The Obama Education Files:[1] Is There Hope to Stop the Neoliberal Agenda in Education?

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Introduction

It is over two years since Barack Obama won the historic election, which some considered a corporately-sponsored horse race, and secured the Oval Office to become the 44th President of the United States. Many citizens, inside and outside of the US, were mobilized and seduced by Obama's rockstar-like persona. His handlers employed "ground-level marketing strategies and tactics, everything from audience segmentation and database management to the creation and maintenance of online communities" (Creamer, 2008, para. 6) to make Americans believe that they could take back their country to meet the unfulfilled promises that framed the "greatness" instilled in the American people, their constitution and their history (Au, 2009). Obama's handlers also convinced millions across the globe that his administration would ultimately put an end to the anti-democratic and authoritarian policies, practices, and mandates implemented by the Bush regime for eight years. The United States, under a Conservative, Republican regime of George W. Bush, experienced intensified militarization, what Peter McLaren terms as the "permanent war on terror," and also exhibited visible economic degradation, with a concomitant assault on public education (Giroux & Saltman, 2009; McLaren, 2009; Ross & Gibson, 2007).

Unfortunately, the Obama administration has not veered from its predecessor despite the compelling rhetorical messaging that was signify "hope" and "change". It has continued to support and promulgate social and economic policies that promote the interests of the corporate elite over the needs of the populace. One of Obama's biggest supporters, critical philosopher and Professor of African American Studies and Religion at Princeton University, Cornel West, who took part in 65 campaign events for Obama, "now nurses, like many others who placed their faith in Obama, the anguish of the deceived, manipulated and betrayed" (Hedges, 2011) because Obama functions as "a black mascot of Wall Street oligarchs and a black puppet of corporate

plutocrats. And now he has become head of the American killing machine and is proud of it" (West as cited in Hedges, 2011).

The contributors to this special issue of *The Journal of Inquiry and Action* provide insight into why the Obama administration's educational policies manifest the dominance of neoliberal ideology over most elements of social life. The articles presented herein build on the work originally presented in *The Phenomenon of Obama and the agenda for Education: Can hope audaciously trump neoliberalism?* (Carr & Porfilio, 2011). According to Hursh (2011), neoliberal ideology is grounded in the belief that economic prosperity and improvements for segments of the social world, such as health care, education, and the environment, emanate from "unregulated or free markets, the withering away of the state as government's role in regulating businesses and funding social services are either eliminated or privatized, and encouraging individuals to become self-interested entrepreneurs". Since neoliberalism is a term rarely uttered is most dominant (mainstream) media outlets, most US citizens would not cognizant of how it is linked to many deleterious economic and social developments at today's historical juncture, such as massive unemployment, the swelling of home foreclosures, homelessness, militarism, school closings, maldistribution of wealth, and environmental degradation (Hursh, 2011; McLaren, 2007; Ross & Gibson, 2007; Scipes, 2009).

We have chosen to highlight neoliberalism's impact on education because we believe that modern, progressive, highly-functioning societies need a broadly responsive, socially relevant, socially just, and pedagogically-engaged educational system, one that bolsters and cultivates critical teaching and learning, accepting that knowledge is socially constructed and mediated (Kincheloe, 2008c). As a starting-point, we accept Friere's contention that education is, and needs to be understood as, a political project (Freire, 1973). Our interest in critical pedagogy helps us elaborate a conceptual framework of analysis, and to identify the potential for transformation within schools and society, a connection that we believe is fluid and necessarily complex (see Kincheloe's body of work, including 2008a, 2008b, 2008c). Ultimately, we believe that there is a link, as others have pointed out, including John Dewey decades ago, between education and democracy (Ayers, 2009; Carr, 2010; Giroux, 2009; Porfilio & Carr, 2008). Thus, the spectacular victory of the first African-American to become President of the United States, which was hailed by the media as well as the world, has been seen as a watershed moment in the political and historical development of not only the US but all nations. Given the dearth of

critical analysis in relation to Obama's leadership and his administration's educational agenda, which we contend is fundamental to meaningful democratic development, we examine herein the meaning of potential transformation in and through the Obama administration's approach to education.

The Age of Obama: Does Neoliberalism Trump "Hope" and "Change"?

Since securing the White House in 2008, the Obama administration has done little, we contend, to implement policies and practices based on improving the lives of US citizens but, arguably, has built upon the Bush administration's agenda to concentrate corporate control over the social world. As Englehardt (2010) puts it, the policies of Bush and Obama "often have a tweedledum-and-tweedledee-ish look to them." Specific party politics, however, do not account for the similarities of their policies; rather, they reflect political and economic systems with own their steamroller force, and their "own set of narrow, repetitive "solutions" to our problems" (Englehardt, 2010). For instance, the Obama administration was complicit in creating BP's gulf oil spill, which has caused colossal damage "to the shorelines of Gulf states such as Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida," to the sea floor, and marine life (Schoof & Adams, 2010). Not only did the administration cater to corporate interests by giving oil companies the power to "drill at depths at which current technology makes mistakes irreparable" (Ford, 2010), but it allowed millions of gallons of oil to leak into the Gulf. This is indicative of how the administration is concerned more with the economic viability of the corporation than catastrophic environmental destruction or the catastrophe impact to the livelihood of a range of workers (Henry & Reeves, 2010). The reality that Obama is as focused on fundraising and using private funds for political purposes as his predecessors underscores how the brilliant rhetorical maneuvers have not defeated the deeply-entrenched core of the two-party monopoly, which Carr (2010) characterizes more of a *econ-ocracy* than a democracy. *Econ-ocracy*, according to Carr (2010), exploits political illiteracy with hegemonic postures that centralize debate exclusively on the two-party system, excluding people from being involved in the actual macro-level decisions that can severely impact their lives, including wars, poverty, discrimination, and education.

Like his predecessor, Obama has also supported corporate and militaristic initiatives that propagate the interests of the global elite. He has supported Bush's 2008 TARP (Troubled Asset Relief Program) bailout, legislation designed to concede power to the capitalist class through the

consolidation of the banking industry, allowing Wall Street to engage in speculative financial endeavors. Since Obama has been in office, Wall Street bankers have had free reign over the economy (Taibbi, 2010). Obama's continued support of Wall Street has not only allowed many investors to "thrive right now" (Harvey, 2010), but, importantly, has put the banks and their leaders in a *better* financial position than before the financial collapse of 2008. Unfortunately, catering to the financial elite has done little to eliminate poverty, homelessness, provide jobs, rebuild the infrastructure, or develop "sustainable energy technologies" (Hursh, 2010). The situation is even bleaker when one considers that African-Americans and economically-marginalized groups, who were considered to form a part of his base, are most affected by the lack of attention paid to them in favor of bankers and stockholders. The argument goes that Obama cannot speak out on behalf of those groups most affected because they would deflate his support from the wealthiest people, which elucidates the conundrum we're facing: if he does what he said he would do, he will have only one term as President, and, if he does what the elites want, he will lose support, credibility and "hope" for "change".

The reasons for which unprecedented military spending on empire-building escapades seems to go unchecked and unquestioned by the political elites, media moguls and business class to the detriment of working people, minorities, marginalized groups and others is a complex matter involving hegemony, hyper-patriotism, limited political rights and literacy, and, specialized, a muzzled educational regime. Although, on the surface, the Obama administration looks as if it has retrenched the US's foreign policy of using the military to control labor, resources, and capital across the globe with its recent pledge to end combat operations in Iraq, the sad reality is the administration has opted to build upon a cornerstone of the Bush administration's military strategy—engaging in 'shadow wars' across various sections of the Middle East, Africa, and Asia (Shane, Mazzetti, and Worth, 2010). The Obama administration has acted surreptitiously in its economic and militarily support of government leaders and military officials in countries such as Yemen, social actors who are concerned about enhancing their own political and economic stature, and who are currently committed to destroying Al Qaeda networks. Concurrently, it has expanded military activities across Africa by providing training to soldiers, weapons to countries, and other assistance to governmental and business leaders who are committed to empowering themselves and insurgent network that may threaten US global hegemony.

Contrary to rhetorical statements during the tumultuous campaign, the Obama administration has provided economic support and power to privatized military units for the purpose of garnering information about potential "enemies." Significantly, it has also engaged in substantial drone warfare in Pakistan to allegedly quell militant networks that are against US political and economic interests (Shane, Mazzetti, and Worth, 2010; Volman, 2010). While this brand of "shadow warfare" may momentarily alleviate the Western public's growing displeasure of "the staggering costs of big wars that topple governments, require years of occupation and can be a catalyst for further radicalization throughout the Muslim world" (Shane, Mazzetti and Worth, 2010), it does not fundamentally alter the hegemony of military and corporate interests over people and the environment. For instance, "shadow warfare" continues to exhaust natural resources, monetary resources on weapons, surveillance, and technology, fuels the possibility that additional conflicts will occur between Western powers and groups who face the brunt of the "shadow" military activities, and perpetuates additional abuses against political prisoners, men, women and children who have been causalities of the US "shadow wars" since the beginning of the Cold War Era.

Not only has Obama not ended the catastrophic misadventure in Iraq as evidenced by the number of troops still there, but he has also created a monstrous twenty-seven building embassy in the so-called "green zone" and continues with the aimless quest in Afghanistan. The military mission seems to have no real objectives outside of the US not knowing how to leave with dignity. The administration has now embarked on a questionable mission in Libya. While refusing to critique and admonish repressive actions by US allies Bahrain, Yemen and Saudi Arabia, the Obama administration has taken aim at its old foe (and also, at one point, ally) Ghaddafi. As reported by the *Black Agenda Report* (2011), many credible sources question the legitimacy of US motives and actions in Libya.

> "I have been an eyewitness to terror," says **Cynthia McKinney**, the former Georgia congresswoman and Green Party presidential candidate whose fact-finding delegation to Libya observed some of the heaviest NATO bombing of Tripoli, the capital. The U.S. corporate media are present in Libya, "but the truth is nowhere to be found".

> **Ramsey Clark**, former U.S. attorney general and also part of the ANSWER tour, called NATO's attack on Libya "the last of a long line of assaults on Arab and Muslim peoples." He challenged the United Nations: "Are the people of the planet powerless to end this tyranny of violence?"
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> **Bruce Fein**, author of "American Empire: Before the Fall" says, "If another country did to us what we are doing to Libya, we would incinerate it with nuclear weapons." As to President Obama's contention that the U.S. is not at war with Libya and, therefore, the War Powers Act has not been triggered, Fein says, "If it's not war, then the United States is committing murder in Libya." The White House also claims that no state of war exists because U.S. personnel are in little danger. Says Fein: "The same would be said if the U.S. launched ICBMs with nuclear warheads and utterly destroyed a country," without itself sustaining casualties.
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> **Bill Quigley**, of the Center for Constitutional Rights, points out that candidate Obama spoke against the rise of an imperial presidency. "This is like the King wearing no clothes," said Quigley, calling Obama's legal stance "ludicrous." There is little prospect of judicial restraints on the White House, because "the courts are cowardly." The Congress may be making loud noises, but the president is telling them, in effect: "I know you're not going to do anything about it."

The political economy of democracy must, we argue, foreshadow any serious discussion of the role of education in contemporary times (Carr, 2010). Resources, priorities, decisions, actions and outcomes related to education have, at their essence, the significant issues documented above. The average US citizen is unaware of how entrenched the US is in nefarious and deleterious military quests across the globe, including the massive amount of its budget allocated to military ventures, the roughly 800 bases that it has in dozens of countries, and the support it offers to tyrants and dictators. The masses are also blocked from recognizing the clearly illegal actions the US endorses among its own troops. Instead, the mainstream media whips people to blindly support US military excursions and the military-industrial complex, so

that opposition to, and questioning of, the military is highly discouraged and may be considered unpatriotic (Carr, 2010).

The Hour-Glass of Educational Change and the Obama "Revolution"

In education circles, the Obama administration has, arguably, supported and instituted policies and practices that may do more to undermine transformative forms of teaching and learning in K-12 schools than policies supported and promulgated by the Bush administration (Giroux & Saltman, 2009; Hursh, 2011; McLaren, 2009). Democrats and Republicans, in lock-step together as the corporate entity controlling formal political life, along with Wall Street, realized that US residents were preoccupied with, and disoriented from, the economic crisis impacting their families and communities, which provided the impetus for them to act swiftly to implement a spate of corporatist initiatives in K-12 schools across the US. In the past two years, the Obama administration has gone far beyond what George W. Bush's administration was able to do with its No Child Left Behind (NCLB) [3] policy[4] in terms of privatizing education (Russom, 2010; Scott, 2010). Below, we discuss how Obama administration's educational agenda is linked to further eradicating public education, promoting corporate interests over the needs of children and the US at-large, and pressuring the public to accept the notion that corporate involvement will improve all elements in the social world. Before examining several specific educational policies currently advanced by the Obama administration, we briefly present the educational initiatives supported by the major designer of the Obama's administration's educational agenda, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan.

Arne Duncan and Education Leadership

The Obama administration is following in the neoliberal footsteps of its Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan. From 2001-2009, Duncan, as CEO of Chicago Public Schools (CPS), instituted sweeping educational reforms "steeped in a free-market model of school reform" (Kumashiro, 2008, as cited in Street, 2008b). According to Street (2008b), "Privatization, union-busting (charter and contract schools operate union-free), excessive standardized testing, teacher-blaming, military schooling, and the rollback of community input on school decisions" were the hallmarks under Duncan's corporate form of schooling in Chicago. One integral component of Duncan's neoliberal schooling agenda is witnessed in the report entitled Renaissance 2010.

Under this directive, the corporate elite in Chicago were given the power to a set up a Commercial Club, which used its "leverage to dismantle the elected school board and replace it with the Chicago Board of Education, a body composed of their own representatives" (Hursh, 2011).

After garnering control of the chief educational authority, the elite showed little concern for establishing quality schools across the city (Lipman, 2003; Lipman & Hursh, 2007). Rather, they aimed to create a "two-tiered educational system" in Chicago. After closing and consolidating numerous schools across Chicago, corporate leaders and politicians supported the creation of charter schools and additional academic programs in areas of the city where affluent people from the dominant culture lived or in areas that would possibly be attractive to affluent citizens who were considering moving to this "world-class city" (Lipman and Hursh, 2007). The additional resources parlayed into superior academic programs for mostly affluent residents, such as magnet programs, International Baccalaureate Programs, regional gifted schools, and Math and Science Technology Academies (Street, 2008b). Since many of the schools created under Renaissance 2010 were charter schools, school administrators were in the position to handpick affluent students from the dominant culture, and hire teachers who were adept at creating educational environments that treat students as subjects rather than as objects. The schools commonly exhibit "a relaxed and open pedagogical environment that encourages free inquiry, critical and experimental thought, autonomous and democratic expression, and the collective sharing of ideas and knowledge" (Street, 2008b).

On the other hand, minoritized and impoverished students and their educators and caregivers in Chicago were forced to grapple with their neighborhood schools being gutted and transformed into test-polluted, overcrowded, and debilitating commercial institutions. In the midst of being part of an environment where schools were deemed "underperforming and forced to closed," "students were treated like cattle, shuffled around from school to school (Brown, Guitstein, and Lipman, 2009). Not only did the privatization of the schools lead to" increased violence and put children's lives at risk due to crossing neighborhood and gang boundaries," it also ensured that the voices of community members were marginalized in terms of what resources, pedagogies, and programs are best suited to foster youths' intellectual, social, and emotional growth.

Furthermore, Duncan used Renaissance 2010 to militarize schools and build military academies in the most impoverished sections of Chicago. Duncan had no qualms in his plan to ensure that Chicago had "the largest JROTC program in the country in number of cadets and total programs" because he feels military programs promote "positive learning environments" (Brown, Guitstein and Lipman, 2009). However, what is missing from Duncan's characterization of militarizing public schooling in impoverished contexts is that these youth have no more desire than their affluent counterparts to gain supposed "leadership" skills from military officials or to attend military academies. This form of schooling is only an attractive option for these youth because systemic barriers sap the degree of power they hold over their life chances. For instance, public schools routinely fail them, they grapple with violence and over-policing in their communities, and the US government fails to promote economic justice, which is at the core of the problem in relation to cultural capital, inequitable opportunities, and the dearth of social justice inside and outside of the classroom. The state intentionally keeps the minimum wage low, offers inadequate transportation, provides limited social services, and maintains inadequate housing options for impoverished urban residents (Anyon, 2005; Porfilio & Hall, 2005), all of which leads to reactionary calls for charter schools and military forms of schooling that, ultimately, plunge marginalized communities into inferior educational opportunities. Ultimately, such a debilitating backdrop can make the notion of "school choice" a logical and desirable option, one that results from the conclusion that public education does not work.

Race to the Top (of What?), and (Neoliberal) Transformation

The Obama administration, on July 24, 2009, promulgated a new education policy, Race to the Top (RTTT), a $4.35 billion dollar "competitive incentive program" that is designed, we contend, to further gut public schooling in the US, structure schools on market ideologies and practices, and provide the corporate elite an additional avenue to profit off of children. To be "competitive" and bolster their chances of winning the educational jack-pot held by the Obama administration, numerous states in the US have had to ensure that they would support "expansion of charter schools as well as high-stakes testing, and test-score driven accountability" (Christianakis & Mora, 2011). Therefore, RTTT only exacerbates the testing, accounting, and competitive form of schooling that both political parties in the US have touted as the panacea to

eliminate the "opportunity gaps" plaguing the educational system for the past two decades (Ravitch, 2010).

To be deemed "accountable" for student learning under RTTP, states, under the tutelage of the federal government, are linking teachers' evaluations to their students' performance on high-stakes examinations. The policy will surely widen the opportunity gaps that pockmark the US educational system. Many minoritized and marginalized youth already attend underfunded, dilapidated, militarized, and overcrowded schools (Anyon, 2005; Kozol, 2005; Lipman, 2003; Porfilio & Malott, 2008; Ross & Gibson; Saltman & Gabbard, 2003). By implementing more examinations and linking teachers' performance to how their students perform on those tests, teachers will be obliged to create a more alienating environment for students. As other critical scholars have argued, in a test-driven educational environment, teachers will feel compelled, or, in some cases, forced, to implement pedagogies of silence and control to push students to simply regurgitate information in order to pass the exams because students' poor test performances may cost them their jobs, close their schools, or nudge students to drop out of the formal schooling process (Au, 2008; Kozol, 2005; Mathison & Ross, 2008; Porfilio & Malott, 2008). Therefore, there will be numerous low-income students and students of color who will disengage from the instructional process and dropout[5] of school because their ways of knowing, constructing identities, cultures, histories, and material realities will not be considered part of the "knowledge" that becomes standardized, and thus validated, on exams and in classroom discourse (Au, 2008, p. 118). The standardize exams also set up special needs students and English-language learners for failure because they may lack the cultural capital or the physical capacity to demonstrate that they can offer the "correct" answers to the corporate test-makers. Similarly, this exam regime pushes critical and engaged educators out of the educational system (Apple, 1999; Kozol, 2005; Porfilio & Malott, 2008). The notion of critically-engaged teaching and learning that seeks to develop the underpinning of a more robust, thicker democracy is absent from such an education regime based on neoliberalism and inequitable power relations (Carr, 2010).

Significantly, business leaders who sell the exams and test preparation materials to schools will benefit from the curriculum being tied to the examinations. Other neoliberal interests will benefit because they will be supplied with a cheap supply of labor to fill jobs in the contingent, service-oriented economy: this expendable sector of the population could almost be

red-circled from Kindergarten based on their cultural capital. The capitalist class will also employ the standardized exams to better "spot talent and recruit the cream of the working class that can be funneled into higher education and employment as technical personnel, frontline managers, and professionals" (Russom, 2010).

Charter Schools, and the Right to Choose (or the Right to Lose?)

The Obama administration made good on its campaign promise to develop and implement "privately run charter schools" as a chief way to solve educational problems under RTTP (Russon, 2010; Scott, 2010). To be competitive for tapping the pool of federal funds available under RTTP, many states were compelled to give more access to charter schools. For instance, the federal government gave points to states, related to RTTP, "if they had no caps or caps greater than 10% of their total public schools, medium points if they had caps between 5%-10%, and low points if they capped charter schools at 5% or lower" (Christianakis & Mora, 2011). In fact, New York State passed a law specifically to increase the amount of charter schools in the state, which gave them a better chance to net federal dollars. The law "will eventually boost the number of charter schools in the state from 200 to 460" (Trapasso, 2010). Not coincidently, New York State's commitment to opening more charter schools helped the state land almost $700 M on its second application to secure RTTP funds. Upon awarding New York State the funds, Duncan praised New York State Teachers' union and political leaders for having the "breathtaking courage" to tie teacher performance to students' test scores, and supporting more charter schools because he believes the initiatives have the power to dramatically improve student achievement (Blain, 2010).

Despite the Obama administration's contention that charter schools will transform education, critical scholars have shown clearly that the implementation of charter schools have not radically altered students' performance on high-stake exams (Ayers & Klonsky, 2006; Booker, Gill, Simmer & Sass, 2009; Christianakis & Mora, 2011; Ross & Gibson, 2007). This is despite the fact that, unlike other public schools, charter schools have the power to exclude certain student populations, such as ESL/ELL and special education students, who may hinder the schools' overall achievement on the increasingly-important examinations. Corporate leaders who delve into the charter school business generally manage their schools like the larger corporate world, which perpetuates a dehumanizing, alienating, and conformity-riddled

environment for students and educators[6]. For instance, they tend to fire and layoff certified teachers to reap more profits, in turn hiring non-tenured teachers who are beholden to the corporate administration because their contingent job status positions them to fear reprisals for challenging their bosses' mandates. They also use charter schools to sell standardized curricula, textbooks, and test preparation materials. Not only does this give the elite the ability to reap handsome profits, but it, as illustrated above, also gives them the power to subvert teachers' ability to implement pedagogies that guide students to reflect critically about self and Other, knowledge and power, and the role they and their students can play to eliminate oppression in their schools and their communities. In effect, these pre-packaged, pre-evaluated, pre-scripted educational systems negate the social context and the generative themes that Freire (1973) located at the center of a socially-relevant teaching and learning experience. Rather than developing a closer *rapprochement* with social justice, democracy and critical engagement, the push toward privatization seems to favor the opposite, measuring success simply on neoliberal terms and standards.

George Dei (Dei, Mazzuca & McIassac, 1997) refers to drop-outs as "push-outs," and this characterization provides some context of the process of weaning the educational system of those who do not have the requisite cultural capital. For example, the drop-out rate for African Americans and Latinos is disproportionately higher than that for Whites, yet the response of providing more school choice for those who are "under-achieving" seems to miss the point that the problem is systemic, structural, ingrained, and relates to power. The reality that the first African American President seems aloof to discuss racialization, racism and race relations, let alone noting how Whiteness, power and privilege in education work, is, therefore, problematic at several levels.

In the end, Obama administration's support for creating additional corporately-run charter schools appears more in line with an overall vision of doing away with public education in favor of a "privatized education system." For instance, in addition to supporting character schools and other corporate schooling practices, the Obama administration's support of Rhode Island's school board's decisions to fire tenured urban school teachers, and blame them for the failure of their students on high-stakes examinations, indicates the desire of the administration and neoliberal supporters to gain the public's favor in privatizing American schools. By scapegoating teachers for the unjust practices and systemic inequalities that set up minoritized

youth for failure in schools and in society, the public will be more likely to support neoliberal policies and practices to (supposedly) fix the ills of the US public school system.

Leadership, and Seeking a Better Society Through Education

The question of leadership is crucial to making education a forum for societal development and engagement. The Obama administration, generally, has offered conflicting evidence of whether any existing forms of transformative forms of education exist in K-12 classrooms. Obama and his handlers seemingly accepted the provocative, unnecessary and debilitating legislation proposed by Arizona lawmakers and Governor Jan Brewer, Arizona House Bill 2281, which effectively bans the teaching of ethnic studies in Arizona's public schools. They also remained silent when Tom Horne, Superintendent of Public Instruction in Arizona, chastised scholars, teachers, and other citizens for wanting to learn and teach about what forces, structures, policies, and laws are responsible for the oppression of Latino people in the past and present as well as "learn(ing) about the cultures of themselves and others" (Hill, 2010). Horne also made egregious and sensational statements to the dominant media that were designed to demonize Latinos and ethnic studies. He stoked the racist ire of members of the dominant culture by claiming that ethnic studies courses will eventually become part of a larger movement to favor Latino/Chiano students over their White counterparts in schools through the creation of "Chicano-only" classrooms. Horne also played upon many members of the dominant culture's fear and hatred of foreigners, in general, and Chicanos, in particular, by linking ethnic studies as a part of the 'Other's plot to indoctrinate "loyal" Americans in communist ideology, leading to the "overthrow (of) the United States government" (Hill, 2010).

As Randy Acuña, Professor of Chicano studies at the University of California at Northridge, makes clear, Chicano people have been subjugated by the elite since "Columbus got off the boat in 1492," and continue to be oppressed today. All you have to do is "look at the demographics and you'll see how Mexicans are the lowest in income, they come from the worst schools" (Smith, 2010). Furthermore, the elimination of ethnic studies and culturally relevant programs appears to be part of the broader neoliberal project to standardize and corporatize teaching, knowledge, and literacy. This trend leads to the visible and far-reaching reality that the vast majority of teaching and learning in US schools avoids critical engagement with fundamental issues such as: why is the US involved in so many military ventures? what are the

social, political, economic and moral costs of these ventures? how can we learn to achieve peace rather than "permanent war"? why do Americans know so much about reality-shows, yet they are not conversant with how power functions in their society? how is democracy structured, is it working, and does it offer *bone fide* opportunities for critical engagement, "hope" and "change"? why are social inequalities increasing in a society with so much wealth, why is this wealth so concentrated, and what can be done to create a more just and democratic society? (Carr, 2010)

Instead of lending support for the Chicano people's desire to empower themselves through critical forms of historical interpretation and pedagogies, the Obama administration has criminalized Chicanos by supporting the fifteen-year US policy of militarizing immigration along the US/Mexico border (Goodman, 2010). For instance, Obama signed into law a $600 million bill to "deploy some 1,500 new Border Patrol agents and law enforcement officials along the border, as well as two aerial surveillance drones" (Goodman, 2010). Rather than providing economic and social support for Latino(a) migrants, whose communities have been devastated by neoliberal "free trade" policies, the Obama administration opted to treat Latino(a) immigrants as chattel. During Obama's first year in office, more than 388,000 immigrants were deported to Mexico, a figure more than "any other year in the republic's history" (Benjamin, 2010). Therefore, it would hardly be a stretch to state that the Obama's "security first" approach to immigration "makes it seem as though he's trying to appease conservatives at the expense of Latinos" (Benjamin, 2010).

Moreover, the Obama administration has been intimately connected to politicians from both of the US mainstream political parties to put into practice neoliberal educational policies in K-12 public schools. For instance, both Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and President Obama have had closed door meetings and appeared at public gatherings with leading Republican politicians, including New Jersey Governor Chris Christe and Florida Governor Jed Bush, to affirm their support to slash funds allocated to classrooms, gutting teachers' pensions, linking teachers' performances to students' high-stakes exam scores, and blaming "greedy" teachers for the lack of resources in public schools (Oliphant and Parsons, 2011). Not surprisingly, Chris Christie calls himself a "great ally" of Obama's educational reforms and incorrectly believes, like the Obama administration, that blaming teachers and corporatizing classrooms offers "hope" to children and their teachers as well as the greater US society. The meetings corresponded with educators, workers and students in Wisconsin and Ohio fighting for

the right of collective-bargaining. The Obama administration was, and continues to be, absent in supporting the right of teachers and other public workers to bargain collectively.

The general assault against educators seems to be codified by a government that seeks to lay blame at their feet while, at the same time, obfuscating all debate by omitting any reference to the enormous political, economic and social hole that militarization has dug out for a society almost teetering on the brink of bankruptcy. The costs of the military invasions in Iraq and Afghanistan are staggering, and are directly related to what is happening domestically. Some estimates place the military costs for the past ten years in those two countries at between $3 and $4 trillion (Reuters, 2011), and, astonishingly, in 2010 the US government, meaning the tax-payers, paid $20.2 billion (NPR, 2011) for air-conditioning in those two countries. The obsession with military conquest and maintaining the empire, perhaps ironically, has had the greatest (negative) impact on those desiring the "change" promised by Obama during the two-year campaign, the racialized and marginalized minorities and people who have not benefitted from the "American dream".

Finally, the Obama's administration's pronouncements to shut down two thousand of the US's "drop out factories," schools that produce nearly half of the US's school dropouts, to eliminate "remedial" collegiate programs for students who are ill-prepared for college because they are forced to attend underfunded, test polluted, and militarized public K-12 schools, and to tout extending the school year as a solution to improve student achievement, are all attempts to condition the public to believe that education is merely a competitive, individualistic and corporate commodity (Simmons, 2010). Once again, through initiatives said to improve student achievement of US students, Obama and his cabinet have failed to guide the public to conceptualize education as a social good that has to potential to guide students to become critically engaged and socially transgressive citizens. Clearly, a critical, meaningful, engaged educational experience is at the base of dynamic, functioning and socially just democratic process, and to neglect enhancing education will lead to an entrenchment toward anti-democratic tendencies and realities, leading people to believe that their primary role is merely to vote for one of the two dominant parties every couple of years.

Tying Critical Pedagogy into the Contemporary Neoliberal Educational Agenda

Education predicated on the ideals of love, democracy, and justice, as well as what Freire (1973) called *conscientization*, and geared to fostering students' understanding of the larger forces responsible for injustice in schools and society, has the potential to stop students from dropping out of schools, and being alienated from the formal educational process, unlike any of the Obama administration's aforementioned policies to improve the US educational system. Rather than treating students as objects, who are valuable if they only perform well on examinations, educators could be given the power to open up spaces in their classrooms to help students examine problems confronting the educational system and the wider society. Similarly, educators could generate pedagogical projects where students work with community members inside and outside of schools to examine why neoliberal policies have ensured that students who are marginalized by race and class attend "drop out factories," while their affluent counterparts attend schools that prepare them for power in the business and social world; why corporate and government officials are unwilling to provide adequate resources to schools and social programs in communities that could place minoritized students in a better place to engage in the schooling process. Moreover, we need to ask why teachers need to be accountable for preparing students to succeed on mindless, standardized examinations that do not foster students' understanding of the relationship between knowledge and power, their openness to diverse intellectual ideas and peoples, or their thirst to join others in the collective struggle to build egalitarian schools and a just society.[7]

Critical pedagogy presents a framework to understand political literacy and social transformation, in which static representations of power, identity, and contextual realities are rejected (Denzin, 2009; Kincheloe, 2008a). Critical pedagogy is not about providing a checklist against which one can determine the level of social justice within a given society (Carr, 2008a). Rather, it is concerned with oppression and marginalization at all levels, and seeks to interrogate, problematize and critique power and inequitable power relations (Macrine, 2009). Giroux (2007) emphasizes that critical pedagogy "refuses the official lies of power and the utterly reductive notion of being a method.... (It) opens up a space where students should be able to come to terms with their own power as critical agents; it provides a sphere where the unconditional freedom to question and assert is central" to an intellectual stimulating education as well as building a robust democratic society (p. 1).

Critical pedagogy makes a direct, explicit and undeniable linkage between the formalized experience in the classroom and the lived experience outside of the classroom, in which bodies, identities and societal mores influence what takes place in schools (Giroux, 2007). Giroux (2007) boldly states that "Democracy cannot work if citizens are not autonomous, self-judging, and independent—qualities that are indispensable for students if they are going to make vital judgments and choices about participating in and shaping decisions that affect everyday life, institutional reform, and governmental policy" (p.1). Significantly, Denzin (2009) provides a number of points that draw together the web of a "critical democratic pedagogy": "critical pedagogy encourages resistance to the "discourses of privatization, consumerism, the methodologies of standardization and accountability, and the new disciplinary techniques of surveillance (p. 381). Critical pedagogy provides the tools for understanding how cultural and educational practices contribute to the construction of neoliberal conceptions of identity, citizenship, and agency" (p. 381).

Being conscious, able to *read the world*, immersed in humane acts, and engaged in a meaningful interrogation of what the purpose of teaching and learning is should be uppermost in the minds of decision-makers as much as the populace in general (Macrine, 2009). Condemning those who would question hegemonic practices as cynical, negative, uncooperative, unconstructive (even destructive) and corrupted can only further widen the gap between those who enjoy comfort and those seeking a more just conceptualization of society. Education, which must underpin democracy for it to be relevant and consequential in favor of the masses, is, as we have already argued, a political project, one that needs to be understood as such for it to challenge systemically entrenched practices, values, norms and conventions (Freire, 1973/2005; Kincheloe, 2008a, 2008b). Comprehending the dialectical relations between oppressed and oppressor requires a re-thinking of the premise of education, one that properly labels *banking* models of education.

Some of the components of a critical synthesis of critical pedagogy, according to Kincheloe (2008c), are the following:

1. The development of a social individual imagination.
2. The reconstitution of the individual outside the boundaries of abstract individualism.

3. The understanding of power and the ability to interpret its effects on the social and the individual.
4. The provision of alternatives to the alienation of the individual.
5. The cultivation of a critical consciousness that is aware of the social construction of subjectivity.
6. The construction of democratic community-building relationships between individuals.
7. The reconceptualization of reason-understanding that relational existence applies not only to human beings but concepts as well.
8. The production of social skills necessary to activate participation in the transformed, inclusive democratic community.

The inextricable linkage to the establishment of a more decent society is ingrained in the foundation of critical pedagogical work. The desire to enhance human agency, imbued in a process of theory and action, thus underscoring praxis and the libratory potential of critical engagement, is (and should be) a central consideration, not an after-thought. Political literacy and media literacy provide a mandatory platform from which education can be explored, cultivated and transformed (Carr & Lund, 2008; Carr & Porfilio, 2009a). Critical pedagogy can assist us in asking questions that are far from the mainstream political process and the corporate media, and, importantly, but which resonate with the lived realities of the majority of people who do not partake fully in the myriad societal, institutional, political, economic and cultural decision-making fora that serve to shape their lives. As a cautionary note, as illustrated by de Lissovoy (2008), critical pedagogy is not disconnected from other critical theoretical frameworks but must be considered from a "compound standpoint," which enhances its relevancy for the multi-disciplinary study of democracy.

The central question related to the purpose of education is not the focus of the Obama educational reforms. We have argued that his vision is not (radically) different than that of his predecessors, who have all paid homage to the supremacy of the neoliberal market place. While rhetoric and a broad public willingness to accept that things should be different than they are, and, importantly, that we can do something to ensure that they are different than they are, should not obscure from the lived reality that things are continuing on a trajectory that does not infer

transformation in and through education. The policies presented at this early juncture in the Obama administration suggest corporate interests are taking a hold over educational and aspects of the social world. The administration has not made it priority to end senseless violence, aggression, militarization and war. To consider that our analysis, or any analysis, for that matter, has a political dimension is to state an obvious point, even if it is a popular contention within neoliberal circles to feign neutrality, objectivity, universal truth, and an allegiance to normative hegemonic values. Our fundamental argument is that power must become an integral part of the educational experience; it is must be exposed, cajoled, challenged and rendered bare so as to expose the existence of oppression, how it works, how it is sustained, and how it can be remedied. Will the proposals presented by Obama, as well as the concrete policies that he is enacting, provide for *hope*, *change* and *transformation*? We would argue that, without assessing in a most critical manner, the overarching neoliberal scaffolding framing how we conceive, develop, implement and cultivate education, the potential for education to be the vanguard of meaningful change for society, for all people, is limited.

Outline of Articles in this Special Issue

In the first essay of this special issue, "Explaining Obama: The continuation of free market policies in education and the economy," David Hursh seeks to explore why the Obama administration has veered from the progressive educational agenda it embraced during the 2008 US Presidential campaign. He believes that the answer lies in "understanding the degree to which neoliberal policies promoting unregulated markets, competition, privatization, and entrepreneurialism have come to dominate political and public discourse." To aid us in this understanding, Hursh provides a critical historical analysis of how neoliberalism came to replace "Keynesian economic policies in which governments should adopt economic policies to limit economic hardships and promote economic growth and individual rights" in the US during the mid-1970s and dominate the fabric of social life in the Age of Obama.

Next, Hursh illustrates how Obama's neoliberal educational initiatives are supporting corporate interest rather than the interests of students, teachers and the wider community. The author concludes his chapter by providing emancipatory guideposts, which have the power to lead us beyond the neoliberal ideological doctrine that is responsible for intense human suffering

and dark social realities coloring our social world. He pushes educators, concerned citizens, and youth to engage in authentic dialogue and critical reflection:

> … to imagine and work for a new future, one in which we rethink and reconstruct the role of government, the nature of the economy, our relationship to the environment, and the purpose of schooling.

In the next essay, **"**On the origin and political significance of test-based teacher evaluation and compensation," Mark Garrison provides a critical historical analysis of "test-based teacher evaluation and compensation" to help us make sense of why, unlike ten years ago, it is possible to eliminate tenure and establish "a standardized test-based evaluation and compensation scheme for teachers." Specifically, Garrison analyzes the "30-plus year performance pay schemes imposed on English and Irish schoolteachers in the latter part of the 19th century." The "payment-by-results" scheme, as it was called, was the first modern, large-scale use of examinations as a basis for teacher evaluation and compensation. According to Garrison, the British government enacted performance pay practices to contain educational costs under the guise of accountability as well as to provide the underclass a form of schooling that would keep them economically and social marginalized. Throughout the remaining sections of the chapter, Garrison provides a broad and deep analysis of why Obama's educational agenda is linked is to the "drive of a faction of the super rich to reduce the total financial expenditure on public schooling in the context of an expanding but faltering empire."

In the third essay of this issue, "Orwellian Educational Change under Obama: Crisis Discourse, Utopian Expectations, and Accountability Failures," P. L. Thomas provides a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's speeches and the Obama administration's public messages "to explore the neoliberal assumptions driving the language and policies related to education." Thomas also supports his contention that the Obama administration generates particular discourses to gain the support of the masses by providing a critical historical examination of how other US presidencies have employed similar tactics to gain the consent of the governed. For instance, several successive US presidential administrations in the mid-1800s blamed schools for the US's social and economic ills in order to inculcate the public to hold this simplistic view of the relationship between schools and

society. Thomas concludes his chapter by providing insight into how critical educators and scholars can push the political elite to promote educational and social change. He believes "the change we need from Obama/Duncan and all political leaders is to create social policy and then educational policy that expose deforming myths and leads to action overcoming those myths."

In the fourth essay, "Charter schools, market capitalism, and Obama's neoliberal agenda," Richard Mora and Mary Christianakis "analyze Obama's education policies as they relate to charter schools." They set out the essay by connecting the charter school movement to the larger neoliberal and neoconservative agenda to privatize schooling and other social entitlements in the US. Next, the authors capture how the corporatized and militarized schooling model concocted in Chicago by Obama's Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, is serving as a "blueprint" for the spate of educational policies proffered by the Obama administration. Ultimately, Duncan's leadership in Chicago has sparked further debilitating forms of schooling for minoritized and lower-class students. The authors illustrate how students, teachers, and administrators in Chicago were left with an increase of militarized schools, charters schools, high-stakes examinations, and teacher termination. In the third section of the essay, the authors dispel the myth that charter schools have given "children greater access to quality education" and have closed the "achievement gap." The authors conclude their essay by gauging how schools, teachers and students will be impacted if Obama's neoliberal educational policies continue to be perpetuated over the coming years. Educators, scholars, and policy makers ought to be concerned because:

> Obama's educational policy is furthering neoliberal and neoconservative agendas to undermine the welfare state, and hand over the public sector to market capitalism. In a market economy, charter school expansion will likely increase social inequalities by encouraging capitalist Darwinism, which leaves urban minority youth, special needs students, and English language learners at 'a competitive disadvantage.'

In the fifth essay, "Welcome to the new normal: The news media and neoliberal reforming education," Rebecca A. Goldstein, Sheila Macrine, and Nataly Z. Chesky argue that the dominant media in the US serve as a key outlet for political and economic leaders to nudge the masses to "support reforms like merit pay, charter schools, and the removal of tenure, while vilifying teachers and public schools." To support their contentions, the authors provide a brief

historical overview of how the corporate and political elite "have harnessed the media to reinforce neoliberalism as the defining reality in which people live, work, and learn, and have dismissed any critique." In essence, the authors contend the elite has generated a politics of emergency to "reinforce and institutionalize insecurity and anxiety—social, economic, and cultural" crisis. They conclude the essay by arguing that the mass media, along with Obama's virulent assault on public education, reveal "a frightening consensus: teachers and teachers' unions are the problem, especially in their reticence to cooperate in the enduring economic crisis."

In the final essay, "Controlled by the corporate narrative: Obama's education policy, the shock Doctrine, and mechanisms of capitalist power," Virginia Lea taps interconnected theoretical ideas—*the shock doctrine, critical multicultural education, and modern disciplinary technologies of power*—to capture how schools have become oppressive, authoritarian, and unequal institutions as well as documenting how the public has been inculcated to support neoliberal ideologies and practices. Furthermore, Lea unveils how the Obama administration has played upon the fears of US citizens, namely, the U.S.'s loss of global hegemony and the need for the U.S to maintain its exceptionalism in the world, to garner support for its corporate, capitalist vision of schooling. Next, she supplies two case studies of high schools to capture how "modern disciplinary mechanisms of power play out in the field or education to gain the consent of educators to the unequal status quo" in the US and the United Kingdom. Lea concludes the essay by providing strategies for progressive educators to interrupt the neoliberal schooling agenda.

Final Thoughts

We believe that it is important to emphasize that this special issue is not about blaming one person for the state of education. Obama, although occupying a powerful position, is but one person. Our analysis illuminates the disconnection between his rhetoric, especially during the two-year electoral campaign, and his policies. He has not sought to undo, dismantle, or even critique neoliberalism, which, as we argue individually and collectively throughout this special issue, is a serious concern. Without addressing neoliberalism in education, it will be very difficult to make meaningful, tangible gains in relation to democracy and social justice. If America the empire cannot be critiqued in and through schools, how can we expect that there

will be significant change in relation to social inequalities, including poverty, racism, sexism, and other forms of marginalization and oppression. A more open acknowledgement that education is a political project, and that critical engagement means diverging from the pre-fabricated setting of neoliberal strictures, we firmly believe, is a pre-requisite to *bone fide* hope and change within education.

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[1] There are numerous scholars who describe and define the most dominant ideological doctrine impacting life in schools and in the wider society for the past thirty years as neoliberalism. For instance, Russom (2010) defines it as "a set of economic policies that emphasizes the minimization of state intervention in the economy, privatization of sectors of the economy once thought to be the domain of the public sector, deregulation of markets, slashing government spending, and promoting anti-union 'flexible' labor policies making it easier for employers to depress wages and fire workers at will." To learn more about the historical forces impacting the development of neoliberalism, see B. Porfilio & C. Malott's *The destructive path of neoliberalism: An international examination of education* (2008).

[2] The 2010 debate, and fury, around the request to place a Muslim cultural centre with a prayer space, which has been labeled a mosque, within two blocks of Ground Zero, where the World trade Center once stood is very instructive in relation to the supremacy of the Christian religion within American political and social culture. Although there are plans for strip-bars, fast-food outlets, and souvenir stands and many other establishments that raise questions about the sanctity of the area, the mosque has been singled out for special vilification. At the same time, a Christian pastor sought to burn the Koran on September 11, 2010, and a large percentage of Americans, at the time of the writing of this piece, still believe that President Obama is a Muslim, thus inferring, supposedly, that he is less American, less likely to support American values, and, ultimately, less worthy of being the President.

[3] Many scholars have shown that NCLB has oppressed K-12 students on the structural axes of race and class. The legislation is responsible for some of the most qualified teachers leaving urban schools because they are forced to implement "drill and kill" curriculum to help ensure that their students and schools do well on corporately-produced standardized examinations. The result is that more urban students are failing to graduate on time or are dropping out of school entirely, and, importantly, schools are becoming militarized zones, where army recruiters are given free rein to cajole minority and poor students, who are desperate for funds to attend college and find a way out of poverty (Kozol, 2005; Mathison & Ross, 2008).

[4] Please see N. Klein's (2007) *The shock doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism* to examine further how the ruling elite have used the public's disorientation from perceived or actually global catastrophes to corporatize numerous segments our social life for the past thirty years. Within the US context, Klein documents in detail how Hurricane

Katrina became an opportunity to alter and undermine the social structure of New Orleans, including turning the majority of public schools into charter schools.

[5] According to Russom (2010), there is a "high school dropout rate of nearly 30 percent nationwide, and more than 50 percent in many major cities."

[6] There are exceptions to the rule, and a small number of charter schools focus on empowerment, social justice, and transformation, but these schools are generally not antagonistic to the public school system, which is the case for a large number of charter schools.

[7] See Morrell's (2008) *Critical Literacy for Urban Youth: Pedagogies of Access Dissent, and Liberation* to examine how educators can establish community-based critical research for the purpose of guiding youth to understanding what causes injustice in schools and in the wider society.

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