

How Did We Get Here?

A Systems Thinking Approach to Meritocracy and
Neoliberalism in Schooling

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Schooling has long been considered the means which individuals could improve their livelihoods, but this facade of meritocratic rhetoric has overshadowed what has been called the hidden curriculum of schooling: managing society and creating more power for the elite (Domhoff, 1967). Throughout the history of the United States the general political ideology of each era has been exceptionally influential in the legislation and practices of schooling. Just after the American Revolution, Classical Liberalism encouraged an immensely different view of schooling than the current ideology of Neoliberalism. Since the rise of neoliberalism, resulting in the support of government intervention to protect the free market, education as a public good has been under attack and people have questioned whether the free market model can save our “failing” schools. The belief in meritocracy, that individuals have autonomous control over the outcomes and success of their lives, has created the illusion that schooling can provide upward mobility for historically marginalized groups. This paper traces how the idea of meritocracy and liberal ideologies have evolved and taken shape throughout the history of schooling in the US, illuminating the contradictory aims of controlling the “dangerous classes” and providing equitable schooling to all. This history of meritocracy promotes a deepened understanding of our current neoliberal moment.

Meritocracy is often expressed in the common phrase that encourages people to take control of their own lives by “picking themselves up by their bootstraps.” This phrase, and the idea of meritocracy, assumes that each individual has autonomous control of the outcomes of their own lives. For the US to be a true meritocracy, every person has to have equal opportunity. Considering schooling within the United States, does every student have the same opportunity to learn and the same opportunity to prove their knowledge? If these are not true for each student,

are supports provided for those who have been historically marginalized? Each educational era addresses these questions differently, but the historical review of our systems of schooling begs the question: what is the purpose of schooling? This question expresses contradictory aims of schooling because of the variance between the rhetoric of schooling and the implementation of policy and practice in schools. Are we managing the poor, non-white populations, the “dangerous classes,” or are we striving to provide supports to ensure equitable opportunities for all?

Examples are provided from each time period that illustrate how meritocratic rhetoric has been utilized by groups seeking these contradictory goals.

Colonial Period (1600s-1770s):

During the English colonization of North America, there was a great focus on the religious rights of the colonists. Some colonists believed that the King of England had been given divine right to control the land in North America, justifying forceful seizing of the land. The idea of meritocracy was not considered in the slightest, because it was commonly accepted that the status of parents determined the status of their children, although the elite feared that they could possibly lose their status. The colonists had to do hard labor to survive, regardless of their social class. The elite colonists desperately wanted to preserve the class status of their children, and they found education to be a significant way to signify their elitism (Spring 11). Because education was only available to those who could afford it, the lower classes relied on apprenticeships for their children to learn a trade but wealthier children were able to go to reading and writing schools, dame schools, or have private tutors to provide them with education. Latin was taught to the children of the upper class, a subject which was used as the

determinant of the education level and the class of children in America. The elite wanted to ensure that their children would be able to reap the benefits of their class and that they would be able to find a cheap source of labor within the new colony, causing them to support the use of schooling to reinforce the place of individuals within the economic system. Thus, the promise of a new life in the colonies was generally not available to those without money or elite status, which was the intention of the elite who colonized North America.

An exception to this generalization was the “Old Deluder Satan Law,” which was passed in Massachusetts in 1647, forcing any community with at least fifty households to appoint a teacher to provide instruction in reading and writing for the children of the community and any community with at least one hundred households to establish a grammar school (Spring 17). This law was enacted to ensure religious conformity and teach the reading of scriptures. The Puritan’s religious beliefs were the main motivation for the education of the children in the community. Religious education persisted past the Colonial Era, but faced opposition by classical liberals in the Early National Period.

Early National Period (1770-1820):

The American Revolution was encouraged by Enlightenment ideals and classical liberalism which value individualism, freedom, and economic independence. Classical Liberal ideology encouraged the newly formed democracy to be extremely cautious about overreaching its power, but the country also needed to be united so that another uprising would not occur. This new democracy was greatly divided, between those who supported England during the war and those that supported the break from England. Leaders of this new country had to find a way to unite the country by creating patriotism and love of the new country while maintaining the

freedom of individuals that was fought for during the war. This was difficult to achieve because the Revolution had just occurred because of the overreaching English government, so the new democracy had to be wary of creating too much government involvement.

On the other hand, there was also an idealistic attempt to create a society without crime or poverty, seeking to develop both the intelligence and morality of children. The desire for the “good society” was influenced by white Protestant ideology and the belief in original sin.

Benjamin Rush, who has been called the “father of American psychiatry” believed that children needed to be educated in order to develop moral and ethical characteristics (Spring 58). It became widespread belief that children needed to be taught morals and ethics in order to create a society that was desirable to live in.

During the Early National Period, white land-owning men were the leaders of society and the only group of people who could vote in the new democracy. Men who were not property owners, women, slaves, and Native Americans were not considered when the leaders of the United States were creating laws and practices. In this era, there was no promise of equality or widespread ideology that supported economic and class mobility, instead the wealthy individuals were able to maintain their power but generally it was commonly accepted that citizens’ class was determined by the class of their parents before them. People in power who did not support providing equal opportunity for different classes and marginalized groups. During this time period, schooling was becoming recognized as a means of educating children to be a part of the good society, a method to manage society and classes, and to teach patriotism and nationalism to encourage a love and devotion for the United States.

Moral schooling was utilized as a means of creating the good society, which was centered around white Protestant ideals and a desire to reduce crime and manage the poor. This was often taught through Noah Webster's spellers which directly taught the patriotism, nationalism, and virtue. These spellers were designed to impose political values onto students, instead of allowing students to develop their own values through thought and reason. Webster's spellers were also credited with the rejection of a multi-cultural society within the United States (Spring 53). The spellers reinforced the English language, Protestantism, and the Anglo-American culture through the choice in passages. The Protestant ideology within schooling was a feature of the education in New England that was continued into the new democracy, and considered to be an essential aspect of the moral education needed to create the good society.

The poor children were considered a threat to the good society because they caused crime, especially when they were able to roam the streets. The elite wanted to manage the poor and stop them from committing crime in their neighborhoods, which caused them to financially support Charity schools. The children that were sent to these schools were thought of as the workers of society, and the elite recognized that the children of the poor would be better workers and members of society if they were taught obedience and morality. Charity schools were not for the personal development or benefit of the students, instead the schools were designed to manage society by attempting to eliminate the crime caused as the backlash of poverty. The behavior and moral failings of these children was placed on their families, and the purpose of these schools was often described as the correction of the problems that were "caused by the failures of parental government" (Spring 61). The charity schools often used the Lancasterian system, which was a highly ordered system that was designed to teach the children obedience. DeWitt

Clinton compared this educational system to a factory, describing it as “a system which is, in education, what is the neat finished machines for abridging labor and expense are in the mechanic arts (Spring 64).” Although education was provided to poor children for free, the type of education was intended to train the children for lives of labor.

Schooling has long been viewed as a means of improving the condition of life of the citizens of the United States, but throughout history this promise of meritocracy, or the ability of the individual to have control over their own success in life, has not applied to all citizens. This is depicted by Charity Schools, which were free schools for poor urban children, but the goal of this schooling was not to better the lives of the particular students, and instead to create a good society that benefits the elite. Even though some wealthy people did invest in charity schools, schooling was not accessible to most groups of people. Generally, the ideology of the time supported schooling as a means of uniting the newly formed country and informing the electorate. The promise of schooling as a means of improving the livelihood of people was only applied to white land owning males, excluding women, Native Americans, indentured servants, poor people, minorities, and slaves.

Opposing certain aspects of this general ideology, Thomas Jefferson believed that the schooling should not force patriotism and moral values upon students. Instead, Jefferson believed that students should be given the resources to form their own opinions on these issues. Thomas Jefferson opposed schooling that is centered on the idea of original sin, where children need to be taught morals and patriotism. He believed that children were born innately good and that given the resources to interpret the newspaper and laws, that men would be able to be informed voters and make moral decisions. This Classical Liberal view influenced Jefferson to desire schools that

did not impose patriotism or religion on the individual, but instead allow them to form these opinions for themselves.

Along with this ideology, Jefferson believed that all white children, rich and poor, should have access to schooling and that this schooling should help to identify, among the boys, future leaders in society and the government. Jefferson's views call for meritocracy; he thought that each student should have the opportunity to better their lives by their merit alone and wanted to provide the means for poor male students to be "raked from the rubbish (A Bill for a More General Diffusion of Knowledge)." Recognizing that the elite were the only people who were affluent enough to send their students to higher levels of schooling, Jefferson created "A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge" that he proposed to the state of Virginia in 1777 (Spring 54). This bill proposed free schooling for male and female white children for three years. Following this initial level of schooling, he proposed that "...after the most diligent and impartial examination and enquiry, appoint from among the boys....whose parents are too poor to give them further education, some one of the best and most promising genius and disposition, to proceed to the grammar school of his district (A Bill for a More General Diffusion of Knowledge)." Each level of schooling would follow this procedure of selecting the "best boy genius" to have their schooling paid for, until finally "the best boy genius" would be selected to attend William and Mary for free. Jefferson believed that this would provide the opportunity for students who were not wealthy to become successful and influential members of society, believing that these boys were the "natural aristocrat".

Thomas Jefferson's proposed model of schooling included the non-elite and females, but only males were considered for scholarships and continued schooling. Jefferson's radical

meritocratic bill proposed expanding access to schooling to include farmers, craftsmen, and those who would not be able to afford a formal education otherwise, but those white males whose families could afford schooling would still have the greatest control over their own futures. Each of the three times that Jefferson proposed the bill to the state assembly of Virginia it was voted down because the other members of the Virginia government thought it was unreasonable for poor farmers to go to school using taxpayer money (The Common School: 1770–1890). To the members of the Virginia Assembly, the idea of paying for poor children to go to school was useless and they saw no reason for these children to be in need of a traditional education.

In summary, following the Revolutionary War, the leaders of the United States were especially concerned with forming an informed electorate that would continue to uphold the new democracy. The electorate during this time was comprised of white land owning males, which was also the main group of people that more widely attended school. Education was used as a means of instilling nationalism and pride in the country and to create a good society without crime or poverty. There was conflict concerning the best way to reach these goals, which persisted into the Common School Era.

The Common School Era (1820-1880s):

The Common School Era encompasses the Industrial Revolution, which reduced the need for skilled artisans. Instead, the young men that would have been skilled artisans had to move to cities in order to find work and to make a wage. In this new labor system the skilled artisans, farmers, and craftsmen that were once highly regarded for their talent and craft had to come to accept that the unskilled labor that they were expected to do in factories caused them to lose their

status. The industrial advancements and the need for more wage laborers caused skilled artisans and farmers to find themselves out of work, while the elite were benefiting from the new capitalist system and by 1850 the wealthiest one percent of Americans owned a quarter of the wealth (Schooling in Capitalist America). Between 1846-1856 alone 3.1 million immigrants came to the United States and were willing to work low paying jobs and accepted even lower wages than the skilled workers that had moved to the city in search of work (Schooling in Capitalist America 158). The culmination of losing their status as skilled laborers and being forced to accept lower wages caused the old immigrants to have great conflict with the new immigrants and with the elite. Poor farmers and skilled workers were motivated to revolt against the new system, often with violence as was exemplified in Shays' rebellion, The Whiskey Rebellion, and the Dorr War. During this era, Native Americans and enslaved and freed African Americans faced many tragedies and extreme racism. The Trail of Tears occurred during this time period and African Americans were still enslaved until the Civil War at the end of this era.

Considering all of the immense social change that was taking place during this era, people were searching for something to solve the problems within the United States. Generally, the white Anglo-Americans were threatened by the increasing rates of immigrants and groups that had different values than them, such as the Native Americans, and wanted to find a way to give them the salvation of the Protestant Church and its strict views on morality. The economic changes that were occurring were also affecting the social structure, and laborers wanted to find a way to better their social standings or to at least better their children's place in society. Horace Mann recognized this social upheaval that was occurring within the United State and accepted a position as the Secretary of Schooling in Massachusetts in an effort to better the country.

Horace Mann had an idealistic view of schooling, and believed that public schooling could end the resistance to the new social structure. He proposed universal public schooling and wanted students to be commonly schooled in the same classroom regardless of cultural background, and justified the creation of these schools by the promise of creating a good society and preparing future workers. A goal of Mann's common school was not to eliminate class consciousness but instead expand it, saying "The spread of education, by enlarging the cultivated class or caste, will open a wider area over which the social feelings will not expand; and, if this education should be universal and complete, it would do more than all things else to obliterate factitious distinctions in society (as quoted in Spring 86)." Mann believed that in teaching students in a common school, the interaction of students from different classes would alleviate the friction between the elite and the non-elite.

Mann justified the creation of his common schools with meritocratic rhetoric. He believed that the schools would increase the general wealth of society, and be an alternative to the proposed property redistribution from the rich to the poor (Spring 86). Mann said "Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men-the balance wheel of social machinery (quoted by Spring 86)." This idealistic view of education provided hope to the supporters of the common school that their children would be able to earn more respect and a better reputation for their work. Mann's bold statements introduced schooling as a means of betterment, where previously in history schooling was used to reinforce the elites' status and to manage the poor through charity schools.

The common schools proposed were not only a means of managing the poor, but also managing society in its entirety. The common school was intended to create and manage the

morality and social order of the country. Mann's promises were idealistically created and attractive for the laborers who wanted to better the lives of their children and for those who feared the immigrant populations and wanted those children to learn a common culture. The labor disputes within the country encouraged a solution in which children from lower classes would have to be taught to accept their position within society. Mann promised this with his common classroom, and wanted children to recognize and accept their current position in society in hopes of "disarm[ing] the poor of their hostility towards the rich (as quoted in Spring 86)." Supporters of the common school clung to the promises of increased wealth and the equality of man, but they were disillusioned by the reality of the common school. To the elite the common school was appealing because the working classes would be taught obedience and morality, making them more valuable workers. The charity schools that the elite were previously funding would no longer be necessary if the government were to fund schooling with the same goal of managing society-especially the poor who were unhappy with their current condition. The creation of human capital, or obedient workers that accept their economic position, being funded by the taxes was an enticing to the elite whose fortunes were built on the backs of low wage labor. The argument was used in support of common schools, and we are still justifying schooling by claiming that we are training children for their future employment. The common school movement also helped to create the belief that schools can eliminate social problems including crime and poverty originated in the common school era and has been a commonly held belief into modern times.

The workingmens' parties supported the creation of common schools to protect themselves from economic and political exploitation, opposing the common school reformers

desire to eliminate the friction between the working class and the elite and the use of schooling to make citizens worthy of democratic rights (Spring 90). The workingmen's parties believed that "Kept in ignorance, workers could be deprived of their rights, cheated in their daily business, and 'gulled and deceived' by 'designing schemers,' 'parasitic politicians,' 'greedy bank directors,' and 'heartless manufacturers (as quoted in Spring 89)." By not providing an education to all people, the workingmen's parties believed that the elite were in control of the economic and political power and that the lower classes were being denied basic rights that were guaranteed by the Declaration of Independence. Educating the lower classes was believed by these groups to be protection against the "tyranny of the upper class (Spring 90)."

The workingmen's parties wanted equality of opportunity through common schooling. To achieve true equality, the New York Workingmen's Party proposed the state guardianship plan, which argued that for true equality of opportunity all children must live in boarding schools and be given equal treatment, clothes, food, and education. Eliminating outside influences of family and wealth, this proposition was true meritocracy, where each individual would have the same opportunity to learn, which would determine which students were truly the most capable and talented. The state guardianship plan was in juxtaposition to the meritocracy that was sought from the common school reformers, who promised the equality of schooling itself in a common classroom with a common curriculum. The common school reformers did not want to address the inequality that existed within society itself, and that this inequality would affect how students learned, that schooling beyond the common school would cost money and be available to only the elite, and that job opportunities would be determined by the families that these children were born into. The inequalities that the common school reformers did not address in the 19th century

were not addressed in the creation of public schools, nor have they been addressed in our current system of schooling.

The Progressive Era (1880-1920):

The Progressive Era was filled with conflict between the industrialization and liberal ideals. The corporations that were created during this period were dependent upon cheap labor of the poor and the immense number of immigrants that lived in cities and worked in factories. By the end of the era over half of the employees in factories were immigrants or the children of immigrants (Hirschman & Mogford, 2009). These groups of people were being exploited by their work, with few job opportunities they were not able to choose their place of work but employers had ample amounts of laborers that they could easily replace workers. The exploitation of workers caused backlash, especially amongst the New Liberal thinkers of the time.

The New Liberals believed that “... it is the business of the state to take the best security it can for the young citizens growing up in such health and with so much knowledge as is necessary for their real freedom (Green, 1861).” This ideology supported government intervention on behalf of the individual when businesses limited personal freedoms. In actuality, New Liberalism was utilized to benefit corporations and businesses during the Progressive Era. The ideology supported the managed meritocracy that from Progressive Era which believed in efficiently finding the correct place for individuals in the labor market, and allowed the

government to create programs that achieved this goal. Schools became a part of this complex system and was a great tool in creating an ordered society.

The Progressive Era, from 1880-1920, was a complex and contradictory time in educational history that has greatly shaped the current schooling system. Educational philosophers of this time, including John Dewey, called for inclusivity, child centered instruction, and democratic school communities. This view was superseded by scientific management of schools which developed from “professionally trained administrators, university based educational researchers and the development of standardized tests (Spring 271).”

The Progressive idea that all students should be able to receive an schooling that addresses the personal learning needs of students from different cultural and economic backgrounds was utilized to justify and support educational testing and tracking within schools. It was argued that tracking was actually creating equal opportunity for students because they would be learning skills that were useful to their own lives.

“Until very recently [the schools] have offered equal opportunity for all to receive one kind of schooling, but what will make them democratic is to provide opportunity for all to receive such schooling as will fit them equally well for their particular life work.” Superintendent of Boston Schools, 1908

This meritocratic argument was appealing and had widespread support. Students took IQ tests that were generally made by psychologists, and these tests would determine the track the student would be placed on in high school (Spring 266). Some students were put on a college level track, while others were encouraged to seek a vocational career track. This was deemed to be equality of schooling, because testing was supposed to eliminate economic factors from

determining the outcome of a student's life. These tests were also supported by Social Darwinism, a theory that society is subject to natural selection and that the people in power were in the position that was determined their by individual strengths.

*“It is obvious that the educational needs of children in a district where the streets are well paved and clean, where the homes are spacious and surrounded by lawns and trees, where the language of the child's playfellows is pure, and where life in general is permeated with the spirit and ideals of America-it is obvious that the educational needs of such a child are radically different from those of the child who lives in a foreign and tenement section.” - Quoted in *Schooling in Capitalist America**

The tracking that took place during the Progressive Era created an opportunity for businesses that needed unskilled laborers to find obedient and unquestioning employees. There were labor strikes occurring throughout the country, which caused the National Guard and strikebreakers to be called in to intimidate, beat, and murder disobedient workers (Falk, 2014). Andrew Carnegie sought alternate methods for handling the labor strikes, citing that the solution to the disobedient workers is “schooling, schooling, schooling. (Bowles and Gintis, 1977). This coincided with the idea of New Liberalism which has a focus of fulfilling human capacities (<http://www.heritage.org/political-process/report/the-progressive-movement-and-the-transformation-american-politics>).” Really, in this managed meritocracy students were being taught that they should accept their place in society because of the strong belief in social darwinist and meritocratic ideology. This was an efficient way of teaching students from a young age to accept their position in life because it has been scientifically determined and managed. The focus on finding a place for all members of society has continued into current times, where students are

told that they have equal opportunity to learn, but this is not taking into the account the immense inequalities that exist in students' lives.

World War Years (1920-1940):

Upon entering the First World War the United States again became enthralled with nationalism, in part being influenced by the propaganda that was commonplace throughout the country. Herbert Hoover had asked Americans to “rally around the flag” and encouraged all citizens to partake in the war effort, which encouraged women to work in factories in traditionally male jobs in order to produce what was needed for the war. The involvement by women had aided the suffrage movement which resulted in the 19th amendment that granted women the right to vote. The Allies' success in World War I and women's suffrage boosted morale the United States and helped to usher in the Roaring Twenties.

This period of liberation came to an abrupt end when the Great Depression hit in 1929. Poverty was rampant and people struggled to feed themselves and their families. Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) promised to end this suffering and was elected president in 1933. FDR created New Deal programs, which were an attempt at what might be considered true meritocracy, recognizing that those who were impoverished needed assistance in order to have an equal chance as those with economic security. He also wanted to ensure that the country had a reliable and trustworthy banking system that would prevent banks from taking excessive risks in the stock market or allow bankers to loan money to companies that they personally invested in. The New Deal created programs and legislation to regulate banks, government sponsored employment, social security, and unemployment insurance sought intervention in order to

balance the interests of farmers, businesses, and laborers. FDR's New Deal focused on what is often referred to as the three R's: relief, recovery, and reform.

The Great Depression ended in part by the start of the Second World War. Again, the country became extremely patriotic and fearful of dictatorships. The American Legion created the "100% Americanism" campaign, which relied on the school system to teach patriotism and loyalty to the country, educate immigrants on the "principles of Americanism," and the principles of the American government (Spring 315). This movement also encouraged weeding out subversive teachers that were believed to have socialist or communist views, or teachers that did not follow the 100% Americanism campaign within their own classrooms. This conservative movement within schools opposed the meritocratic movement of the New Deal.

Socially, schools were mostly a conservative and traditional organization during the World War period that supported patriotism and capitalism. Through the influence of the media, as well as the influence within schools, democracy was becoming increasingly associated with the freedom to consume products (Spring 327). Because of the Great Depression, the World War Eras was filled with fear of losing American interest in industry and changed how people saw the spending of money. Businesses recognized that schools were a great place to make money because all children must attend school, and the companies wanted to instill interest in the children in their products from a young age.

Textbook censorship depicts desperation for schools to be supportive of the economic system, as exemplified by the criticism of the textbooks written by Harold Rugg (Evans, 2007). These books were intended to make the study of history relevant to students' lives, but these books also intended to teach children how to be intelligent consumers. This widely used textbook

received criticism by the American Legion, the Advertising Federation of America, and the New York State Economic Council for being too progressive. Then, the National Association of Manufacturers cited social science textbooks as “[undermining the] youths' beliefs in private enterprise (Schugurensky, 2007).” It was clear by the reaction to the Rugg books that there was to be no consumer schooling in schools, but instead schools became a center for advertisements themselves. The encouragement of consumerism and the period of mass media targeted students as potential consumers. The term “teenager” came about during this time to have a way to describe this consumer market.

During this time period, there were organizations and individuals who wanted to change the United States school system, but these people were at odds with businesses that wanted the school system to remain the same and continue to support capitalism. George Counts argued in a speech, “Dare Progressive Education Be Progressive?” that “in its present form capitalism is not only cruel and inhuman; it is also wasteful and inefficient” (1932). He called for a new economic system that would free people from poverty and argued that education could help to create a new society in which this was possible. In his speech, Counts explains that the exploitation of man for the benefit of the economic system is immoral and that schools partake in the indoctrination of children to support this system. Counts, and other educators, who wanted to change the system and the support the system by schools were at odds with businesses and were unable to utilize schooling in a reconstruction of society.

The World War Years were filled with conflict between traditional American ideals and those of social, political, and economic change. The New Deal was the first time in history that the government recognized the inequalities existed within society and sought to provide supports

to help individuals have equal opportunity. This ideology was not supported in the capitalistic society and caused businesses to fear loss of profits. Schooling became a tool for businesses to encourage consumerism and support for capitalism in America and the people that opposed this ideology were considered to be socialists, communists, or un-American.

Cold War Era:

The Cold War was a time of immense fear the United States. Not only was communism considered to be a great threat to democracy in America, but there was fear surrounding the possibility of a nuclear war with the Soviet Union, which was so intense that schools practiced bomb drills in preparation. Tension was extremely high, and there was no tolerance for anything considered to be left leaning, socialist, or communist. During this time, there were propaganda campaigns supporting democracy and capitalism and those who opposed these ideologies were considered traitors and communists. The Red Scare was intensified by the House Un-American Activities Committee, as well as U.S. Senator Joseph R. McCarthy and the investigation on allegations of communist leaning parties.

The Truman Doctrine called for the containment of communism which sought to stop weaker nations from falling to dictatorships. This caused the United State to become involved in foreign affairs, including the Vietnam War. Groups vehemently opposed the involvement in the Vietnam War, publicly protested the involvement in other nations affairs. Many college students were active in protesting the war, and colleges became known as liberal centers that were considered harmful to democracy causing Professors to be targeted by the Red Scare. The public school system was encouraged to weed out subversive teachers, stop teaching books that were

considered to be sympathetic of communists, and to encourage students to be successful in their chosen field in order to benefit the country. This called for an emphasis in the curriculum on math and science in order to beat the Soviet Union in the arms race as well as the space race.

New Liberalism was the common ideology of the time, which supported ordering society by the capabilities of individuals. Because of the space race and nuclear arms race, the students who were skilled in math and science were encouraged to be involved in school in hopes that they would help with the effort of defeating the Soviet Union. New Liberalism supported educating students based upon their abilities, but there was a conflicting discourse of meritocracy which promised upward mobility for those who were talented and hard working. Students were also encouraged to recognize their place within society and to accept their place in the industrial order. Those who were considered to be talented and intelligent were expected to understand the knowledge and disseminate it to the rest of society, and it was believed that the common person was unable to understand the complexity of the world on their own.

When the Soviet Union launched Sputnik in 1958, the federal government blamed the lack of science education in public schools and cited this failure as a reason for the government to obtain greater control of the public school system, passing the National Defense Education Act (Spring 370). The Federal Government's regulations that were in place to prevented uncooperating schools from receiving money became more strict and schools had to be in line with the goals of the government or choose to forfeit their funding (Spring 359).

Educational testing that was prominent in the Progressive Era was re-tooled in the Cold War Era, and testing services started to become more common. Standardized tests were thought to determine the potential of the individual and started to become used to determine whether

students could go to college (Spring 363). The SAT in particular was (and is) more closely related to an IQ test than an academic exam (Spring 363). These tests were also particularly useful in justifying the conflicting meritocratic rhetoric surrounding education and the inequalities that existed throughout society, by encouraged people to accept that they were less capable than those who scored well on the tests. The tests in the Progressive Era, Cold War Era, and our current test centered era are all highly correlated with income and race. In *Meritocracy 2.0*, Wayne Au eloquently explains that “As a racial project, high-stakes, standardized testing constructs which children (and communities) are identified as “failures” by the tests, how such “failure” is used to justify neoliberal conceptions of individualist educational attainment and the denial of structural inequalities” (2016). These tests encourage students who are minorities or low income to accept their place in society and to not question their place as laborers for the wealthy elite. Schooling reminds these students of their unworthiness of success by constant low test scores, and then teaches them the obedience that is needed to be an unskilled laborer (Au, 2016; Westheimer, 2008). If people are not obedient laborers, then they are channeled into prisons which also benefits the wealthy that own for-profit prisons (ACLU, 2011; Giroux, 2009).

Standardized exams during the Cold War Era helped to open the door for neoliberal practices in schooling. In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* David Harvey explains that “neoliberalism is the financialization of everything including all areas of the economy, state apparatus, and daily life (33)”. Most of the standardized tests are created and implemented by private organizations and for-profit corporations that charge fees for students to take them. In particular, the SAT is run by Educational Testing Service and they charge a fee for students to take these exams (Spring 363). During the Cold War Era it became normal practice that if you

wanted to attend college you had to pay the fee for the SAT in order to get into any schools. These tests, like many others that the government encourages or enforces our students to take, cost money that goes directly to a private organization. These tests are justified by the promise that all students can take the test to assess their capabilities. As Nicholas Lemann explained in *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy*, the function of the SAT was to divide the population by income and status. The SAT is used to determine who is worthy of becoming a member of the elite and attend the best colleges and graduate schools, but it has been shown that the score received has a great correlation with the test taker's family income, their parents' education level, and their ethnicity (Goldfarb, 2014).

Another factor for attendance in college during the Cold War Era was The Universal Training and Service Act allowed the government to “defer individuals who were needed for national health, safety, or security (Spring 362).” There were amendments made to this act which made it so that young men could either remain in school or serve in the armed forces (Spring 362). This, in conjunction with the National Defense Education Act, created great inequalities in the population who was attending school, because men who could afford school and those who could get into a college would continue their schooling in order to avoid joining the military, while schools that could not enhance the science and mathematics curriculum lost federal funding.

The Civil Rights Era (1954-1968)

Brown v. Board of Education's ruling that separate but equal was no longer legal sparked the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement where minorities fought for their rights as American citizens. This movement was an effort to recognize the unjust inequalities within the United

States and to create legislation that would prevent these injustices from taking place. There was great mobilization and activism that caused the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to pass, which banned discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin. This was the most influential legislation that was passed in support of equal rights since the slavery was abolished in 1865, and created hope for a more united nation. Then in 1965 the Voting Rights Act was passed which suspended literacy tests and barriers to voting that were previously in place to prevent minorities from voting. This movement for equality helped encourage honest discussion about the inequalities that existed throughout society and encouraged legislation that provided support for struggling populations.

Although the main focus of the Civil Rights Era was obtaining rights for black people who were discriminated against, there was also a push to create a more opportunities throughout society as a whole. Women's movements in the 1960s pushed for equal access to schooling and attempted to eliminate bias in schools against women (Spring 411). Through the National Organization for Women, Title IX was passed in 1972, which required schools to provide equal opportunities for males and females (Spring 411). There was also an attempt to reduce poverty, and recognized that poverty was an issue that prevented equality regardless of race. Programs were created in order to provide supports for impoverished people so that they would have a more equal opportunity to their peers. In this era there was a true meritocracy that recognized that individuals who were discriminated against and those who did not have financial security needed more assistance to have equal opportunity.

The most influential legislation from this time period was the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, ESEA, which promised a billion dollars a year of financial support to

school districts with high rates of disadvantaged students (Nelson, 2016). ESEA also gave money in “support of school libraries, state departments of education, and education research, and subsequent amendments gave aid for bilingual education, and students with disabilities” (Nelson, 2016). This was an attempt to close the achievement gap between the rich and the poor and was especially important to educational history because it directly addressed the inequalities that existed between students who came from different backgrounds.

The War on Poverty was declared during this time and the Equal Opportunity Act was created. It was a more a common understanding that poverty and discrimination were preventing schools from “discovering and classifying talent for service to the national economy and defense (Spring 371).” Civil Rights legislation acknowledged the inequalities that existed and sought true meritocracy by created Job Corps and Head Start in an attempt to level the playing field for poor students and their families (Spring 371). Schooling was revitalized as a means of improving living conditions and sought to provide true opportunity for people’s effort and intelligence to determine the success of their lives. This was a change in national discourse from the previous rhetoric surrounding meritocracy, that assumed that all students already had the same opportunity to learn and that it was the students choices and effort that determine their success. This was an effort for true change to the social system.

The War on Poverty was created in response to the Civil Rights movement. During this time, there was an attempt for true meritocracy that would provide the opportunity of success to the groups that had been historically marginalized and not considered in the rhetoric of meritocracy. The Civil Rights movement was monumental in educational legislation, and created an era of hope that the schooling system, amongst other aspects of American Life, would become

more accepting of different races and cultures. In 1954, *Brown v. Board of Topeka* ruled that separation was illegal, and legislatively ended the longstanding segregation within public schools (Spring 389). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed which extended to areas of voting rights, public accommodations, schooling, and employment (390). Title V of this act “established a precedent for using disbursement of government money as a means of controlling educational policies (Spring 390).

Following the Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Immigration Act was passed, which loosened previous legislation that greatly limited immigration, allowing more non-white immigrants to enter into the United States (Spring 386). The Immigration Act introduced the possibility of multicultural schooling because of the debate that was created by the Civil Rights Movement, which greatly threatened Americans of European descent (Spring 407). The influx of immigrants of non-white descent created a debate surrounding the schooling of immigrants, with some supporting a multicultural schooling while others wanted the immigrants to assimilate to the culture of the times. Joel Spring argued that the supporters of multicultural schooling thought this type of schooling would “empower members of dominated and oppressed immigrant cultures by providing an understanding of the methods of cultural domination and by helping build self-esteem (407)”. Much like the previous times when immigration rates increased, there was a resurgence of fear that the cultural dominance of Protestant Anglo-Americans would diminish. This movement for cultural dominance opposed the Civil Rights Movement that was opening the doors to equality and acceptance.

Contemporary Era (1980-Present):

Ronald Reagan was elected president of the United States in 1980, and began to roll back Civil Rights Era gains in addressing inequality and began implementing neoliberal policies in which the government created supports for businesses and the free market instead of supports for marginalized groups. Reagan believed that the country's only option after his predecessor Jimmy Carter greatly increased the national debt was to create government intervention in order to support the free market. Reagan supported deregulation which essentially reversed the New Deal Policies that were put in place to promote equality, which was appealing to the masses because it was described as providing more freedom within the United States. The cry of individual freedom and liberties such as "free trade" and "school choice" are used to justify government actions, creating policies that sound beneficial to all citizens. Neoliberal theory supports the state using its power to keep individual private property rights, the rule of the law, free markets, and free trade at all costs (Harvey 64). Since Reagan's time, neoliberalism has continued to be the political philosophy held by politicians and by each president following Reagan.

In 1983 *A Nation at Risk* was published and released by the government. This report argued that the poor quality of schooling threatened the ability of the United States to compete in the global marketplace and argued that schools should prepare students for the global workforce through curriculum and testing (United States, 1983). In the forward of *A Nation at Risk* it says that schooling should shape students to have the "judgement needed to secure gainful employment, and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself" (United States, 1983). This document was shocking for two main reasons: it was a direct criticism of public schooling from the government and it

supported the needs of the global market above all other educational goals. *A Nation at Risk* “became somewhat of a pre-cursor for the private sector to intervene in public schooling since tax dollars spent on schools needed to be accounted for in terms of deliverable and measurable outcomes” (Sriraman, 2015). From this point on, public schooling had a clear purpose of supporting the economy through the creation of human capital and the optimal way to do so was with neoliberal policies and practices.

Career preparation through schooling caused all aspects of schooling to conform to the needs of the economy by preparing each individual to be unquestioning of the dignity of their work, to obtain economic independence, and attain personal fulfillment through their work (Spring 427, source 7 of book). Teaching students to be obedient workers through schooling has been a goal of education since the Common School movement, but this was different from the career development within schools of the past, because it was well acknowledged and encouraged that the main purpose of schooling was to prepare workers for their careers and to measure their progress through testing to prove their growth. The discourse around schooling is that the students in the United States are not prepared for careers in the global economy which would in turn tarnish the economy and power of the country (United States, 1983). *A Nation at Risk*, and the rhetoric surrounding education following the Reagan Era, has utilized education as a scapegoat for the United States’ shortcomings in the global economy when schooling has not been designed to create the leaders of the global economy, but instead obedient laborers.

After Reagan’s administration from 1980-1988, George H. W. Bush continued to emphasize the role of schooling in the United States’ competition in the global economy (Spring 431). He created Goals 2000, which “were presented as necessary for improving the ability of

U.S. companies in international markets” (Spring 431). These goals were plans that were designed to be in place by the year 2000. Bush also placed greater emphasis on standardized testing and curriculum by creating the National Council on Educational Standards and Testing. He also created voluntary testing for grades 4, 8, and 12 (Spring 431). These tests were designed to keep teachers accountable for their students’ progress in learning. The tests also served the purpose of ordering society without the school forcing students to take different academic tracks. Students and parents were constantly being reminded of how their performance compared to the performance of the rest of the students around the country, so students who were underperforming were encouraged from a young age to recognize their inability in school, teaching them to accept that they are unworthy of success in the meritocratic society.

Following Bush, Bill Clinton created another neoliberal policy, the Goals 2000 Educate America Act in 1994, that stressed the importance of educating workers in order to meet the needs of businesses (Spring 432). This was a part of Clinton’s plan for lifelong learning and included preschool and adult education. Clinton recognized that the poor were at a disadvantage and were less likely to receive a quality education and to attend college, so the plan increased funding for Head Start programs. Meritocratically, this plan did recognize the existing inequalities and their effect on success in school and in the economic system and sought to provide programs to aid those who were struggling, but did not provide support that would allow these children to have the same opportunity as the elite. Instead, The Goals 2000 Educate America Act aimed to expand the skills of the general workforce to meet new economic demands. This program wanted to provide quality education for the impoverished, but wanted to provide them with an education that would benefit them in their jobs as laborers. As laborers,

they benefit themselves to a certain extent because they have a job, but they are an immense asset to the owners of the large corporations and businesses that rely on low workers to increase profits.

In 2001, George W. Bush reauthorized Title 1, No Child Left Behind, in the wake of A Nation at Risk. A major component of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was the standardization of schooling, which forced school districts to administer tests in order to receive federal funding. NCLB had bipartisan support and was supported for its high standards and for its establishment of measurable goals. A Nation at Risk had called upon educators to “meet the needs of key groups of students such as the gifted and talented, the socioeconomically disadvantaged, minority and language minority students, and the handicapped (United States, 1983).” In NCLB, in contrast, all students are expected to raise to the challenge of these standards regardless of their socio-economic, educational, or language background (Spring 440). If students do not perform well on the standardized tests there are repercussions for the school districts where they can lose control of their funding and allow students to transfer to higher-performing local schools and charter schools, receive free tutoring, or attend after-school programs. This policy reverses the ESEA practice of increasing funding to low-income schools and focuses on the monetary gains that can be achieved by encouraging underperforming students to transfer to alternative school in hopes of being more successful.

Within the context of NCLB, charter schools and voucher systems are offered as a last resort for the “failing” public schools, which is also how school choice is justified to the public. “By holding public schools and teachers responsible for inadequately addressing student needs, the onus of reform could be shifted to charter and private schools. One can argue that the

increased role of the federal government in public schooling in the U.S has resulted in the marketization of public schooling by allowing the private sector to fill in the gap left by public schools” (Sriraman, 2015). When a school is deemed at risk, students are given the option to seek out other schools creating more economic opportunity for the wealthy elite who have invested money into school corporations such as KIPP, the NewSchools Venture Fund, the Charter School Growth Fund, and the D.C. Public schooling Fund (Woodard, 2013).

President Obama’s appointment of Arne Duncan, former CEO of Chicago public schools, signified the impending acceleration of neoliberal policies in schooling because of his involvement with charter schools in Chicago (Giroux, 2009). Following this appointment, Race to the Top was signed by Barack Obama in 2009, which expanded NCLB by allowing states to compete for federal money, creating policies that met qualifications outlined by the federal government (Spring 445). Duncan had said “Education is the Civil Rights movement of our generation,” but the actions of the Education Department of the United States during the Obama administration did not relieve the inequalities that existed in the United States schooling system (Au, 2016). The standardized testing that was furthered by Race to the Top created measurable outcomes that are used to justify why minorities as a whole have lower socioeconomic statuses than white people. Results from these tests justify the racism and inequalities that exist, while also furthering the rhetoric of meritocracy. Students are promised that they have the opportunity to better their lives by working hard and obtaining high scores on tests, but the tests have the greatest correlation to socioeconomic status, and strong correlations with the experience of teachers, and the schooling level of parents, while all three of these aspects are the lowest

amongst racial minorities (Popham, 1999; Greenwald, Hedges, Laine, 1996; Whitehurst, Reeves, Rodrigue 2016; Simon, Moore 2015).

“As a racial project, high-stakes, standardized testing constructs which children (and communities) are identified as ‘failures’ by the tests, how such ‘failure’ is used to justify neoliberal conceptions of individualist educational attainment and the denial of structural inequalities (Au, 2016).” This shifts the blame for the existing inequalities from the social structure and government to the individual themselves. It is considered to be their own fault that they are not succeeding and if enough students are failing in a school district then the blame is placed on the teachers and the school district. In response, the Obama administration offered a last resort to these failing schools: charter schools. The privatization of education is believed to be the answer to the failing schools because competition is hailed as the almighty motivator of success.

Following *A Nation at Risk*, the government has supported neoliberal policy and created policy in support of the privatization of education, most commonly in the forms of the voucher system and the charter school system. Supporters of charter schools and the voucher system believe that giving parent options for alternative schools will not only give students better opportunities to attend a better school, but also force schools to improve so that they retain their enrollment levels. The voucher system is a system in which the government would fund tuition to private schools, and charter schools are publicly funded schools that are privately run. Both the voucher system. Charter schools exemplify the privatization of the public school system and were supported by G. W. Bush and Obama. These schools are provided as a solution to the “failing” public schools, but charter school results on standardized testing greatly vary, with

some schools outperforming, some charter schools underperforming, and most schools staying on par with traditional public schools (CREDO, 2015).

There is also great concern about segregation created by charter schools, where English Language Learners, minorities, and special education students are not afforded the same school choice as other students. In *Separate and Unequal*, a policy review done by Stanford, it was found that “charters can currently choose their students, rather than families choosing their schools— in essence, school choice has evolved to mean that charter schools, and not families, choose” (2013). In a free market model of education, students that are thought of as weaker academically are left behind because they are less likely to enhance the school’s test scores, because of the close correlations between standardized tests and race and economic status. If these groups of students have more difficulty getting into an alternative school, then they are not only being denied the same opportunity as their peers on an individual level, but also changing the dynamic between traditional public schools and alternative schools. If schools are competing in the free market system, then the schools that choose their students are more likely to have an upper hand, which will in turn cause the traditional public schools to close and open the markets for more privately run schools.

The voucher system and charter schools both are free market models of education, where students are offered choice to attend other schools, but the voucher system allows students to attend a wider range of schools, including private schools and in some cases religious private schools. This idea mimics the free-market where consumers are able to choose the product that they want to purchase and the products that are not purchased are forced to change or face the possibility of leaving the market. The ideology of implementing market values on all aspects of

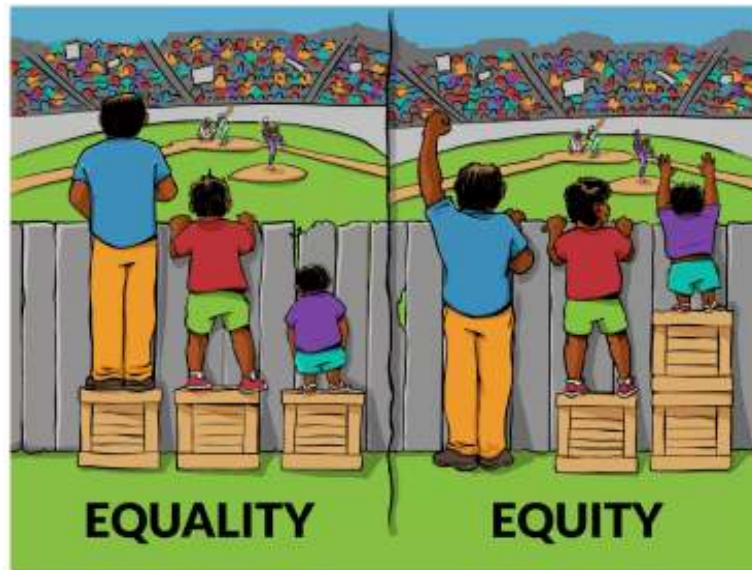
life, including schooling, is clearly neoliberal and has just as many critics as it has proponents. The people who oppose the voucher system raise concerns about public money being used for religious schools, which they argue violates the separation of church and state (National Conference of State Legislators, 2018). Other critics argue that when students leave public schools it does not reduce the cost of the school because teachers still need to be paid and the building still needs to be cared for, so schools are forced to work on a deficit which reduces the ability of the school to pay for extracurricular activities (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2018). Critics also argue that the improvements to the public schooling system from the implementation of free market model policy placed on schooling is exaggerated, and do not believe that schooling should become a private enterprise (National Council of State Legislatures, 2018).

The voucher system is a current debate in the politics of schooling that has been in the forefront of discussion since Betsy DeVos was nominated as Education Secretary in 2017. DeVos is a devout supporter of charter schools and the voucher school system, with her and her family donating more than two million dollars to the Great Lake Education Project, which lobbies for charter schools in Michigan, and 5.6 million dollars on a campaign to amend Michigan's charter which would allow school vouchers (Henderson, 2016). The free market model of education that DeVos supports undermines the system of public education and creates profit for companies that have invested in these alternative schools. For-profit charters and private schools can capitalize on schooling by cutting costs in their schools, which takes the public dollars that were given to support their students' education in order to make a financial gain. For voucher schools in particular it has been shown that "vouchers underserved many students, including low-income

students who often cannot afford private schools even with a voucher, students in rural areas who may have no other educational options nearby, and students with disabilities who often cannot find private schools to serve their needs” (Hayes, 2017). This neoliberal vision of schooling is exceptionally harmful to the most vulnerable groups in society but is supported because it furthers the privatization of education.

Meritocracy is promised to all children through school choice, but in actuality the rhetoric does not fulfil its promises to students. In a national study on charter schools, the Center on Research for Educational Outcomes at Stanford University found little to no improvement in learning at a charter school compared to a traditional public school (CREDO, 2013). The rhetoric of meritocracy is contradictory to the school choice system itself, which serves to benefit the elite. The owners and CEOs of private and charter supported by the school choice movement are receiving direct economic advantages, and greatly benefit from the privatisation of the school system. Unfortunately, the losers in this free market model of education are the children who are not receiving a quality education. All students are forced to take countless standardized tests and encouraged to perform well so that their school benefits, and those students who are not successful on these tests are told that they are failures. These students are reminded that they are not meant to be successful in the meritocratic system every time they are forced to take a test that it is designed for them to fail. Then, these students and their families seek out other options for education and something to blame for their “failures.” Public schools are used as this scapegoat and are considered “failing” themselves. Finally, school choice is offered as the solution to this problem but the greatest choice we as an American people are making is the choice to ignore the disastrous neoliberal policy that has encouraged the privatization of education.

Conclusion



(Maguire, 2013)

The United States public school system is fundamental to our values as American Citizens, where we pride ourselves on the opportunity for all children to receive an education. The question that the history of schooling within the United States begs for us to ask, is what is the purpose of public schooling? As the above picture depicts, are we educating our students on the basis of equality or equity? The promise of opportunity is often touted as the reason that we as Americans value education, but does our school system really allow all students to receive the opportunity for a successful life?

In the current United States school system, it appears that equality is the true goal of schooling. Common Core, a country wide curriculum that is designed to better the “stagnant academic progress” by fixing “uneven patchwork of academic standards that vary from state to state and do not agree on what students should know and be able to do at each grade level”

(Common Core Website, 2018). Students are forced to take the same exams in order for their school district to receive federal funding, and these tests are used to measure the success of the schools and their teachers. These exemplify the desire to equalize all aspects of education, which in turn allows students needs to be unmet. Students are told that if they work hard and are intelligent then they will succeed, but schooling does not provide the support that is required for a level playing field. There are external factors that influence a students ability to learn, and the current system does not address these inequalities. In fact, the extreme push for a voucher system and charter schools seeks to capitalize off of the inequalities that exist within schools.

Public schools are not failing, but they can do more to provide a truly equitable education.

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