosure; they are not required to open their records to the public. Many charter schools, especially those run by charter management organizations (CMOs), receive private money in a way not permitted by public schools.

Charter schools often say they are “open to all,” implying that this is part of what makes them public. But “open to all” is ambiguous. Charter schools are “open to all” in the sense that any parent may apply to one. The public system is open to all in the much more substantial sense that anyone of appropriate age must be accepted by the public school system of the district in which they live. By contrast no one is guaranteed a spot in either a particular charter school or charter schools as a sector. If a student is expelled from a TPS school, they still remain the local TPS system’s responsibility to educate. But if a student is expelled, or edged out, of a charter school, no other charter school is required to admit them, but the TPS system is.

Thus, TPS’s are governed by a public logic of “universal provision,” in line with the egalitarian aspect of the normatively informed idea of “public,” that charter schools are not.

Individual Threads within Neoliberalism

I will now examine several distinct, though related, threads in neoliberalism; look at whether and how they are manifested in educational institutions, policies, and practices; and give a brief normative assessment of that thread. I will then examine neoliberalism’s relation to inequality in general and race in particular.

Competition

This neoliberal principle is invoked to favor charter schools and vouchers as introducing competition into a public school system largely lacking it, on the premise that it will improve the schools as a whole. If districts lose funding to the extent that district students choose to attend charter schools, they will have an incentive to improve their schools. Charter advocates tend to assume or claim that lacking that competition-based incentive, districts and district schools experience no incentive to improve the education delivered to students.

In their earliest incarnation, as proposed by Albert Shanker, then head of the American Federation of Teachers, one of the two large, national teachers' unions in the U.S., charter schools were not viewed in this competitive way. Shanker proposed that groups of teachers and parents be permitted to create schools that were tied to the district but were freed from some regulations. The purpose was to serve students not being well-served by the current regime in those districts. If the schools were successful, their lessons would be adopted by district schools. In this way, charter schools were more like an experiment run by a district than an alternative structure putting competitive pressure on the district (Kahlenberg and Potter 2014: 7-16).

But from early on, charters took on an identity as competition with district schools. State charter laws seldom required that they maintain any connection with district schools that would facilitate the "lessons" of (the successful among the) charter schools being adopted by district schools. They tended to be run by outside agents who, unlike Shanker's envisioned operators, had no knowledge of or ties to schools and personnel in the district.

Charter advocates see this model of competition as one (neoliberal) foundation for the value of charter schools. It is an empirical question whether charter schools actually have the desired competition-based effects on existing district schools, that is, whether district schools keep track of what charter schools are doing and try to mine their successes for their own programs out of a concern about losing the competition. But for the enhanced-quality-through-competition argument to work it would not in any case be sufficient that traditional public schools adopt practices from charter schools. Schools might adopt practices of other schools that are not particularly educationally valuable but do help with their competitive position in their particular education marketplace. For example, they might put funds into the physical plant for their athletic program that has no educational benefit.

Note also that a school might adopt a practice engaged in by another school but not for a competition-based reason. As Shanker envisioned, it could be because the former school, having come to recognize the latter school's practice, thinks adopting it would improve their school. The teachers or administrators at the former school might have learned of the practices in question through their professional networks in or out of the district. The idea of professionally-driven motivation to improve one's own practice, or the practice of institutions of which one is a part, is plausibly regarded as a source of educational improvement, and is also manifested in the professionally-informed desire of a teacher to improve how they serve their students. But this motivation is not credited in the neoliberal centering of competition as the primary motive for improvement.

Consumerism

Another thread in neoliberalism is that consumer behavior is the appropriate measure of value; a product that satisfies consumer preferences in a competitive marketplace is the product that should prevail. The kind of value represented by consumer preference is not value assessable from an impartial standpoint, like the value of beauty or knowledge. A full neoliberal philosophy rejects this robust sense of value. The power of the market way of assessing value is precisely that it does not rely on (allegedly) disputable views of what has value.

In educational contexts, who exactly is the "consumer"? In one sense it is the child, as the child will "consume" the good of education. But we do not think younger children should have the full responsibility of choosing important and complex life

goods. So, in market approaches to education, parents' preferences are the ones the education market should be aggregating and responding to, in driving the array of educational options—public, private, religious (“parochial”), charter—generated thereby.

But making parental preferences the linchpin of an education system is problematic. First, parents' desires for their children do not always align with children's actual interests. Parents may be overly invested in ensuring that their children embrace their own value system (religious or not) at the expense of the child developing the autonomous ability to choose for themselves.¹ Or parents may mis-assess what it would take for a school to foster their child's cognitive and emotional growth, and may therefore prefer a less than optimal school for their child.

Second, studies have shown that parents do not always select, or express preferences for, schools based on (their understanding of) their child's interests. This is one manifestation of a larger point that agents behave less rationally than some market models of “agent rationality” suppose (Ben-Porath and Johaneck 2019: 94-96). For example, parents may accord the racial composition of a school or the type of uniforms required (or not) in the school undue importance in their overall assessment of the school.

Third, parents may not be aware of or know how to find the information about particular schools it would be rational of them to take account of. Knowledge about a given school's average achievement levels, for example, would not take a parent very far towards what they need to know about how their particular child would fare in that school. There are also class differences in parent time and wherewithal to undertake the project of locating and understanding this information.

A fourth problem with consumerism concerns aggregate versus individual-level goals. For example, from an individual parent's perspective it is better for her child to be in classes with as few disruptive students as possible. If an individual school treats this preference in the aggregate as an incentive for it to try to keep disruptive students out, rather than to figure out how best to accommodate and educate such students in the context of classes with non-disruptive students, this will result in disruptive students not receiving a quality, or any, education (Brighouse 2020: 190).

A fifth concern with consumerism is that society has a stake in the school's producing knowledgeable and civically competent students who will become productive citizens in the democratic society that they inherit. This vital public function of schools is not derived from, and by no means always aligns with, parental preferences for what they want their individual child to learn in school.² Civic education serves a common, public good out of reach of marketist consumerism.

A final problem with the consumerist strand in educational neoliberalism concerns schools' needing to attract parent-customers. A school in a marketplace is viable only if it has customers/students to attend it. But according parents-as-consumers that kind of power in a school's success invites schools to do whatever it can to attract those parents, including misrepresenting the school's program, offerings, and character in ways that parent-consumers cannot readily discern. If the market challenge is to bring the potential customer to their product, producing the objectively best product is not the only way to accomplish this goal. Misrepresenting the truth about one's, or a rival's, product will often accomplish it.

For all these reasons, it would not be wise for a school and a school system to rely overly much on parental preferences for their individual child's education to drive educational programming, to sort students into particular schools or to decide what sorts of schools should be created. Other educational philosophies, founded on democratic

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participation, provide an essential role for parental input, deriving from the parent's role as a member of the school community, not only as guardians of their own child's educational welfare. Neoliberalism does not have a monopoly on parental voice, as it portrays itself as having because it sees the only alternative to neoliberalism as an ossified state bureaucracy (including teacher unions) running the schools (Friedman 2020).

Choice

Advocates of charter schools and vouchers often tout "choice" as an important value exemplified by these neoliberal reforms. It is often said that poor families should have as much choice to find a good school for their child as a wealthy family, that zip code should not affect the quality of school a child attends.

"Choice" in relation to schools is not a conceptually or morally uniform category. Not all choice plans have a market character. "Controlled choice" involves a district allowing parents to rank their preference for schools within the district, then its striving to give as many of the parents one of their top preferences as possible. To do so, the schools in the district have to be seen as relatively equal in quality, differing only in specific focus, such as arts or science, or pedagogical approaches all of which can be seen as valuable by different groups of parents. If there were to be a widely shared sense among parents in the district that certain schools are "bad" and others "good," satisfying the large majority of parental preferences, as controlled choice seeks to do, would not be possible.

Thus, controlled choice does not leave it to the market to supply schools, nor to employ competitive effects in weeding out some schools and incentivizing others to improve. So, this form of choice is utilized in a framework structured by attempts by the district to ensure relatively equal quality, thus differing fundamentally from a market system in which families exit the perceived inferior traditional system for the perceived superior charter or voucher system. Therefore "choice" by itself does not provide an argument in favor of a neoliberal system of education.

Moreover, even confining ourselves to choice in the specific context of a market system including charter, voucher, and traditional public schools, it is not clear that "choice" is an important value for most parents in seeking schools. It depends on what "choice" means. If it means the provision of a school the parent regards as high quality, of course most parents will want "choice" in that sense, as in the idea that wealthy parents have the "choice" of a high-quality school. But if it refers to the processes a parent is required to engage in to research different schools in an option set available to the parent, and then to go through the often-demanding process of making applications to schools (without a guarantee of securing one's preferred placement), it is much less clear that parents across the class spectrum would desire "choice" in this sense. We saw that there are serious barriers to gaining adequate information about individual schools, and also that working class parents often do not have the time or resources to engage in the "choice activities" required for doing so. It is far from clear that the choice activities required by a market system are generally valued by parents.³ Finally, one might question whether accessing a public good to which citizens are entitled should require such exceptional efforts.

Equality

Let us now turn to the relation of neoliberalism to equality, as the charter sector is often defended as serving a disadvantaged population. I will start by looking at the comparative success of charter schools and TPSs. Unfortunately, it is not entirely easy to make the comparison.

Comparing Charter and Traditional Public Schools

Several respected studies have compared the two types of school on standardized test scores. Brighthouse summarizes the overall finding: “The evidence on charter school achievement effects suggests that they are not, on average, better than traditional public schools in the respects that social scientists measure” (Brighthouse 2020: 139). The last qualification is important. On the one hand, as Brighthouse points out, charter schools want to establish their superiority or at least their quality, according to readily recognized and accepted criteria, so they generally use standardized test scores, and in any case are often required by the chartering agreement to do so. So, a comparison with TPS is possible in this respect. On the other hand, standardized tests do not, or do not yet, capture important aspects of the complex learning process that we are interested in, including moral and civic education, and education for personal flourishing (Curren & Kotzee 2014).

A second problem is how to take account of differences in advantage and disadvantage in the populations served by the different types of school. Studies have shown that charter schools serve a smaller percentage of special needs students (and some smaller studies suggests that among special needs students, they serve ones with less severe disabilities), and a smaller proportion of ELL students (White 2015: 137; Blum 2017: n. 45). This disparity is partly due to charter schools’ often not being required to serve these populations by providing disability services in their schools.

Charter schools and TPSs serving the same income-defined areas have also been compared. A limitation of those studies is that “free and reduced lunch” is generally the criterion used to define income level, as that is a measure the schools must keep records of, in regard to their qualifying for Title I (poverty-related) funds. But that category runs from 0% to 185% of poverty level income (“free” is 0-130%, “reduced” 130-185%), so students in different tiers of this category are bringing quite different levels of poverty-related disadvantage to the school.⁴

Many charter schools aim to serve a low-income, disadvantaged population, almost always students of color in urban centers. One subset of such schools is referred to as “no excuses” schools to emphasize both a strict behavioral regimen and also a philosophy that neither teachers nor students can use a student’s poverty as an “excuse” for not making educational progress. But these schools engage in a form of unofficial selectivity that leaves them with easier-to-educate students within the low-income category. Finn, Manno, and Wright, prominent charter school advocates, concede that “the no-excuses model... does in fact lead to self-selection and a form of creaming, whether voluntary or school-driven” (2016: 163). The schools are not allowed to select students according to their previous grades, and (if oversubscribed) they must select among applicants according to a lottery, but as already mentioned, the admission process makes it challenging for low-income parents to do the work necessary to find out about the process, visit schools (which is sometimes required), and submit applications. These demands effectively exclude dysfunctional parents and many who do not have the time or capital to engage in all aspects of this process, and in that way favoring the easier-to-educate students among the disadvantaged target population.

In addition, once students are admitted, the schools' strict behavioral regimen, and the requirement that parents sign on to help enforce this regimen, means that students can be excluded or "counseled out" (i.e., encouraged to consider leaving the school) because they are not perceived as adhering to the regimen, or because the parents are not perceived as adhering to their agreement. One study of the KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program), the best known of the "no excuses" schools, found that a "typical KIPP grade cohort shrunk by about 30% between grades 6 and 8" (Kahlenberg and Potter 2014: 79).

These processes, acknowledged by the charter advocates mentioned, mean that even if charter schools do show greater success with a student population defined by "free and reduced lunch," this is not sufficient evidence that they are more successful at educating disadvantaged students who are relevantly comparable to TPS students.

Notice that even if (contrary to the argument just presented) KIPP schools were superior to TPS, this would not show the superiority of charter schools in general to TPS, since KIPP schools are only one segment of the overall charter sector. Moreover, experience shows that charter schools that are superior by some standard measure do not have the effect of driving out "lesser quality" charter schools. Finally, market logic requires the possibility of continual entry by new educational entrepreneurs into the education market, and ongoing subjection of the new and the old to market processes ("market discipline").

KIPP and other CMOs also raise the issue of controversy in the neoliberal movement mentioned earlier, concerning the impact of large, well-funded charter chains driving out and making entry difficult for smaller "mom and pop" charter schools, and violating market principles in this sense. In her study of charter schools in Harlem, Terrenda White also claims that in contrast to the early community-based charters, the later-arriving chains tend to have leadership remote from the schools' communities, to be overly invested in standardization in the service of expansion, and to be beholden to the views of overwhelmingly white wealthy donors (White 2018).

Neoliberalism, Inequality, and Wealthy Foundation Funding

Neoliberalism as a political philosophy does not object to inequalities in life conditions. Its market fundamentalism expects such disparities because a market must have winners and losers, that is, producers whose goods are given uptake by the population and those that are not. Its competitive ethos requires substantial disparities of reward. These inequalities can be quite extreme, as in our current highly neoliberalist order with its reduced taxes, weakening of progressivity in taxes, and deregulation of corporate practices.

It is no accident that a substantial part of the charter sector is funded to a significant degree by foundations explicitly embracing a neoliberal, marketist, philosophy, advocating low taxes on the wealthy, minimal state regulation (except to preserve the market) and hostility to unions. The Walton Foundation (funded by the family that owns Walmart), Broad Foundation, Gates Foundation, and the Koch Brothers networks are the prime exemplars. This private largesse toward schools meant to be and claiming to be public is a significant aspect of the charter school scene, involving a mammoth personal relations and advocacy apparatus for the charter sector in general, as well as for specific charter networks. These donors regard charter schools as a sector as entirely consistent with the overall inequalities fundamental to neoliberalism.

In addition the substantial private funds from these sources enable charter schools to employ costly educational improvements like longer school days and years that throw

further into doubt the relevance of higher test scores in KIPP and similar schools to the superiority of the educational regimen of KIPP to TPS schools. Moreover, this funding is often undisclosed, making it even more difficult to track the relevant variables in comparing the two types of schools. In addition, there is of course no guarantee that the private funding would continue if the supported schools succeeding in driving competitor schools out of the market. Finally, there is indeed reason to be concerned that well-funded CMOs backed by market-promoting foundations will drive out the smaller charter operators without providing higher quality offerings, just as the early strand of neoliberalism feared about monopolies created through initial market processes.

Charter Schools, Race, and Inequality

Yet it might seem that the charter sector's educational philosophy does not align with neoliberalism's embrace of inequality in that a significant segment of the charter sector sees itself as exemplifying the fight for racial justice, often asserting that "education is the civil rights issue of our time" and seeing themselves as part of that struggle for civil rights (Cunningham 2021: 30; King 2017⁵). Nevertheless, the neoliberal influence in the world in which these charter sector agents operate greatly constrains and often distorts their vision of social justice.

First, the charter sector does not challenge the extreme inequalities in American society today. It aspires only to provide its own students with the educational wherewithal to avoid the lower rungs of the socio-economic hierarchy. As schools, networks, or a whole sector, it does not put forward the message that this system of inequities is unjust and needs change, and that their education should be part of that change—a message increasing numbers of districts and schools are adopting and seeing as continuous with an implied justice mission of the public school system (Blum and Burkholder 2021: 147-149).

This failure to challenge inequality is partly due to charter schools' generally embracing a "human capital" way of conceiving of education and its value. This approach aims to provide students with what they need to become successful market agents in the society as it is currently structured, with its vast reward disparities along both racial and class axes. Sidelined are other often quite traditional educational values at odds with this economistic and inequality-accepting focus. These include an emphasis on *personal flourishing* in which students would be taught to work out their own life path with the understanding that doing so would not necessarily be reflected in society's reward structure; an emphasis on developing students' capacities for *thinking critically* about their own society and its traditions, goals, and institutions; and a *civic perspective*, educating students to be knowledgeable citizens in society, working toward a common good that would provide a vantage point for criticizing racial and socio-economic disparities. All three of these educational purposes are at odds with a human capital view of education's purpose.

A second limitation of charter agents' understanding of the social justice they imagine themselves to be seeking concerns the "creaming," mentioned above, of the easier-to-educate from among the wider group of disadvantaged students. The limitation is partly that the charter supporters portray themselves as helping disadvantaged black and brown students in general while their practices draw students with "hidden" sources of advantage among the disadvantaged. But in addition, by removing the more advantaged from the TPS pool of students, they further disadvantage the comparatively-harder-to-educate students remaining in TPS by increasing that group's percentage of the

overall TPS population. Doing so has this effect because individual students' educational progress is affected not only by their own disadvantaging characteristics but, independently, by those of their peers as well.⁶

In their 2016 call for a moratorium on new charter schools, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a leading US civil rights organization, mentioned this feature of charter schools specifically, claiming that charters perpetuate de facto segregation of the highest-performing children, compared to those whose aspirations may be high but whose talents are not yet as obvious (NAACP 2017). Apart from these resonances with traditional Jim Crow Segregation, this heightening of disparity within the disadvantaged population is in line with neoliberalism's and the charter sector's overall lack of a critical stance toward inequalities.⁷

A third neoliberalism-related limitation on charter agents' sense of social justice is a denial of the educational significance of poverty, especially prominent in the "no excuses" schools. These see the invoking of poverty in explaining educational deficits as an evasion of the educator's responsibility, and the student's own responsibility, to advance the student's learning. This is neoliberal (and libertarian) in denying systemic barriers to individuals' potential for advancement, in the offloading of responsibility purely to individuals (and families) and in the withdrawal of a norm of public responsibility for provision.⁸

A fourth limitation is the in-school normative environment promoted by the no-excuses schools. The schools regard the students' home cultures, including their ethnoracially-based ancestral cultures as channeled through the family's cultural traditions, as at odds with the schools' stringent class- and culturally-slanted behavioral demands. The school does want buy-in and support from the parents, but their way of understanding what this support involves disrespects those parents' cultures. This disrespect is racialized not only in that when the school's leadership is white and the parent is Black or Brown, it smacks of a racist paternalism; but also because the charter philosophy views the student very much in racial terms and sees his home culture, through a racial lens, as an important part of what educationally disadvantages the student. The student is regarded as immersed in a culture not conducive to success in the white middle-class world, implied to be the standard the school is preparing the student to meet (White 2015).

For all these reasons whatever sense of social and racial justice animates charter school actors, the sector's (especially its "no excuses" wing's) beholdenness to neoliberal inequality seriously constrains the conception of justice involved.

Neoliberalism, School Closings, Race, and Community

A different though related manifestation of neoliberalism in relation to race concerns the shuttering of schools that fall below a certain measurable standard, generally in its students' test scores. Students are then generally reassigned to various other schools. Sometimes the school is reconstituted under different, often charter, management. The schools in question are almost always situated in low-income Black and Brown communities.

Parents and communities served by these schools have sometimes organized to try to keep the schools open, citing the importance of the school as a neighborhood hub; as a safe and home-like space for its students, especially homeless ones; as a symbol of and tribute to a historical institution important to black education in general, and in a

particular location; and as an affirmation of the voice of a marginalized community in its attempt to keep the school alive.⁹

Such school closings offend against educational justice for low-income students of color, channeling neoliberalism's privileging of test scores over a range of other educational considerations. But the protests against the closings reveal constrictions in neoliberalism's valuational framework that go beyond justice. Its individualistic orientation, embedded in its market philosophy, is unable to see or appreciate the communal values asserted by the community protesters—the sense of community within and toward the school itself; the wider neighborhood community seeing the school as a valuable institution serving that community; and the historical dimension of the school as expressing an historical commitment to black education. These communal values are not recognized in neoliberalism's economism of educational value. Finally, neoliberalism is blind to the specifically racial aspect of these communal values—the way communal affirmation and assertion is a resistance to racism, racial devaluing, and racial marginalizing.¹⁰

Challenges to Neoliberalism from the Right and Left

Neoliberalism is alive and well in the U.S. and the world, both in society in general and in the world of education specifically. It continues to have its stable of wealthy foundation support. The Trump administration passed the most wealth-friendly tax cut in recent history.

But the Trump years also saw some important pushback against some aspects of the neoliberal agenda. Trump's economic nationalism, echoed by the rise of ethnonationalist forces in Europe and elsewhere, counters "free trade." The "populist" aspect of right-wing ethnonationalism, though politically allied with corporate hegemony, nevertheless results in at least a small counterweight to that hegemony, resulting in greater popular support for taxing wealth and corporate excess, that left populism can pick up on.

Progressive forces on the left have also become stronger in this same period. The Democratic party agenda is the most anti-neoliberal one since the Johnson administration, with a much greater willingness to use the tools of government to promote the general welfare and the plight of the disadvantaged, and to recognize that the market and market approaches do not solve many of the major problems of society.

This economic populism has a direct bearing on education in that inequality and poverty are significant drivers of educational failure and class and race disparities. Serious reductions or blunting of poverty, as in the Covid relief measures in the U.S. in 2020-21, have a salutary impact on student educational performance. So, in contrast to right-wing populism, left-wing populism has implications for education independent of direct changes to educational policy itself.¹¹ In addition, there has been pushback against various aspects of neoliberalism: teachers unions have engaged in labor actions to support on-site services for low-income students, and for greater funding for such schools; parents and students have boycotted high-stakes standardized tests; low income parents have protested the closing of schools in their neighborhoods slated for "takeover," mentioned earlier. The Supreme Court of the State of Washington declared charter schools not to be "public" in that state's understanding (Rosenfeld 2015). A highly visible campaign to increase the charter presence in the liberal state of Massachusetts was soundly defeated on a popular referendum in 2016 (Cunningham 2021; Blum 2017).

President Trump's Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, was such an extreme opponent of public schools that, together with her being associated with an administration that came to be anathema to liberal Democrats, served to weaken the liberal and Democratic support for the neoliberal educational agenda the Obama administration had encouraged.

There are further signs, some stemming from the Covid crisis and the perceived need for government action to deal with it, that neoliberalism does not have the unchallenged hegemony it once had across the West and imposed on the rest of the world. Nevertheless, it remains a potent force in society and education more generally.

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¹ I have worded this point so as not to assume that autonomy is the central goal in education, having lexical priority over all others. I am taking the weaker position that autonomy is one plausible educational goal, that can run up against parental preference for a child to adopt the parent’s value system (which I am not here assessing as a worthy educational goal or not).

² To be sure, many parents do in fact want their children to learn civic competence in school.

³ One study of parents in a low-income African American neighborhood found that parents felt more disempowered than empowered by a school choice program involving charter schools. “Not one parent [out of 77] expressed positive enthusiasm for or a personal desire to search for such schools.” (Pattillo 2015: 54).

⁴ A study of Boston-based charter school showed that 44.8% of students fell into “free lunch” category compared to 74.6% in Boston Public School (Levinson 2016: 182). “

⁵ King was Secretary of Education in the Obama administration in its last year and civil rights language was often used by that administration (but also by the previous Bush administration) for, among other things, the promotion of charter schools in poor Black and Brown communities.

⁶ One study showed that introducing an academically selective magnet school into a district found that “removing higher performing students from nonmagnet schools not only lowered the mean achievement of the sending schools but also lowered the actual performance level of the students in that school.” (Michelson, Bottia, and Southworth 2012: 186)

⁷ At least some parents think of charter schools as private or selective (Pattillo 2015: 57), reinforcing the idea that the charter sector fosters hierarchy in the way parents think about schools. My argument does not deny that many Black families support their charter schools and charter schools in general. (See valuable discussion of this support in Pedroni 2007).

⁸ For further discussion of the denial or deliberate ignoring of poverty as an educational barrier, see Blum and Burkholder 2021:111-116.

⁹ Eve Ewing (2018) documents an extended community effort to keep an historically important school in an historic black neighborhood in Chicago. She also mentions other such efforts elsewhere.

¹⁰ This racial aspect of the protests is emphasized in Ewing’s account.

¹¹ Wendy Brown makes a case that neoliberalism and ethnonationalism/authoritarianism are not as far apart

as generally thought (Brown 2019).