

Public School as Corporation and the Erosion of Capital

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Abstract

Corporate network proliferation is eroding public school capital. Profiteers present themselves as caretakers of an ethos of public service. In this completed literature review, public schools and education policy are conceived of as a network showing how schools are becoming privatized. Educational leadership programs can benefit from understanding these dynamics.

Overview

A major problem confronting professional educators in schools and universities is that public education is being abandoned as a public service in the United States. Corporate network proliferation in the public school sector is eroding the capital of these schools (English, 2014). The meaning of formal education becomes distorted where for-profit corporations present themselves as the caretaker of an ethos of public service for the greater good.

In this literature review, the public school sector and education policy are conceived of as a network. Links will be made among corporate networks and governmental entities relative to education policy, suggesting erosion of economic, intellectual, and other forms of capital for public schools.

Questions stemming from my purposes to reveal the workings and influence of self-interest groups on the public school sector and education policy are

1. What networks are driving current school reform and how are they functioning within the public education enterprise and affecting it?
2. What are the implications of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for social democracy in terms of “equality” and “justice” in education?

The connections I trace among markets will provide evidence of the neoliberal movement’s takeover of public education. Neoliberalism values are money, power, and markets, and neoliberalism is an ideology that promotes markets over the state and individual self-interest over common well-being (Ball, 2012).

For-profit corporations and their supporting markets are largely invisible, thus drawing attention to what they do and how is important. One strategy for accomplishing this involves identifying which markets (e.g., Achieve, Inc.) are coopting what education rhetoric (e.g., achievement). By feigning a deep stake in public education and social democracy, these entities hide their true intentions of making money and directing education policy.

The CCSS—the prevailing reform network—has executed a single curriculum, assessment, and instructional resources market, requiring the use of imported tests that, hypothetically, align with the standards (Brass, 2014; Ravitch, 2013). In a single market, one curriculum is adopted, disenfranchising some groups (Papa et al., 2012). The CCSS initiative is funded by private foundations, reflecting a

momentous financial push by the private sector into the public sector (Wexler, 2014). These foundations exercise influence over federal policies.

As social services become privatized public schools lose agency for protecting the common good (Westbury, 2008). Bill Gates (2009) has insisted that schools be whipped into shape. Falling prey, schools in high-poverty neighborhoods lack the power to take a stand in their own best interests (Apple, 2014).

In the military–industrial complex of the 21st century, schools and universities are being rewired from the outside-in by external interest groups, many of which are corporately organized controlling giants. Just as we are being changed from the outside, we are being changed from the inside out by corporate-minded enterprising academicians and new crops of neoliberal leaders. We must prepare ourselves for this new reality in the academy.

Introduction

American corporate leadership is an extraordinary, well-financed, determined group of corporate millionaires and billionaires that are financing a self-serving, destructive doctrine on school leaders and public education in America. (English, 2014, p. 51)

Well-intentioned people are trying to improve public schools, but they need support from activists and policy actors. Committed educators and stakeholders are hitting a wall: “The only pathways they can see are too often ones prescribed and scripted by others,” meaning that they lack the freedom to use their expertise and capacities to develop learner-centered programs (Bogotch & Shields, 2014a, p. 2).

Public education in the United States and around the world needs to be defended, as does our right as taxpaying citizens to keep it public (English, 2010, 2014). Who has the moral courage to protect this sector from the dominance of excessively financed networks and affluent advocates from the political right and left? Who has the political capital to take action?

Herein I aim to explain complexities and nuances involved in the marketization or commodification, also known as the market takeover, of the public education sector in the United States. Three questions stem from my purposes to reveal the workings and influence of self-interest groups on the public school sector and education policy.

3. What networks and entities are driving current school reform in the United States, and how are they functioning within the public education enterprise and affecting it?
4. Whose interests are served by extracting revenues, labor pools, and services from the nation’s public school system?
5. What are the implications of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for social democracy and social justice in terms of “equality” and “justice” in education?

I use the original concept “Public Education, Inc.” as a framework for discussion. My writing strategy involves tracing some connections among markets in an effort to evoke a bigger picture of the neoliberal movement’s takeover of public education. Because the markets and their influence are largely invisible, tracing connections among for-profit corporations and their supporting cast of characters is a complicated task. Neoliberal corporations, councils, think-tanks, and sponsors that favor free-market education reforms have coopted public school rhetoric. By feigning a deep stake in public education and democracy, these entities hide their true intentions of making money and directing education policy.

Take, for example, the propaganda of the money-making lobbyists of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), who, according to Berliner and Glass (2014), say that they are in the business of improving education by advancing reforms that give parents choice; by making schools more accountable, transparent, and efficient, and by paving the way for youth to become successful adults. ALEC likes charter schools that make money, not public schools (Ravitch, 2013). Prisons and tobacco are business priorities overshadowing ALEC’s marginal interest in education that mimics the vision statements of public schools. ALEC lobbied “politicians to attach free-market reforms to state education laws” (Berliner & Glass, p. 8).

Just as ALEC’s members have turned schools into a marketplace, they have ventured to turn private prisons into big business by landing severer punishments for criminals (Berliner & Glass, 2014).

Public Education Inc. serves as a wakeup call for bringing uncomfortable truths to the surface. It also serves as a medium for supplying educators with ideologies and evidence for having a greater stake in the corporate appropriation of the public school sector and for taking back control of our public schools. Moreover, Public Education, Inc. requires a moral outcry against it because it equates with what English (2014) unequivocally argues is the destruction of public education.

I have organized this conceptual report by (1) introducing my concept of Public Education, Inc., as a jolt for educators and citizens who want public schools to thrive; (2) summarizing the CCSS as a policy issue of high relevance today; (3) identifying this policy issue in broad terms, giving an overview of literature in the educational leadership field, also drawing on curriculum studies, critical studies, and education sociology; (4) addressing why key stakeholders (e.g., school leaders, teachers, policymakers) should care about the issue; and (5) concluding with a call to action.

Public Education, Inc.

Public Education, Inc. allows me to openly and critically speak to what many public school activists consider a dire situation concerning public schools in the United States. I should first clarify that I do not see all corporations as automatically bad or somehow conspiring against public education. And I do not see entrepreneurial leadership as inherently wrong-headed, especially where those entrepreneurs who seek to turn a profit are not undermining the public school system or higher education institutions. Those who work to achieve social benefits as social entrepreneurs may be making a positive contribution to public education. I recognize that many of us in our daily work use the services of corporations and have codependent relationships with them in our roles as customers.

Military–Industrial Complex

In the military–industrialization of the 21st century American society has provided a playbook for Public Education, Inc. by laying the groundwork for public schools to be sold to the highest bidder. The Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) (2012) (under the Office of the Secretary of Defense) adopted the CCSS, in addition to 43 states and the District of Columbia. The DoDEA, a federally-operated school system, is in the business of preparing children of military families for education in America, Europe, and the Pacific (with many schools in 12 foreign countries). Attention is on a prescription for science beyond the language arts and math.

Government agencies like the DoDEA are supported with taxpayers' dollars, yet their neoliberal ideologies and marketing tactics seems more like those of the private sector than public service. The unquestioning taxpaying citizen who is concerned about the health of public education should want to know and do more. Public education historian Ravitch (2013) explains that “The transfer to public funds to private management and the creation of thousands of deregulated, unsupervised, and unaccountable schools have opened the public coffers to ... exploitation by ... entrepreneurs” (p. 4). Abuses of power in the exploitation of the public school sector is a common refrain in the education policy domain.

Public Education, Inc., my term used throughout, is a byproduct of the “military–industrial complex” President Eisenhower (Yale Law School, 2008) coined in his farewell speech, delivered in 1961 (dubbed “Military–Industrial Complex Speech”). He alluded to a “compelling” military–industrial need for the nation to “create a permanent armaments industry of vast proportions,” arguing against the risks involved in “emergency improvisation of national defense.”

Yet Eisenhower admitted in his speech that our military spending was completely out of line compared to other important priorities: “We annually spend on military security more than the net income of all United States corporations.” This admission made a domain comparison between the military world and the corporate world. An alliance. Additionally, he disclosed the high-priority investment of the government in the military and the huge wealth of U.S. corporations.

Eisenhower also alluded to “misplaced power” and its “total influence” on all sectors of society. Although he did not specify public education or repercussions for schools (or university-based teacher and leader preparatory programs), it seems presaged. Reigning megacorporations like Pearson Education and Microsoft have been invading the public school system with the force of a military campaign. They overpower the agency of schools to serve constituents and communities and remold them to the self-

serving, profiteering interests of the market economy. Consider the insights of this education professor, whose critical take is that Eisenhower's speech

focuses less on necessary defense and more on generating dollars in the corporate structure by way of developing arms and ammunition not needed, which has grave consequences for public education and its sustainability around democratic values and the common good. (personal communication, October 13, 2014)

The speaker of these words is a retired senior officer in the military and a vocal Democrat.

Not all readers may be aware of the extent to which the corporate takeover of public schools has been occurring or its historic context, fueling my decision to tackle this topic. Readers may wonder what the moving pieces are, how they fit together, and what the possibilities are for new leadership in the roles of policy actor and advocate. To this end, Bogotch and Shields (2014a) explain why educators and education leaders may be blindsided; they are “often swallowed up by dominant business and governmental interests which today often represent global, corporate, and capitalistic . . . interests gone awry” (p. 2).

As public school activists believe, corporations invade schools, destroying their integrity and the capacity of school people to do their jobs. The military take on this equation is very real, although from another perspective. As James Heintz (2011) of the Political Economy Research Institute explains, heavy investment from the federal government in the military has deprived the nation's schools, robbing them of much-needed improvements in poor infrastructure (e.g., English, 2014; Ravitch, 2013), including horrendous sanitary problems in Michigan schools.

With historical context involving governmental military investments and real costs to public schools, Heintz's analysis is directed at the financial investment in the military since 9/11 terrorist attack and the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Total military assets rose significantly to “\$1,245 billion (\$1.2 trillion) by the end of 2009—an increase of \$341 billion” (Heintz, 2011, p. 4). Importantly, he concludes that “if these capital investments were made in U.S. education infrastructure, it would represent an 18.5 percent boost in terms of capital improvements nationwide” (p. 4). This could have footed the facilities bill for improving all makeshift public schools in the country. Without the investment of public assets in schools, the costs of the wars show up as dilapidated facilities in high-poverty areas, compounding the health and safety of the nation's poorest children (Mullen, 2014a).

Outside-In Rewiring

In the modern day military–industrial complex, public schools (and colleges and universities) are being rewired from the outside-in by external interest groups. Consider Broad Foundation. Uncommon Schools. Success Academy. Teach For America. All corporately organized controlling giants. Just as we are being changed from the outside, we are being changed from the inside out by colleagues, supervisors, entrepreneurial leaders, and a new crop of neoliberal leaders trained by the corporate giants they quickly come to represent.

Critical awareness among educators, leaders, and professors means understanding such prevailing educational dynamics and doing something about them. People we know at work moonlight with marketeers and benefit financially while, importantly, changing the value system of education (Moffett & Newsom, 2014). Yet it is those working in public schools whose jobs are on the line and schools are in jeopardy—they are the ones being pressured by accountability policies and measures of student performance to the taxpaying citizen. They are the ones being penalized when expectations set by policies fall short (English, 2014; Ravitch, 2013).

It should not escape our notice that we are being conditioned to humanize corporations and see them as valuable education leaders and stakeholders, in effect giving them greater latitude to colonize schools. By not protesting, we are falling prey to the subliminal rewiring of citizens by our federal court: The U.S. Supreme Court has decreed [that] corporations are people too. And as a person, a corporation has plenty of self-interest in the forms of revenues and stock prices. Both revenues and profits will benefit from lower taxes—much of which will be spent at the state level financing public education—and cheaper labor costs. (Berliner & Glass, 2014, p. 6)

Anthropomorphizing corporations by making them out to be benevolent friends and even saviors—in keeping with Gates’s (2009) accusatory rhetoric of school failure and messianic messages of corporate intervention—disrupts our ability to spot the bullying tactics that proliferate market invasions of schools, even the very meaning of education itself. The hostage-taking of the public education sector should inspire us to investigate how public schools are being exploited for their revenues, services, and cheap labor (Ravitch, 2013).

Zapping School Agency

In the contemporary political scene, as social services become privatized schools lose their power and agency for protecting the common good. Westbury (2008), curriculum theorist from Canada, believes that “the school system is an agency that should exist to support and protect the local service,” so his concern is that schools break rather than improve that service when school leaders lose sight of this reality (p. 3). Cheating on standardized tests is an example of the shortsightedness of school leaders who fear the negative repercussions (English, 2014).

Many leading education specialists argue a two-pronged perspective: that there exists a critical mass of influential decision makers and entities in American society *and* that there is “misplaced power” (ironically, Eisenhower’s own words) in the erosion of the core mission, common good, local control, and democratic goals of the public education system (e.g., Anyon, 2014; Apple, 2014; Ball, 2012; Barry, 2005; Berliner & Glass, 2014; Bogotch & Shields, 2014b; English, 2010, 2014; Giroux, 2014; Mullen, English, Brindley, Ehrich, & Samier, 2013; Ravitch, 2013; Tienken & Orlich, 2013; Westbury, 2008).

Some entrepreneurs—take the very powerful corporatist Bill Gates (2009)—claim that these are the same ideals that engineer their vision. Supporters of Gates and his ideas would say that his interventions improve public schools, whereas critics adamantly disagree; social justice proponents are reaching a boiling point (Bogotch & Shields, 2014b; English, 2014). Ravitch (2012) identifies nondemocratic forces tied to the capitalist mindset as think tanks from the right-wing, wealthy elite—corporations and individuals alike—and legislators who claim that government funding for private enterprise is badly needed. They have bought into the myth that America’s public schools are hopeless, dismal failures which in turn had dried up state support for public schools. Berliner and Glass (2014) drive the point home:

... modern myths about schools (e.g., private schools offer superior teaching and learning compared with public schools) are likely to be articulated and communicated by organized private interests—by various think tanks and organizations that stand to gain from widespread belief in the myths. (p. 7)

Power in the industrial, capitalist market economy of the day is associated with free unregulated markets, competition, and property holdings, not membership in society or good intentions (Bogotch & Shields, 2014a, 2014b). As English (2011) insists, greed is the golden pretense of improving schools, but in reality money and power are at stake: “The lure of making money is a powerful motivator for these agencies to promote standardization and to take steps to remain in power” (p. xii; see also English, 2014). However, public school defenders are fighting back, even “outing” enemies by name (e.g., English, 2010, 2014; McDermott-McNulty, 2014).

Being Whipped into Shape

Gates (2009), a celebrated hero in this campaign to inject public schools, has insisted that public schools must be whipped into shape. His marketing zeal essentially rolled out the red carpet for profiteers and state and national legislators to conduct commando raids of schools. The language of whips evokes the outrageous injustice of African American slaves by plantation owners and legislators that is integral to Gates’ history as an American. In today’s era, public schools have been bought and sold (English, 2014), turned into a profitable warehouse for goods and services. With success, entrepreneurs have rationalized the failure of public schools, paving the way for intervention from outside “experts” and their unchecked conversions. Gates brokered the control of the public school sector by “promot[ing] unproven school reforms (e.g., high-stakes testing, charter schools, teacher merit pay, the [CCSS]),” intent on “boost[ing] international test scores to reclaim the United States’ rightful place at the top of the test results lists—a position we never held” (Berliner & Glass, 2014, p. 17).

Falling prey, schools in high-poverty neighborhoods lack the power to take a stand in their own best interests (English, 2014). Many times, these schools have come under mayoral control or the control of mayorally appointed school boards. Democratic values of public education have eroded: “Business values are not appropriate to drive American education, social justice advocates protest, even though citizens “would support the most efficient use of the taxpayer dollar in the public schools. But that is not an educational core value. . . . Democracy is not efficient and thus a democratic education is not efficient” (Tienken & Orlich, 2013, p. 42).

Educating poor and minority children and children with disabilities so that they can succeed as contributing members of society is a hallmark of democracy. Markets are ostensibly efficient, making them seductive to stakeholders. School leaders and parents are being misled by Gate’s claim that K–12 public schools are simply too expensive to operate, having lost sight of the fact that in a democratic society we do not institutionalize children with disabilities—instead, we support them through better funding in special education (Berliner & Glass, 2014).

Berliner and Glass (2014) confirm that “modern corporations are beginning to view the public schools as ripe for picking big profits” (p. 6). A functional/instrumental role, not educative role, of service provider has propelled marketing companies and their motive to operationalize schools as targets of economic gain (English, 2010, 2014; Ravitch, 2013). William J. Bennett, conservative pundit and former U.S. secretary of education (during the Reagan administration) received millions from the U.S. Department of Education under the name K12, Inc., a private company he cofounded (English, 2010). The illusion of being a sponsor of K–12 public education and imitating this system as a company name but in reality debasing its cherished ideals only serves to compound the moral bankruptcy Heintz (2011) describes.

Megacorporations like Pearson Education are powerhouses, accessing and controlling delivery and evaluation services to the public education sector; their exploitation of the country’s public schools is unprecedented. It is challenging to identify all of the influential policy pundits and marketeers (who sell goods and services in public schools and advocate for the public school sector to be made into a marketplace, e.g., Gates, 2009), as well as to unearth their connections to one another.

It is exhausting to try and understand how they mimic the rhetoric of education reform for their own ends. Moreover, it is labor intensive to assemble the many puzzle pieces only to realize that the power grid is made of quicksand and we are stuck in it. As such, it is a constantly moving nimble machine that extends beyond the federal government to a shadow government operating right under our feet.

Scheming Shadow Governments

Shadow government (also *cryptocracy*) refers to “private individuals exercising power behind the scenes, beyond the scrutiny of democratic institutions. . . . The official elected government is in reality subservient to the shadow government [made up of influential corporations and think tanks, the elite classes, including the White middle class, and wealthy individuals, for example] that represents the true executive power” (*Wikipedia*, 2014).

In America, we have been primed to think that one government makes decisions for the country and represents our citizenry, when in reality a shadow government (corporate America) is the conduit of its power and influence. Take, for example, how shadow governments become more powerful and influential in a society where “the White middle and governing classes wish both to reduce the cost of public education to themselves and to find protected privilege for their children and grandchildren in segregated schools” (Berliner & Glass, 2014, p. 5). White middle-class parents have been influencing the fate of urban public schools, hence their very existence.

Policy Issue: A Single Market, the CCSS

The CCSS is a school reform network. Through it, a single curriculum, assessment, and instructional resources market has been created. The private sector is consuming public education in America. Entrepreneurs with political power are requiring the use of imported tests, services, and products that, at least hypothetically, align with the standards (Brass, 2014; Ravitch, 2013). In a single market,

the adoption of only one form of curriculum is an example of symbolic power, and it enfranchises some and disenfranchises other groups. . . . It is a myth that any new set of standards that imposes only one type of curriculum will reduce the achievement gap when the gap is built into the system itself. (Papa et al., 2012, pp. 45-46)

Wielding “symbolic power,” the CCSS initiative (published in 2010) is heavily funded, reflecting a momentous financial push by the private sector into the public sector (Wexler, 2014). An elite network of megacorporations supports the CCSS, which itself “is funded by the richest private foundations in the country,” primarily the Gates Foundation and the Broad Foundation (p. 52). Wexler, like other researchers, draws attention to how these foundations exercise influence over the policies of President Obama and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan.

Federal Backing Gives Weight

The CCSS are state adopted, but it is misleading to stop right there. One cannot claim a lack of federal weight and nationwide networking in its development. Consider, for example, the widespread influence of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) Task Force, which actually recreated its mission of national security to send the urgent message that U.S. education is not only a dismal failure but a national security issue. It formed a partnership with the federal government and private industry to expand the influence of the CCSS (Blumenfeld, 2012), spreading the military–industrialization of the United States. Aligned with the CFR, The U.S. Department of Defense, through its field activity branch DoDEA, colonizes the children of military families on a grand global scale with its strong endorsement and use of the CCSS.

Yet Jones and King (2012) insist that the CCSS is not a “national curriculum” that violates state and local control of education or that places constitutional limits on the federal government’s influence over curriculum and pedagogy. Their logic is misleading and dangerous and so is this demarcation. In the latter case, this language obscures how the CCSS works to discipline classroom practice and force radical shifts in the governance of public education in the United States (English, 2014; Papa et al., 2012).

Hence the CCSS did not pop up out of nowhere as a heavily financed policy initiative. The underlying ideologies and practices of corporate accountability and standardization have been inextricably meshed with federal legislation in education that has existed for more than 20 years (Bracken, 2013). As Wexler (2014) explains, policy reform has

led to the involvement of the Gates and Broad foundations, which set in motion the corporate reforms of the CCSS, such as standardized testing; adequate yearly progress (AYP); and CCSS predecessors such as the Elementary and Secondary School Act (ESEA), No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), and now Race to the Top (RTTT). (p. 53)

Ravitch (2013) further documents that “national standards and national assessments created a national marketplace for products” (p. 181). “Equity investors” acted on ideas to make money after Race to the Top was launched. Businesses began developing “technological resources, hardware, and online curricula for the new national [CCSS]. National standards and national assessments created a national marketplace for products” (p. 181). A consultant predicted that public school officials would be put in the position of wanting to receive assistance from businesses, worrying that if the CCSS tests turned out to be as rigorous as promoted, their students and schools would look bad (Ravitch, 2013). Was this an example of clever backdoor policy manipulation by shadow governments?

Neoliberal Public Enemies

English (2010) “outs” neoliberal public enemies. His work, already a classic, has generated controversy. He ranks Eli Broad as the number 1 enemy of public education in America, with his multimillion dollar funding and perpetuation of “a top-down corporate takeover of urban school systems” (p. 67). English attests that the leaders (i.e., “non-educators”) Broad promotes are not credible academic educators. Not only do they lack knowledge of the education field they also “are beholden to efficiency management tactics and simplistic economic models” and they “discourage innovation and privatize formerly non-commodified public spheres while failing to bring about the dramatic improvements they advertise” (p. 67). In addition, the Broad approach does not offer anything new and keeps its curriculum hidden, as well as its purported experts.

Public enemy number 2 in English's (2010) lexicon is Arne Duncan, whose ideology and practice are driven by the neoliberal agenda that directs the Democratic and Republican parties, with President Clinton and President Obama both endorsing it as much as any Republican and right-wing think tanks as well (see also English, 2014; Tienken & Orlich, 2013). Additional enemies, such as Chester E. Finn Jr., are tied into the neoliberal agenda of commodifying public schools through the creation and development of the CCSS and/or by preparing for it. William J. Bennett has channeled millions of dollars from the U.S. Department of Education through K12, Inc., his private online education company (English, 2010). Note his coopting of "K12."

Further elucidating the marketers' policy grip in the U.S., the most influential federal agencies in education—the National Governors Association (NGA)¹, Achieve², and CCSSO³—are all backers of the CCSS (Bracken, 2013; English, 2014), in addition to the U.S. Department of Education (Wexler, 2014). And there are other networked powerhouses that Tienken and Orlich (2013) pinpoint as having "pushed through the development of the standards" (p. 107). What we got was a prescription for the language arts and math as subjects, with science (and who knows what else) to follow, and for which public education's resources are being expended.

Neoliberal Business Networks

Neoliberalism relies heavily on networks as a conduit for penetration of the public school sector. Ball (2012) encourages empirical researchers to do a "more careful tracing of policy networks that underpin the global expansion of neoliberal ideas" and "descriptions of circulatory systems that connect policy regimes" (pp. 2-3). A deep understanding of the connections among corporate networks and their dynamics will guide us to empower ourselves to take action.

Working in this direction, curriculum professor McDermott-McNulty and literacy professor Moore have each documented the Common Core's networks in relation to connections and impact, concluding, "It is a private club [in which] these people all know each other" (as cited in Downey, 2013). McDermott-McNulty's (2013) drawing⁴ is thought-provoking.

McDermott-McNulty identifies some key players and their connections in today's education policy environment, specifically regarding the overflow of networks supporting the CCSS movement. In my opinion, it is an intriguing instructional exhibition. The reigning neoliberal worldview is operationalized as a power grid of brokers dealing not with human beings and their lives, and associated teaching-learning complexities, but in decontextualized services and products rendered transformative for public education.

CCSS Ploys and Bedfellows

In case you are wondering, the states were financially pressured to comply with the CCSS. Wexler (2014) argues that they were indeed "coerced into adopting the standards through federal grants and, most recently, No Child Left Behind waivers" (p. 52; see also Tienken, 2012). From this angle, Jones and King's (2012) viewpoint seems simplistic as well as insufficiently attuned to the politics and role of the federal government as a colossal market cooperative.

A NGA press release suggests that the political workings and intentions of governmental marketers are not even all that covert anymore. Consider that the NGA (2014) announced that it will "use the 'bully pulpit'" to make states comply with the CCSS-aligned tests. It is rationalized that this will ensure rigor in the Washington-based bullying tactics that permeate the attitude and actions of the powerhouse networks—oddly enough, revealing their machinations while concealing them.

You may be asking who is partnering with whom to benefit financially from the CCSS. Downey (2013) has responded by "outing," among others, a conglomerate network with key players—Achieve, Inc.—which she describes as "a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit group that has been heavily involved in writing the standards, receiving funding from corporate titans such as Microsoft, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Chevron and DuPont" (p. x). She has disclosed the networked connections to administrations and partnerships, as well as Achieve Inc.'s executives' average salary of "\$198,916" in 2011. She continued, saying that

The company's president, former Clinton administration official, has a salary of \$263,800 in 2011. Two national consortia, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and

Careers [PARCC] and Smarter Balanced, having gotten a combined \$346 million in federal education grants to create a pair of new standardized tests tied to Common Core.

The rich get richer and their shadow governments help them campaign on their own behalf.

Lacking Empirical Evidence

This proliferating change in the policy reform landscape came about without proper vetting and testing by school leaders and teachers, and parents. The CCSS have been implemented in most states in 2014–2015, with the justification in part being that they are a “godsend” to academically struggling K–12 schools, explain critics Tienken (2012) and Wexler (2014). Tienken (2012) adds the crucial perspective that “large social programs” like the CCSS “should have research to support them prior to being released large-scale on the public. That research should be independent and not created by one or more of the contributors to the program that is released. Neither of those things happened in this case” (p. 154). These are basic expectations for rigor in curricular programming, long known by education researchers.

Like Brass (2014), but with laserlike focus on the empirical violation of the CCSS and the weak justification and coercive thinking that led to its implementation, Tienken (2012) argues,

It is dangerously naïve and professionally irresponsible to think that one set of standards, based solely on two subjects, can prepare children to access the thousands of college options or even make them attractive to the admissions officers that control access to those options. For example, is it really crucial that all students master the following CCSS English Language Arts standard RI.9-10.7 (CCSSO and NGA 2010)?

Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person’s life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account. (p. 154)

Money-Making Markets

These growing education markets make money hand over fist. The incomes of Achieve’s executives are but one toxin in this polluted ocean. The resulting education crisis has enabled “state-led” intervention through “the provision of CCSS-based tests (PARCC and Smarter Balanced), prepackaged materials developed by educational publishers, and educational technologies and games” (Brass, 2014, p. 24). In this product-packaged school life, the teacher is being manufactured as a consumer of new technologies and s/he is being remodeled to accommodate the tests and services.

In this new world of market domination, the teacher who has been classically prepared for the educative role of curriculum maker, or who stays in education because of the independent thinking and professionalism it affords, has been robbed of it. As Papa et al. (2012) attest about the politics involved in education policy and testing, “There is a huge economic interest in the [CCSS] as textbook and other companies stand to gain with a host of prepackaged products ready to sell for the new market created by the new curriculum” (pp. 45–46). Pearson Education (Pearson International is headquartered in London, United Kingdom) has bought McGraw-Hill and numerous other publishing companies but have them keep their own names; in a shadow government, a motive is to help conceal one’s monopoly over public schools (Bracken, 2013).

Private Sector Profits

Networked powerhouse connections across America suggest that conservative and progressive forces have forged partnerships in creating and/or publicizing the standards (Ball, 2012; Bracken, 2013). Thus, in keeping with the spirit of public education upheld by Papa et al. (2012) and many other public education spokespersons, CCSS is *not* a philanthropic endeavor, despite declarations to this effect. It is disconcerting that “the private sector has developed and established the CCSS with considerable federal support” (Brass, 2014, p. 24) and this is an echoing refrain in the education literature (e.g., English, 2014; Tienken & Orlich, 2013).

Brass’s (2014) fiscal breakdown of profitable wins for the private sector animates an undeniable picture of greed:

The \$350 million of federal funding for CCSS-aligned tests represent a small portion of the \$4.35 billion in economic stimulus money that the federal department of education has distributed to

states, professional organizations, and private businesses to develop and promote the standards and CCSS-aligned tests, services, and products. (p. 24)

Just think about how the federal dollars have been used. Brass (2014) explains that most of it has gone “to subsidize entrepreneurs, testing companies, and the educational technology sector to displace the curricular and pedagogical leadership of elected public representatives—for example, state legislatures, state regents, and local school boards—at the public’s expense” (p. 24). However, even while such corporate identifications can be made in addition to establishing interconnections among the market forces, the market conversion of education is not a smooth or transparent operation. Rather, as I have “metaphorized” (e.g., Mullen, 2014b), this mechanistic force consists of many moving parts across corporate structures and within educational systems; it works in and against schools and us as citizens.

As a single market that is also a reform movement of catalytic proportions, the CCSS has made it possible for for-profit and not-for-profit contractors to make more money doing business with public schools; they also benefit from related political opportunities (Brass, 2014; Tienken & Orlich, 2013). Savage, O’Connor, and Brass’s (2014) view is that the CCSS movement raises questions about the extent to which today’s reforms can be considered public or democratic in nature. The binary between democratic and republican ideologies disappears in the neoliberal deconstruction of ideological bleeding brought on by the thirst for money and power (English, 2014; Tienken & Orlich, 2013).

The smoke and mirrors of debates surrounding standards and curriculum taken up by game-changing marketeers like Bill Gates, Arne Duncan, E. D. Hirsch, and the Fordham Foundation manage to “work around ideological and legal controversies surrounding a national curriculum” (Brass, 2014, p. 25; see also English, 2014). Brass wants us to know that such disciplinary control of curriculum and instruction limits the democratic jurisdiction of schools.

Thinning of Democracy

The thinning of democracy has been made a hyper-reality by Bill Gates (2009), but I doubt that he would see it this way. His conviction is that the marketization of public schools is a necessary intervention for ensuring a strong democracy in schools and society. His speeches, albeit consisting of generalizations and abbreviated constructions, paradoxically reveal and conceal changes to come.

Gates himself presents the CCSS as a radical departure from traditional state and local control of public education, as a kind of genesis of school reform on a large-scale that is culturally penetrating. Consider that Gates (2009) used the words “for the *first time*” in his foreboding speech, implying that the CCSS represents the rebirth of education:

Identifying common standards is just the starting point. We’ll only know if this effort has succeeded when the curriculum and the tests are aligned to these standards. ... Arne Duncan recently announced that \$350 million of the stimulus package will be used to create just these kinds of tests.

Gates (2009) also announced that markets would uniformly see to it that there would be a top-down delivery of services and products to schools in the production of better teaching:

When the tests are aligned with the common standards, the curriculum will line up as well, and it will unleash a powerful market of people providing services for better teaching. For the first time, there will be a large uniform base of customers looking at using products that can help every kid learn and every teacher get better.

Intent on these directions, Gates has spearheaded the use of the CCSS in reifying standards, disciplining curriculum and teaching, and aligning classroom practice with high-stakes tests. Brass (2014) has assessed these interventions, concluding that they have led to the failure and closing of the most disadvantaged schools in the nation. Advocates of the CCSS assume that alignment of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment is needed. Brass counters that this goal is dangerous, as alignment separates standards from curriculum, making it possible for curriculum and pedagogy to be governed at a distance. Alignment turns curriculum making into the purview of corporate titans.

CORE and Corporate Control

The corporate titan CORE has wielded its financially draining demands upon schools. The CCSS is big business: Just scrutinize the CORE (2013) webpages. Note the expenses associated with its menu of

implementation tools (curriculum analysis templates, lesson planning/design templates, and observation rubrics) and add them up. When I asked educator McDermott-McNulty about the CORE based on her firsthand knowledge, she said that

CORE is a profit-driven vehicle that collects (public) federal, state, and (private) corporate funding to deliver goods and services they advertise as “necessary” to implement education policies (like CCSS) that their education technology industry partners and political beneficiaries lobbied to create in the first place, thus creating a “need” on the one end, and providing the services to fill that manufactured need on the other end. (email, September 28, 2014)

And she added that CORE represents “corporate hijacking of public education at its worst.”

Why Care About the CCSS Policy Issue? School Leaders Speak

CCSS Standards and Losses

Leaders on the ground level of public schools in North Carolina have cited curricular, personnel, and political issues. Regarding the CCSS standards, they specified current cuts in state funding for instructional materials and professional development. The school leaders, referring to the CCSS as the “Common Core,” also pinpointed losses in teacher positions and teacher aid hours. They associated these problems with the CCSS, expressing concern over the way in which its implementation had been rushed, implying that they were treated as consumers who were left out of the loop, not as a critical body of stakeholders with proven curriculum expertise.

About these financial, staff, and resource losses, a district leader in North Carolina explained that his public schools

... have newly developed curriculum aligned to new standards at the same time the state drastically cut or completely eliminated funding for new textbooks, instructional materials and supplies, instructional technology, professional development, and cut other areas that resulted in cuts to teacher positions and teacher assistant hours. (email, September 17, 2014)

Classroom materials have not been properly vetted and they are outdated, according to this same source.

Another school principal described the hasty implementation of the CCSS, which did not allow time for educators’ reflection and review; hence “if only” laments pepper this statement:

The whole thing seems to have turned into a political nightmare, and I’m afraid for the students who come to us expecting our very best. If only we could have slowly phased in Common Core. If only teachers and parents would have been given a chance to react to the standards and provide some feedback. We could have implemented pilot curriculum for 2 years and made adjustments at the end of every year. We really missed the opportunity to do something good with the new standards. And what is scarier is that we have spent very little time reviewing the curriculum changes because everything happened so fast. (email, September 20, 2014)

To be fair, this same principal made a few positive points about the CCSS launch in North Carolina regarding coverage of content and student mastery of concepts: “We cover less per grade level and spend more time going deeper into concepts. I also appreciate the fact that many of the standards loop year after year so students have the opportunity to master concepts.”

Nevertheless, this principal emphasized, and at some length, the negative impact associated with the politics of the CCSS:

However, it is difficult to explain all of this to parents. There is such a lack of trust in what we do anymore because of the political cloud surrounding Common Core. Staunch Republican families have been working diligently to end Common Core. When you ask them why, they all quote the lieutenant governor. The federal government wants to monitor and classify our children before they get out of elementary school. Common Core, at its roots, may have a nice foundation. But it is surrounded by such a multitude of issues it’s hard to know what is or isn’t right with it. This has to be one of the more frustrating things I have had to deal with in my 25 years of service as an educator.

Mistrust, confusion, and frustration are apparent in these responses from veteran leaders. The markets involved in the commodification of their schools, based on their testimonies, include the state of North Carolina, the federal government, and the CCSS engineers.

Conclusions

As educators and school leaders, we can empower ourselves to imagine a different future for public education through consciousness raising, policy initiatives, and social movements. A tighter connection is needed between school leadership research and the practices of school personnel, but also with advocacy, in that professional staff in school systems have the agency to serve local communities and constituents (Westbury, 2008). The staff who have responsibility for reclaiming their agency include superintendents, school principals, and teachers.

We must take back education by educating ourselves as to the challenge itself and by “resisting and fighting for democracy and keeping public education public” (English, 2014, p. 51). With the CCSS in mind and other policies in the wake, Wexler (2014) cites implications for higher education programs that should be grabbing our attention:

The new teacher certification reform called edTPA follows the top-down, corporate formula, with the not-so-hidden agenda of disrupting the authority and autonomy of university education programs. In the same spirit of data-driven assessment, the CCSS and corporate views of accountability have made their way into the new certification and licensure process in teacher education. Teacher candidates will be evaluated based on certification tests aligned with the CCSS. Higher education teacher certification programs will be required to teach to the test, readying candidates to be judged by data driven by the Pearson Corporation’s tests. (p. 55)

Public school defenders like Wexler (2014) are forecasting concerns about the future of public education to remain a public good. We can bring illumination to this cause by making visible dynamics and connections that illustrate the neoliberal force at work in education.

Notes

1. NGA is a trade association that has nothing to do with governors (Bracken, 2013).
2. Achieve, also Achieve, Inc., is “a private contractor” that was created by NGA and quickly completed the “NGA/CCSSO standards-development process” (Tienken & Orlich, 2013, p. 107). Achieve is one of the influential backers of the CCSS initiative for school reform (Bracken, 2013; Wexler, 2014). Achieve (2008) presents itself as a cutting-edge, empirically grounded think tank. This is another example of how marketeers are cleverly disguising themselves as legitimate researchers.
3. CCSSO is “one of the organizations that pushed through the development of the [CCSS] standards” that “will form the core curriculum of every public school program, drive another stronger wave of high-stakes testing, and thus become student selection criteria for K–12 programs” (e.g., Title I services, gifted and talented programs, high school course placement) (Tienken & Orlich, 2013, p. 107).
4. McDermott-McNulty (2013) drew a chart to educate her college students about the very real ways neoliberalism has taken over public education.

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