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# COMPETITION, KNOWLEDGE, AND THE LOSS OF EDUCATIONAL VISION

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Throughout the United States, we are witnessing the growth of a fundamental mistrust of public schools. We are told that our education system must be made more efficient and competitive. At the same time, many schools in urban and rural areas are experiencing a debilitating fiscal crisis. There are insistent calls to return to the “basics.” In combination, these economic and ideological tendencies have profoundly affected some curricular areas more than others. Music and the arts are increasingly considered “frills,” with thousands of positions being cut or not filled. Not only are such positions unnecessary, but they and the knowledge they represent are too expensive in a time when everything in schools must be connected to the project of making our nation economically strong and committed to a “knowledge economy.”

In this article, I want to place these tendencies and the crisis they represent for music and the arts in their larger social context, since they cannot be understood in isolation from the transformations in what schools are for, who they should serve, and who benefits the most from the ways knowledge is organized, taught, and evaluated. In order to do this, I need to extend my focus beyond the borders of the United States. The movements that are having such profound effects here

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can best be understood as part of what are truly international dynamics. As we shall see, a focus on what is happening outside our borders should make us extremely cautious about many of the dominant reforms that are being proposed here.

## RIGHT TURN

In his influential history of curriculum debates in the United States, Herbert Kliebard has documented that educational issues have consistently involved major conflicts and compromises among groups with competing visions of “legitimate” knowledge, what counts as “good” teaching and learning, and what is a “just” society.<sup>1</sup> While I believe neither that these competing visions have ever had equal holds on the imagination of educators or the general citizenry nor that they have ever had equal power to effect their visions, it is still clear that no analysis of education can be fully serious without placing at its very core a sensitivity to the ongoing struggles that constantly shape the terrain on which the curriculum operates.

Today is no different from the past. A “new” set of compromises, a new alliance, and new power bloc have been formed that have increasing influence in education and all things social. This power bloc combines multiple factions of capital which is committed to neo-liberal marketized solutions to educational problems, neo-conservative intellectuals who want a “return” to higher standards and a “common culture,” authoritarian populist religious fundamentalists who are deeply worried about secularity and the preservation of their own traditions, and particular factions of the professionally oriented new middle-class who are committed to the ideology and techniques of accountability, measurement, and “management.” While there are clear tensions and conflicts within this alliance, in general its overall aims are to provide the educational conditions believed necessary both for increasing international competitiveness, profit, and discipline and for returning us to a romanticized past of the “ideal” home, family, and school.<sup>2</sup>

In essence, the new alliance—what I have elsewhere called “conservative modernization”<sup>3</sup>—has integrated education into a wider set of ideological commitments. The objectives in education are the same as those which guide its economic and social welfare goals. They include the dramatic expansion of that eloquent fiction, the free market; the drastic reduction of government responsibility for social needs; the reinforcement of intensely competitive structures of mobility both inside and outside the school; the lowering of people’s expectations for economic security; the “disciplining” of culture and the body; and the popularization of what is clearly a form of Social Darwinist thinking, as the popularity only a few years ago of *The Bell Curve* with its claim that people of color, poor people, and women are genetically deficient<sup>4</sup> so obviously and distressingly indicates.

The seemingly contradictory discourse of competition, markets, and choice on the one hand and accountability, performance objectives, standards, national testing, and national curriculum on the other have created such a din that it is hard to hear anything else. As I have shown elsewhere, these tendencies actually oddly reinforce each other and help cement conservative educational positions into our daily lives.<sup>5</sup>

While lamentable, the changes that are occurring present an exceptional opportunity for critical investigations. Here, I am not speaking of merely the accumulation of studies to promote the academic careers of researchers, although the accumulation of serious studies is not unimportant. Rather, I am suggesting that in a time of radical social and educational change it is crucial to document the processes and effects of the various and sometimes contradictory elements of the forces of conservative modernization and of the ways in which they are mediated, compromised with, accepted, used in different ways by different groups for their own purposes, and/or struggled over in the policies and practices of people's daily educational lives.<sup>6</sup> I shall want to give a sense of how this might be happening in current "reforms" such as marketization and national curricula and national testing in this essay.

## NEW MARKETS, OLD TRADITIONS

Behind a good deal of the New Right's emerging discursive ensemble was a position that emphasized "a culturalist construction of the nation as a (threatened) haven for white (Christian) traditions and values."<sup>7</sup> This involved the construction of an imagined national past that is at least partly mythologized, and then employing it to castigate the present. Gary McCulloch argues that the nature of the historical images of schooling has changed. Dominant imagery of education as being "safe, domesticated, and progressive" (that is, as leading toward progress and social/personal improvement) has shifted to become "threatening, estranged, and regressive."<sup>8</sup> The past is no longer the source of stability, but a mark of failure, disappointment, and loss. This is seen most vividly in the attacks on the "progressive orthodoxy" that supposedly now reigns supreme in classrooms in many nations.

For example, in England—though much the same is echoed in the United States, Australia, and elsewhere—Michael Jones, the political editor of *The Sunday Times*, recalls the primary school of his day.

Primary school was a happy time for me. About forty of us sat at fixed wooden desks with ink wells and moved from them only with grudging permission. Teacher sat in a higher desk in front of us and moved only to the blackboard. She smelled of scent and inspired awe.<sup>9</sup>

The mix of metaphors invoking discipline, scent (visceral and almost “natural”), and awe is fascinating. But he goes on, lamenting the past thirty years of “reform” that transformed primary schools. Speaking of his own children’s experience, Jones says:

My children spent their primary years in a showplace school where they were allowed to wander around at will, develop their real individuality and dodge the 3Rs. It was all for the best, we were assured. But it was not.<sup>10</sup>

For Jones, the “dogmatic orthodoxy” of progressive education “had led directly to educational and social decline.” Only the rightist reforms instituted in the 1990s could halt and then reverse this decline.<sup>11</sup> Only then could the imagined past return.

Much the same is being said on my own side of the northern Atlantic. These sentiments are echoed in the public pronouncements of such conservative figures as William Bennett, E. D. Hirsch, Jr., Diane Ravitch, and others, all of whom seem to believe that progressivism is now in the dominant position in educational policy and practice and has destroyed a valued past. All of them believe that only by tightening control over curriculum and teaching (and students, of course), restoring “our” lost traditions, making education more disciplined and competitive as they are certain it was in the past—only then can we have effective schools. These figures are joined by others who have similar criticisms, but instead turn to a different past for a different future. Their past is less that of scent and awe and authority, but instead one of market “freedom.” For them, nothing can be accomplished—even the restoration of awe and authority—without setting the market loose on schools so as to ensure that only “good” ones survive.

We should understand that these policies are radical transformations. If they had come from the other side of the political spectrum, they would have been ridiculed in many ways, given the ideological tendencies in our nations. Further, not only are these policies based on a romanticized pastoral past, these reforms have not been notable for their grounding in research findings. Indeed, when research has been used, it has often either served as a rhetoric of justification for preconceived beliefs about the supposed efficacy of markets or regimes of tight accountability or they have been based—as in the case of John Chubb and Terry Moe’s much publicized work on the benefits of marketization in education<sup>12</sup>—on quite flawed research.<sup>13</sup>

Yet, no matter how radical some of these proposed “reforms” are and no matter how weak the empirical basis of their support, they have now redefined the terrain of debate of all things educational. After years of conservative attacks and mobilizations, it has become clear that “ideas that were once deemed fanciful, unworkable—or just plain extreme” are now increasingly being seen as common-sense.<sup>14</sup>

Tactically, the reconstruction of commonsense that has been accomplished has proven to be extremely effective. For example, there are clear discursive strategies being employed here, ones that are characterized by “plain speaking” and speaking in a language that “everyone can understand.” (I do not wish to be wholly negative about this. The importance of these things is something many “progressive” educators have yet to understand.) These strategies also involve not only presenting one’s own position as “commonsense,” but also usually tacitly implying that there is something of a conspiracy among one’s opponents to deny the truth or to say only that which is “fashionable.” As Gillborn notes,

This is a powerful technique. First, it assumes that there are no *genuine* arguments against the chosen position; any opposing views are thereby positioned as false, insincere or self-serving. Second, the technique presents the speaker as someone brave or honest enough to speak the (previously) unspeakable. Hence, the moral high ground is assumed and opponents are further denigrated.<sup>15</sup>

It is hard to miss these characteristics in some of the conservative literature such as Herrnstein and Murray’s publicizing of the unthinkable “truth” about genetics and intelligence or Hirsch’s<sup>16</sup> and Ravitch’s latest “tough” discussion of the destruction of “serious” schooling by progressive educators.<sup>17</sup>

## MARKETS AND PERFORMANCE

Let us take as an example of the ways in which all this operates one element of the conservative restoration—the neo-liberal claim that the invisible hand of the market will inexorably lead to better schools. As Roger Dale reminds us, “the market” acts as a metaphor rather than an explicit guide for action. It is not denotative, but connotative. Thus, it must itself be “marketed” to those who will exist in it and live with its effects.<sup>18</sup> Markets are marketed, are made legitimate, by a depoliticizing strategy. They are said to be natural and neutral, and governed by effort and merit. And those opposed to them are by definition, hence, also opposed to effort and merit. Markets, as well, are supposedly less subject to political interference and the weight of bureaucratic procedures. Plus, they are grounded in the rational choices of individual actors.<sup>19</sup> Thus, markets and the guarantee of rewards for effort and merit are to be coupled together to produce “neutral,” yet positive, results. Mechanisms, hence, must be put into place that give evidence of entrepreneurial efficiency and effectiveness. This coupling of markets and mechanisms for the generation of evidence of performance is exactly what has occurred. Whether it works is open to question.

In what is perhaps the most comprehensive critical review of all of the evidence on marketization, Geoff Whitty cautions us not to mistake rhetoric for reality. After examining research from a number of countries, Whitty argues that

while advocates of marketized “choice” plans assume that competition will enhance the efficiency and responsiveness of schools, as well as give disadvantaged children opportunities that they currently do not have, this may be a false hope. These hopes are not now being realized and are unlikely to be realized in the future “in the context of broader policies that do nothing to challenge deeper social and cultural inequalities.” As he goes on to say, “Atomized decision-making in a highly stratified society may appear to give everyone equal opportunities, but transforming responsibility for decision-making from the public to the private sphere can actually reduce the scope of collective action to improve the quality of education for all.”<sup>20</sup> When this is connected to the fact that, as I shall show shortly, in practice neo-liberal policies involving market “solutions” may actually serve to reproduce—not subvert—traditional hierarchies of class and race, this should give us reason to pause.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, rather than taking neo-liberal claims at face value, we should ask about their hidden effects that are too often invisible in the rhetoric and metaphors of their proponents. Given the limitations of what one can say in an essay of this length, I shall select a few issues that have been given less attention than they deserve, but on which there is now significant research.

The English experience is useful here, especially since Chubb and Moe rely so heavily on it and because it is being used to support voucher proposals in the United States. In England, the 1993 Education Act documents the state’s commitment to marketization. Governing bodies of local educational authorities (LEAs) were mandated to formally consider “going GM” (that is, opting out of the local school system’s control and entering into the competitive market) every year.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the weight of the state stood behind the press towards neo-liberal reforms there.<sup>23</sup> Yet, rather than leading to curriculum responsiveness and diversification, the competitive market has not created much that is different from the traditional models so firmly entrenched in schools today.<sup>24</sup> Nor has it radically altered the relations of inequality that characterize schooling.

In their own extensive analyses of the effects of marketized reforms “on the ground,” Stephen Ball and his colleagues point to some of the reasons why we need to be quite cautious here. As they document, in these situations educational principles and values are often compromised such that commercial issues become more important in curriculum design and resource allocation.<sup>25</sup> For instance, the coupling of markets with the demand for and publication of performance indicators such as “examination league tables” in England has meant that schools are increasingly looking for ways to attract “motivated” parents with “able” children. In this way, schools are able to enhance their relative position in local systems of competition. This represents a subtle, but crucial shift in emphasis—one that is not openly discussed as often as it should be—from student needs to student per-

formance and from what the school does for the student to what the student does for the school. This is also accompanied too uncomfortably often by a shift of resources away from students who are labelled as having special needs or learning difficulties, with some of these needed resources now being shifted to marketing and public relations. “Special needs” students are not only expensive, but deflate test scores on those all important league tables.

Not only does this make it difficult to “manage public impressions,” but it also makes it difficult to attract the “best” and most academically talented teachers.<sup>26</sup> The entire enterprise does, however, establish a new metric and a new set of goals based on a constant striving to win the market game. What this means is of considerable import, not only in terms of its effects on daily school life but in the ways it signifies a transformation of what counts as a good society and a responsible citizen. Let me say something about this generally.

Drawing on Kliebard’s significant historical work, I noted earlier that behind all educational proposals are visions of a just society and a good student. The neo-liberal reforms I have been discussing construct this in a particular way. While the defining characteristic of neo-liberalism is largely based on the central tenets of classical liberalism, in particular classic economic liberalism, there are crucial differences between classical liberalism and neo-liberalism. These differences are absolutely essential in understanding the politics of education and the transformations education is currently undergoing. Mark Olssen clearly details these differences in the following passage. It is worth quoting in its entirety.

Whereas classical liberalism represents a negative conception of state power in that the individual was to be taken as an object to be freed from the interventions of the state, neo-liberalism has come to represent a positive conception of the state’s role in creating the appropriate market by providing the conditions, laws and institutions necessary for its operation. In classical liberalism, the individual is characterized as having an autonomous human nature and can practice freedom. In neo-liberalism the state seeks to create an individual who is an enterprising and competitive entrepreneur. In the classical model the theoretical aim of the state was to limit and minimize its role based on postulates which included universal egoism (the self-interested individual); invisible hand theory which dictated that the interests of the individual were also the interests of the society as a whole; and the political maxim of *laissez-faire*. In the shift from classical liberalism to neo-liberalism, then, there is a further element added, for such a shift involves a change in subject position from “*homo economicus*,” who naturally behaves out of self-interest and is relatively detached from the state, to “manipulatable man,” who is created by the state and who is continually encouraged to be “perpetually responsive.” It is not that the conception of the self-interested subject is replaced or done away with by the new ideals of “neo-liberalism,” but that in an



age of universal welfare, the perceived possibilities of slothful indolence create necessities for new forms of vigilance, surveillance, “performance appraisal” and of forms of control generally. In this model the state has taken it upon itself to keep us all up to the mark. The state will see to it that each one makes a “continual enterprise of ourselves”. . . in what seems to be a process of “governing without governing.”<sup>27</sup>

Ball and his colleagues’ research document how the state does indeed do this, enhancing that odd combination of marketized individualism and control through constant and comparative public assessment. Widely publicized league tables determine one’s relative value in the educational marketplace. Only those schools with rising performance indicators are worthy. And only those students who can “make a continual enterprise of themselves” can keep such schools going in the “correct” direction. Yet, while these issues are important, they fail to fully illuminate some of the other mechanisms through which differential effects are produced by neo-liberal reforms. Here, class issues come to the fore in ways that Ball, Richard Bowe, and Sharon Gewirtz make clear.

Middle-class parents are clearly the most advantaged in this kind of cultural assemblage, and not only as we saw because the principals of schools seek them out. Middle-class parents have become quite skilled, in general, in exploiting market mechanisms in education and in bringing their social, economic, and cultural capital to bear on them.

Middle-class parents are more likely to have the knowledge, skills, and contacts to decode and manipulate what are increasingly complex and deregulated systems of choice and recruitment. The more deregulation, the more possibility of informal procedures being employed. The middle class also, on the whole, are more able to move their children around the system.<sup>28</sup>

That class and race intersect and interact in complex ways means that—even though we need to be clear that marketized systems in education often expressly have their conscious and unconscious *raison d’être* in a fear of “the other” and often express a racialization of educational policy—the differential results will “naturally” be decidedly raced as well as classed.<sup>29</sup> This is exactly what has happened in the U. S. as well.

Economic and social capital can be converted into cultural capital in various ways. In marketized plans, more affluent parents often have more flexible hours and can visit multiple schools. They have cars—often more than one—and can afford to drive their children across town to attend a “better” school. They can as well provide the hidden cultural resources such as camps and after school programs (dance, music, computer classes, and so on) that give their children an “ease,” a “style,” that seems “natural” and acts as a set of cultural resources. (Many

of these are exactly the same kinds of classes and positions that are being cut by our financially hard-pressed urban and rural districts.) Their previous stock of social capital—who they know, their comfort in social encounters with educational officials—is an unseen but powerful storehouse of resources. Thus, more affluent parents are more likely to have the informal knowledge and skill—what Pierre Bourdieu would call the “habitus”<sup>30</sup>—to be able to decode and use marketized forms to their own benefit. This sense of what might be called “confidence”—which is itself the result of past choices that tacitly but no less powerfully depend on the economic resources to actually have made the choices possible—is the unseen capital that underpins their ability to negotiate marketized forms and work the system through sets of informal cultural rules.<sup>31</sup>

Of course, it needs to be said that working class, poor, indigenous, and/or immigrant parents are not skill-less in this regard, by any means. After all, it requires an immense amount of skill, courage, and social and cultural resources to survive under exploitative and depressing material conditions. Thus, collective bonds, informal networks and contacts, and an ability to creatively manipulate the system are developed in quite nuanced, intelligent, and often impressive ways here. However, the match between the historically grounded habitus expected in schools and in its actors and those of more affluent parents, combined with the material resources available to more affluent parents, usually leads to a successful conversion of economic and social capital into cultural capital.<sup>32</sup> And this is exactly what is happening in England, the United States, and elsewhere.<sup>33</sup>

These empirical findings are made more understandable in terms of Bourdieu’s analysis of the relative weight given to cultural capital as part of mobility strategies today.<sup>34</sup> The rise in importance of cultural capital infiltrates all institutions in such a way that there is a relative movement away from the *direct* reproduction of class privilege (where power is transmitted largely within families through economic property) to *school-mediated* forms of class privilege. Here, “the bequeathal of privilege is simultaneously effectuated and transfigured by the intercession of educational institutions.”<sup>35</sup> This is *not* a conspiracy; it is not “conscious” in the ways we normally use that concept. Rather, it is the result of a long chain of relatively autonomous connections between differentially accumulated economic, social, and cultural capital operating at the level of daily events as we make our respective ways in the world, including as we saw in the world of school choice.

Thus, while not taking an unyieldingly determinist position, Bourdieu argues that a class habitus tends to reproduce the conditions of its own reproduction “unconsciously.” It does this by producing a relatively coherent and systematically characteristic set of seemingly natural and unconscious strategies—in essence, ways of understanding and acting on the world that act as forms of cultural capital that can be and are employed to protect and enhance one’s status in a social field

of power. He aptly compares this similarity of habitus across class actors to handwriting.

Just as the acquired disposition we call “handwriting,” that is a particular way of forming letters, always produces the same “writing”—that is, graphic lines that despite differences in size, matter, and color related to writing surface (sheet of paper or blackboard) and implement (pencil, pen, or chalk), that is despite differences in vehicles for the action, have an immediately recognizable affinity of style or a family resemblance—the practices of a single agent, or, more broadly, the practices of all agents endowed with similar habitus, owe the affinity of style that makes each a metaphor for the others to the fact that they are the products of the implementation in different fields of the same schemata of perception, thought, and action.<sup>36</sup>

This very connection of habitus across fields of power—the ease of bringing one’s economic, social, and cultural resources to bear on “markets”—enables a comfort between markets and self that characterizes the middle-class actor here. This constantly *produces* differential effects. These effects are not neutral, no matter what the advocates of neo-liberalism suggest. Rather, they are themselves the results of a particular kind of morality. Unlike the conditions of what might best be called “thick morality” where principles of the common good are the ethical basis for adjudicating policies and practices, markets are grounded in aggregative principles. They are constituted out of the sum of individual good and choices. “Founded on individual and property rights that enable citizens to address problems of interdependence via exchange,” they offer a prime example of “thin morality” by generating both hierarchy and division based on competitive individualism.<sup>37</sup> And in this competition, the general outline of the winners and losers *has* been identified empirically.

## NATIONAL CURRICULUM AND NATIONAL TESTING

I showed in the previous section that there are connections between at least two dynamics operating in neo-liberal reforms, “free” markets and increased surveillance. This can be seen in the fact that in many contexts, marketization has been accompanied by a set of particular policies for “producers,” for those professionals working within education. Once again I need to turn our attention to the international context. These policies have been strongly regulatory. As in the case of the linkage between national tests and performance indicators published as league tables, they have been organized around a concern for external supervision, regulation, and external judgement of performance.<sup>38</sup> This concern for external supervision and regulation is not only connected with a strong mistrust of “producers” (for example, teachers) and to the need for ensuring that people continually make enterprises out of themselves. It is also clearly linked both to the

neo-conservative sense of a need to return to a lost past of high standards, discipline, awe, and real knowledge and to the professional middle class's own ability to carve out a sphere of authority within the state for its own commitment to management techniques and efficiency.

There has been a shift in the relationship between the state and "professionals." In essence, the move toward a small strong state that is increasingly guided by market needs seems inevitably to bring with it reduced professional power and status, even more so in those areas of the curriculum that are perceived as "low status."<sup>39</sup> Managerialism takes center stage here.

Managerialism is largely charged with "bringing about the cultural transformation that shifts professional identities in order to make them more responsive to client demand and external judgement." It aims to justify and to have people internalize fundamental alterations in professional practices. It both harnesses energy and discourages dissent.<sup>40</sup>

There is no necessary contradiction between a general set of marketizing and deregulating interests and processes—such as voucher and choice plans—and a set of enhanced regulatory processes—such as plans for national curricula and national testing. "The regulatory form permits the state to maintain 'steerage' over the aims and processes of education from within the market mechanism."<sup>41</sup> Such steerage has often been vested in such things as national standards, national curricula, and national testing. Forms of all of these are being pushed for in the United States currently and are the subject of considerable controversy, some of which cuts across ideological lines and shows some of the tensions within the different elements contained under the umbrella of the conservative restoration.

I have argued elsewhere that paradoxically a national curriculum and especially a national testing program are the first and most essential steps toward increased marketization. They actually provide the mechanisms for comparative data that "consumers" need to make markets work as markets.<sup>42</sup> Without these mechanisms, there is no comparative base of information for "choice." Yet, we do not have to argue about these regulatory forms in a vacuum. Like the neo-liberal markets I discussed in the previous section, they too have been instituted in England and partly in the U.S.; and, once again, there is important research available that can and must make us duly cautious in going down this path.

One might want to claim that a set of national standards, national curricula, and national tests would provide the conditions for "thick morality." After all, such regulatory reforms are supposedly based on shared values and common sentiments that also create social spaces in which common issues of concern can be debated and made subject to moral interrogation.<sup>43</sup> Yet, what counts as the "common," and how and by whom it is actually determined, is rather more thin than thick.

It is the case that while the national curriculum now so solidly in place in England and Wales is clearly prescriptive, it has not always proven to be the kind of straight-jacket it has often been made out to be. As a number of researchers have documented, it is not only possible that policies and legislative mandates are interpreted and adapted, but it seems inevitable. Thus, the national curriculum is “not so much being ‘implemented’ in schools as being ‘re-created,’ not so much ‘reproduced,’ as ‘produced.’”<sup>44</sup>

In general, it is nearly a truism that there is no simplistic linear model of policy formation, distribution, and implementation. There are always complex mediations at each level of the process. There is a complex politics that goes on within each group and between these groups and external forces in the formulation of policy, in its being written up as a legislative mandate, in its distribution, and in its reception at the level of practice. Thus, the state may legislate changes in curriculum, evaluation, or policy (which is itself produced through conflict, compromise, and political manoeuvring), but policy writers and curriculum writers may be unable to control the meanings and implementations of their texts. All texts are “leaky” documents. They are subject to “recontextualization” at every stage of the process.<sup>45</sup>

However, this general principle may be just a bit too romantic. None of this occurs on a level playing field. As with market plans, there are very real differences in power in one’s ability to influence, mediate, transform, or reject a policy or a regulatory process. Granted, it is important to recognize that a “state control model”—with its assumption of top-down linearity—is much too simplistic and that the possibility of human agency and influence is always there. However, having said this, this should not imply that such agency and influence will be powerful.<sup>46</sup>

The case of national curriculum and national testing in England and Wales documents the tensions in these two accounts. It was the case that the national curriculum that was first legislated and then imposed there, was indeed struggled over. It was originally too detailed and too specific, and, hence, was subject to major transformations at the national, community, school, and then classroom levels. However, even though the national curriculum was subject to conflict, mediation, and some transformation of its content, organization, and its invasive and immensely time consuming forms of evaluation, its utter power is demonstrated in its radical reconfiguration of the very process of knowledge selection, organization, and assessment. It changed the entire terrain of education radically. Its subject divisions “provide more constraint than scope for discretion.” The “standard attainment targets” that have been mandated cement these constraints in place. “The imposition of national testing locks the national curriculum in place as the dominant framework of teachers’ work whatever opportunities teachers may take to evade or reshape it.”<sup>47</sup>

Thus, it is not sufficient to state that the world of education is complex and has multiple influences. The purpose of any serious analysis is to go beyond such overly broad conclusions. Rather, we need to “discriminate degrees of influence in the world,” to weigh the relative efficacy of the factors involved. Hence, although it is clear that while the national curriculum and national tests that now exist in England and Wales have come about because of a complex interplay of forces and influences, it is equally clear that “state control has the upper hand.”<sup>48</sup>

The national curricula and national tests *did* generate conflict about issues. They did partly lead to the creation of social spaces for moral questions to be asked. (Of course, these moral questions had been asked all along by dispossessed groups.) Thus, it was clear to many people that the creation of mandatory and reductive tests that emphasized memory and decontextualized abstraction pulled the national curriculum in a particular direction—that of encouraging a selective educational market in which elite students and elite schools with a wide range of resources would be well (if narrowly) served. Diverse groups of people argued that such reductive, detailed, and simplistic paper and pencil tests “had the potential to do enormous damage,” a situation that was made even worse because the tests were so onerous in terms of time and record-keeping. Teachers had a good deal of support when as a group they decided to boycott the administration of the test in a remarkable act of public protest. This also led to serious questioning of the arbitrary, inflexible, and overly prescriptive national curriculum. While the curriculum is still inherently problematic and the assessment system does still contain numerous dangerous and onerous elements within it, organized activity against them did have an impact.<sup>49</sup>

Yet, unfortunately, the story does not end there. By the mid-1990s, even with the government’s partial retreat on such regulatory forms as its program of constant and reductive testing, it had become clearer by the year that the development of testing and the specification of content had been “hijacked” by those who were ideologically committed to traditional pedagogies and to the idea of more rigorous selection. The residual effects are both material and ideological. They include a continuing emphasis on trying to provide the “rigor [that is] missing in the practice of most teachers, . . . judging progress solely by what is testable in tests of this kind” and the development of a “very hostile view of the accountability of teachers” that was seen as “part of a wider thrust of policy to take away professional control of public services and establish so called consumer control through a market structure.”<sup>50</sup>

The authors of an extremely thorough review of recent assessment programs instituted in England and Wales provide a summary of what has happened. Catherine Gipps and Patricia Murphy argue that it has become increasingly obvious that the national assessment program attached to the national curriculum is

more and more dominated by traditional models of testing and the assumptions about teaching and learning that lie behind them. At the same time, equity issues about class, race, gender, and “ability” are becoming much less visible. In the calculus of values now in place in the regulatory state, efficiency, speed, and cost control replace more substantive concerns about social and educational justice. The pressure to get tests in place rapidly has meant that “the speed of test development is so great, and the curriculum and assessment changes so regular, that [there is] little time to carry out detailed analyses and trialing to ensure that the tests are as fair as possible to all groups.”<sup>51</sup> The conditions for “thin morality”—in which the competitive individual of the market dominates and social justice will somehow take care of itself—are re-produced here. The combination of the neo-liberal market and the regulatory state, then, does indeed work. However, it works in ways in which the metaphors of free market, merit, and effort hide the differential reality that is produced.

Basil Bernstein’s discussion of the general principles by which knowledge and policies (“texts”) move from one arena to another is useful in understanding this. As Bernstein reminds us, when talking about educational change there are three fields with which we must be concerned. Each field has its own rules of access, regulation, privilege, and special interests: 1) the field of “production” where new knowledge is constructed; 2) the field of “reproduction” where pedagogy and curriculum are actually enacted in schools; and, between these other two, 3) the “recontextualizing” field where discourses from the field of production are appropriated and then transformed into pedagogic discourse and recommendations.<sup>52</sup> This appropriation and recontextualization of knowledge for educational purposes is itself governed by two sets of principles. The first—de-location—implies that there is always a *selective* appropriation of knowledge and discourse from the field of production. The second—re-location—points to the fact that when knowledge and discourse from the field of production is pulled within the recontextualizing field, it is subject to ideological transformations due to the various specialized and/or political interests whose conflicts structure the recontextualizing field.<sup>53</sup>

A good example of this, one that confirms Gipps and Murphy’s analysis of the dynamics of national curricula and national testing during their more recent iterations, is found in the process by which the content and organization of the mandated national curriculum in physical education were struggled over and ultimately formed in England. In this instance, a working group of academics both within and outside the field of physical education, headmasters of private and state-supported schools, well-known athletes, and business leaders (but *no* teachers) was formed.

The original curriculum policies that arose from the groups were relatively mixed educationally and ideologically, taking account of the field of production

of knowledge within physical education. That is, they contained both progressive elements and elements of the conservative restoration, as well as academic perspectives within the specialized fields from the university. However, as these made their way from report to recommendations and then from recommendations to action, they steadily came closer to restorational principles. An emphasis on efficiency, basic skills, and performance testing, on the social control of the body, and on competitive norms ultimately won out. Like the middle-class capturing of the market discussed earlier, this too was not a conspiracy. Rather, it was the result of a process of “overdetermination.” That is, it was not due to an imposition of these norms, but to a combination of interests in the recontextualizing field—an economic context in which public spending was under severe scrutiny and cost savings had to be sought everywhere, government officials who were opposed to “frills” and consistently intervened to institute only a selection of the recommendations (conservative ones that did *not* come from “professional academics” preferably), ideological attacks on critical, progressive, or child-centered approaches to physical education, and a predominant discourse of “being pragmatic.” These came together in the recontextualizing field and helped insure in practice that conservative principles would be reinscribed in policies and mandates, and that critical forms were seen as too ideological, too costly, or too impractical.<sup>54</sup> “Standards” were upheld; critical voices were heard, but ultimately to little effect; the norms of competitive performance were made central and employed as regulatory devices. Regulatory devices served to privilege specific groups in much the same way as did markets.

Unfortunately, recent research on the effects of all of this in the United States confirms these worries. Linda McNeil’s powerful and detailed investigation of what has actually happened in Texas when state mandated “reforms” involving imposed standards and curricula, reductive and competitive testing, and attacks on teachers’ professionalism demonstrate in no uncertain terms that the very children and schools that these policies and practices are supposed to help are actually hurt in the process. Similar tendencies toward producing inequalities have been documented in the conservative modernization reforms in tax credits, testing, and curricula in Arizona and elsewhere.<sup>55</sup> The implications of these tendencies are deeply troubling in fields such as music, where there has been a long and very serious set of conflicts over what should be taught and how it should be taught. Thus goes democracy in education.

## CONCLUSION

In this relatively brief essay, I have been rather ambitious. I have raised serious questions about current educational “reform” efforts now underway in a number of nations. I have used research largely on the English experience(s) to document



some of the hidden differential effects of two connected strategies—neo-liberal inspired market proposals and neo-liberal, neo-conservative, and middle-class managerial inspired regulatory proposals. Taking a key from Kliebard’s powerful historical analyses, I have described how different interests with different educational and social visions compete for dominion in the social field of power surrounding educational policy and practice. In the process, I have documented some of the complexities and imbalances in this field of power. These complexities and imbalances result in “thin” rather than “thick” morality and in the reproduction of both dominant pedagogical and curricular forms and ideologies and the social privileges that accompany them.

Having said this, however, I want to point to a hidden paradox in what I have done. Even though much of my own and others’ research recently has been on the conservative restoration, there are dangers in such a focus of which we should be aware. Research on the history, politics, and practices of rightist social and educational movements and “reforms” has enabled us to show the contradictions and unequal effects of such policies and practices. It has enabled the re-articulation of claims to social justice on the basis of solid evidence. This is all to the good. However, in the process, one of the latent effects has been the gradual framing of educational issues largely in terms of the conservative agenda. The very categories themselves—markets, choice, national curricula, national testing, standards—bring the debate onto the terrain established by neo-liberals and neo-conservatives. The analysis of “what is” has led to a neglect of “what might be.” Thus, there has been a withering of substantive large scale discussions of feasible alternatives to neo-liberal and neo-conservative visions, policies, and practices, ones that would move well beyond them.<sup>56</sup>

Because of this, at least part of our task may be politically and conceptually complex, but it can be said simply. In the long term, we need to “develop a political project that is both local yet generalizable, systematic without making Eurocentric, masculinist claims to essential and universal truths about human subjects.”<sup>57</sup> Another part of our task, though, must be and is more proximate, more appropriately educational. Defensible, articulate, and fully fleshed-out alternative progressive policies and practices in curriculum, teaching, and evaluation need to be developed and made widely available.

While James Beane and I have brought together in *Democratic Schools* a number of such examples for a larger educational audience,<sup>58</sup> so much more needs to be done. Of course, we are not starting anew in any of this. The history of democratically and critically oriented educational reforms in all of our nations is filled with examples, with resources of hope. Sometimes we can go forward by looking back, by recapturing what the criticisms of past iterations of current rhetorical “reforms”

have been, and by rediscovering a valued set of traditions of educational criticism and educational action that have always tried to keep the vast river of democracy flowing. We will not find all of the answers by looking at our past, but we will reconnect with and stand on the shoulders of educators whose lives were spent in struggle against some of the very same ideological forces we face today.

Although crucial, it is then not enough, as I have done in this essay, to deconstruct the policies of conservative modernization in education. Neo-liberals and neo-conservatives have shown how important changes in commonsense are in the struggle for education. It is our task to collectively help rebuild it by re-establishing a sense that “thick” morality, and a “thick” democracy—a democracy that includes *everyone* and *all* of the knowledge that has been so very important to our understanding of the human condition, including music—are truly possible today. There is political and practical work that needs to be done, and some of it is already being done in the schools and communities of Porto Alegre and elsewhere in Brazil where a curriculum based on the music and culture of the most disadvantaged members of Brazilian society serves as a major focus for everyday school life.<sup>59</sup> We can learn from them about what is possible and what can be done. If educators such as ourselves do not do it, and if we do not join with others in the struggles over class, race, gender, and disability, who will?

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Herbert Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum* (New York: Routledge, 1986).

<sup>2</sup>Michael W. Apple, *Official Knowledge*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000); and *Cultural Politics and Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup>Apple, *Educating the “Right” Way: Markets, Standards, God, and Inequality* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>4</sup>Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

<sup>5</sup>Apple, *Cultural Politics*; *Official Knowledge*; and *Educating the “Right” Way*.

<sup>6</sup>Stuart Ransom, “Theorizing Educational Policy,” *Journal of Education Policy* 10 (1995):427.

<sup>7</sup>David Gillborn, “Race, Nation, and Education,” unpublished paper, Institute of Education, University of London, 1997.

<sup>8</sup>Gary McCulloch, “Privatizing the Past?” *British Journal of Educational Studies* 45 (1997): 80.

<sup>9</sup>Quoted in McCulloch, “Privatizing the Past?” 78.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>John Chubb and Terry Moe, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1990).

<sup>13</sup>See, for example, Geoffrey Whitty, "Creating Quasi-markets in Education," in Apple, ed., *Review of Research in Education* 22 (Washington: American Educational Research Association, 1977).

<sup>14</sup>Gillborn, "Racism and Reform," *British Educational Research Journal* 23 (1997): 357.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 353.

<sup>16</sup>E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Schools We Want and Why We Don't Have Them* (New York: Doubleday, 1996).

<sup>17</sup>Diane Ravitch, *Left Turn* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000). See, Apple, "Standards, Subject Matter, and a Romantic Past," *Educational Policy* 15 (2001): 323–334.

<sup>18</sup>Roger Dale, quoted in Ian Menter, Yolanda Muschamp, Peter Nicholls, Jenny Ozga, with Andrew Pollard, *Work and Identity in the Primary School* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1997), 17.

<sup>19</sup>Menter, et al., *Work and Identity*.

<sup>20</sup>Whitty, "Creating Quasi-markets in Education," 58.

<sup>21</sup>See also Whitty, Tony Edwards, and Sharon Gewirtz, *Specialization and Choice in Urban Education* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Whitty, Sally Power, and David Halpin, *Devolution and Choice in Education* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1998) and Apple, *Cultural Politics and Education*.

<sup>22</sup>Whitty, Power, and Halpin, *Devolution and Choice in Education*, 27.

<sup>23</sup>Whether there have been significant changes in this regard given the victory by "New Labour" over the Conservatives in England again remains to be seen, although the outlook is not necessarily good in many ways. Certain aspects of neo-liberal and neo-conservative policies have clearly been accepted by Labour, such as the acceptance of stringent cost controls on spending put in place by the previous Conservative government and an aggressive focus on "raising standards" in association with strict performance indicators. See for example, Ken Jones, "In the Shadow of the Centre-left: Post-conservative Politics and Re-thinking Educational Change," *Discourse* 20 (1999): 235–247.

<sup>24</sup>Power, Halpin, and John Fitz, "Underpinning Choice and Diversity?" in Sally Tomlinson, ed., *Educational Reform and its Consequences* (London: IPPR/Rivers Oram Press, 1994), 27.

<sup>25</sup>Stephen Ball, Richard Bowe, and Sharon Gewirtz, "Market Forces and Parental Choice," in Sally Tomlinson, ed., *Educational Reform and its Consequences* (London: IPPR/Rivers Oram Press, 1994), 19.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 17–19.

<sup>27</sup>Mark Olssen, "In Defence of the Welfare State and Publicly Provided Education," *Journal of Education Policy* 11 (1996):340.

<sup>28</sup>Ball, Bowe, and Gerwirtz, "Market Forces and Parental Choice," 19.

<sup>29</sup>See the discussion of the racial state in Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 1994) and the analysis of race and

representation in Cameron McCarthy and Warren Crichlow, eds., *Race, Identity, and Representation in Education* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>30</sup>Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

<sup>31</sup>Ball, Bowe, and Gerwitz, "Market Forces and Parental Choice," 20–22.

<sup>32</sup>See Bourdieu, *The State Nobility* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

<sup>33</sup>See, for example, Hugh Lauder and David Hughes, *Trading in Places* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999).

<sup>34</sup>Bourdieu, *The State Nobility*.

<sup>35</sup>Loic Wacquant, "Foreword," in Bourdieu, *The State Nobility*, xiii.

<sup>36</sup>Bourdieu, *The State Nobility*, 273.

<sup>37</sup>Ball, Bowe, and Gerwitz, "Market Forces and Parental Choice," 24.

<sup>38</sup>Menter, et al., *Work and Identity in the Primary School*, 8.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>42</sup>Apple, *Cultural Politics and Education*.

<sup>43</sup>Ball, Bowe, and Gerwitz, "Market Forces and Parental Choice," 23.

<sup>44</sup>Power, Halpin, and Fitz, "Underpinning Choice and Diversity," 38.

<sup>45</sup>Ransom, "Theorizing Educational Policy," 436.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 437.

<sup>47</sup>Richard Hatcher and Barry Troyna, quoted in Ransom, "Theorizing Educational Policy," 438.

<sup>48</sup>Ransom, "Theorizing Educational Policy," 438.

49. Philip O'Hear, "An Alternative National Curriculum," in *Educational Reform and its Consequences*, 55–66.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 65–66, 68.

<sup>51</sup>Catherine Gipps and Patricia Murphy, *A Fair Test?* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1994), 209.

<sup>52</sup>Basil Bernstein, *The Structuring of Pedagogic Discourse* (New York: Routledge, 1990); and *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control, and Identity* (Bristol, PA: Taylor and Francis, 1996).

<sup>53</sup>J. Evans and D. Penney, "The Politics of Pedagogy," *Journal of Education Policy* 10 (1995): 27–44; and Apple, *Official Knowledge*.

<sup>54</sup>Evans and Penney, "The Politics of Pedagogy," 41–42.

<sup>55</sup>Apple, *Educating the "Right" Way*.

<sup>56</sup>Terri Seddon, "Markets and the English," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 18 (1997): 165–166.

<sup>57</sup>Allan Luke, "Series Editor's Introduction," in J. L. Lemke, *Textual Politics* (Bristol, PA: Taylor and Francis, 1995), vi–vii.

<sup>58</sup>Apple and James A. Beane, *Democratic Schools* (Washington: Association for Super-

vision and Curriculum Development, 1995); and *Democratic Schools: Lessons from the Chalk Face* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999).

<sup>59</sup>See Luis Armando Gandin and Apple, "Educating the State, Democratizing Knowledge," in Apple, ed., *The State and the Politics of Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, in press).