

Good Teacher / Bad Teacher

Helping Undergrads Uncover Neoliberal Narratives That Dichotomize and Disguise Structural Inequalities

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Abstract

Current reforms often blame “bad” teachers and “failing schools” for the achievement gap. Through an education course, undergraduates serving in diverse urban schools examine the opportunity gaps that have privileged them, and unpack neoliberal myths that ignore structural and racial inequalities and erode support for public education. This paper critically examines common educational reforms, and highlights strategies to counter corporate narratives that undermine equity goals in educational settings

Key Words: Opportunity Gap; Educational Reform; Neoliberal Policies; Teacher Education; K-12

Introduction

The role of public education in the U.S. has never been so polarized, multifaceted, and contentious. Discussions surrounding what students “should” and “can” learn all too often take preference to the abhorrent structural and institutional inequities that permeate the interconnectivity between school and society. Therein lies a current and very dangerous (often unchallenged) narrative that places the blame of “failing” schools on both teachers and students. This simplistic and one-sided narrative results in a dichotomy which frames teachers as not doing their job well, students as disengaged and lazy, and public education as failing (Ravitch, 2013). Through such arguments, public education too often falls prey to

for-profit ventures cloaked as “choices” that promise simple solutions to complex problems.

Under this free-market context, the focus narrows on the individualized performance of students and teachers, whilst ignoring the economic and racial inequalities that advantage some groups over others, resulting in an opportunity gap that continues to spread.

Under this approach, policymakers promote silver bullet proposals instead of recognizing the connection between inequities found both within education and society. Such reforms ignore social policies that increase access to equitable opportunities and resources, such as high-quality preschool, well-trained and culturally responsive teachers, childhood nutrition, learning enrichment programs, and other inputs that could make real structural differences. As a result, teachers simultaneously become both the problem and solution that such “reforms” promise to ameliorate.

Embracing the task of interrogating this reality, we write this paper as professors who teach an education course on the undergrad campus of a small, private, liberal arts college in the Pacific Northwest. The course is entitled *Education in a Complex World*, and is offered each semester, meeting once a week for a three-hour block. This course is the first in a series of three that are offered on the undergraduate campus, as there is no education major. Thus, students interested in education tend to take this course first, because it helps lay the foundation for subsequent classes they may choose to enroll in. The relationships and experiences built within this course are unique in that although students do not major in education, they take this course as a way to dig more deeply into the many complexities that make up the many facets of education, both within educational institutions and society writ large.

One of the challenges we face as we teach this course is to carefully navigate a multiplicity of issues, paying close attention to how our own positionalities and ways in which we self-identify (female, white, European-American, middle class, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, Jewish; and female, Mexican-American, middle class, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, respectively) connect and intersect with the challenging and often uncomfortable content that we teach.

In regard to the students who take our class, and similar to the majority of teachers in the U.S., most identify as white, European-American, middle/upper-class women. There is a small percentage of men who enroll in our course, who also, for the most part, self-identify as white, European-American, middle/upper class. We do have a few students of color, as well as some who are also first-generation students (identifying as low/middle class), but they are more in the minority in respect to the overall demographics of the students who take our course. It is

important to contextualize the demographics of both ourselves, as well as the students who take this class, as such identifying factors often contribute to the manner in which we conceptualize our relationships to school, society, teaching and learning.

Throughout the course, undergraduate students uncover and deeply examine the neoliberal¹ presence within the field of education, taking stock of the opportunities that have advantaged them, while critically examining the effects of reforms that have impacted their schooling trajectory. Importantly, the overall aim of this course is to unpack the socio-cultural, socio-historical, and socio-political elements of our education system, with the ultimate goal of demonstrating how deeply connected and intricately intertwined school and society really are within the United States.

As part of the course, students work in diverse (racially, ethnically, linguistically) low income classrooms, tutor struggling pupils, conduct in-depth interviews with teachers and students, and engage in a critical examination of teaching and learning. Throughout this process, our students are encouraged to challenge dominant education myths that have impacted their formative years of schooling (K-12). This process is not easy, and some students experience disbelief or anger when confronted for the first time with such a critical analysis of their own relationship within the educational system.

By the end of the term however, many class participants solidify their commitment to enter the teaching profession, while some choose to take a different career path. Regardless, all reported to have come away with a greater understanding and appreciation of the challenges and rewards associated with teaching, a more critical view of reform efforts, and an engaged commitment to contribute to a democratic public education system designed to serve *all* students.

What follows is an extended description and discussion of the course, which incorporates anonymous student responses and commentary throughout. We obtained student feedback from two different semesters of teaching *Education in a Complex World*. We also gathered informal and anecdotal responses from three assignments students completed throughout the term: *Teacher Interview*, *Student Interview*, and a *Final Paper* discussing and analyzing their learning from the term. Finally, we drew upon comments from students on the both informal (mid-semester) and formal evaluations from the course. Although this methodology and data collection is less conventional and informal, we feel that such responses help us to see, within many different formats, the ways in which students grappled with, and made sense of the content.

Current Reforms and the Neoliberal Agenda

Numerous reforms have aimed at closing the racial “achievement gap” in schools. This narrative promotes simplistic, one-sided reforms and places the blame on “bad” teachers and “failing” schools for not doing enough to raise the achievement of students of color.

Through clever marketing and accountability rhetoric, public education in the U.S. has been framed as “broken” (Kumashiro, 2012). Our students are constantly compared to others around the world and perceived as “severely under-performing” in relation to their international counterparts (Berliner & Glass, 2014; Ravitch, 2013). Often, teachers are de-professionalized and attacked as the culprit for the apparent chaos that ensues within the grander scheme of public education. Although many would argue that this skewed perception of public education is relatively new, it has been a long time coming, and has been carefully constructed and disseminated as to appear novel (Kumashiro, 2012; Ravitch, 2013).

Shifting the fault to educators falls carefully in line with the boundaries of our conservative political climate. This narrative is comfortable blaming a left-leaning, largely unionized group of individuals, rather than focusing on the societal inequities that create and maintain educational inequalities. “Importantly, there is a connective tissue that is continually being forged between ideologies, intentions, and the formation of policies and practices” (Picower & Mayorga, 2015, p. 11). This must be understood as an amalgamation of insidious practices and ways of thinking about the world that directly interconnect and dehumanize elements of race, class, and gender, among other identifiers. Education from a neoliberal approach puts a premium on individuality, competition and self-meritocracy, as captured by the “pull oneself up by the bootstraps” metaphor.

The purpose of education from such a perspective moves away from conceptualizing school as a common good, and instead looks at it as a purely private and individual service commodity (Apple, 2001). Dominance and hegemony don’t happen overnight. They operate under the slow creep of time, creating a subtle yet pervasive effect on the mindset and the worldview of a people (McDermott, et. al, 2015). “Success” in school (for teachers and students) is measured through quantifiable means, which only reinforces the notion that public education is objectively categorized rather than being a unique, nuanced, and complex system of teaching and learning (de Saxe, 2014).

Furthermore, Apple (2001) builds on this notion by describing the education system and neoliberalism as a “vast supermarket.” He argues that “rather than democracy being a political concept, it is transformed into a wholly *economic* concept...the entire project of neoliberalism is

connected to a larger process of exporting the blame from the decisions of dominant groups on the state and onto poor people” (p. 39). Consequently, the recent direction of education reform (both liberal and conservative) hops on the neoliberal and privatization bandwagon, without questioning the severe impact it has upon our children, their families, and the community (Moses & Nanna, 2007).

Meanwhile, those who view education from a more democratic and liberatory perspective (Apple, 2001; Freire, 1970, 1974, 1998) understand that one cannot focus on schools without also considering the role of society (Dewey, 1900; Anyon, 2005). Through our years as both former public school educators, and now professors in education, we sit in a privileged position which allows us to view the complex dynamics that currently permeate the conversations surrounding our “failing” public schools, and the students who serve them.

Education in a Complex World: Challenging Simplistic Solutions Through Critical Counter-Narratives

In designing the course *Education in a Complex World* we sought to unpack the socio-cultural, socio-political, and socio-historical elements of our education system, with the ultimate goal of demonstrating how deeply connected and intricately intertwined school and society are within the United States. Our goal is to expose the false and simplistic neoliberal discourse for those considering entering the education profession long before they ever apply to a teacher education program. We also strive to develop a space within our classrooms where students have a chance to venture into the realm of coming into critical consciousness regarding their relationships with education (Freire, 1974).

Throughout the course, undergraduates uncover the neoliberal and privatization agenda within the field of education, and examine how waves of reforms have impacted their schooling experience. They also examine the ways in which school policies have systematically privileged and disadvantaged different students. As students become more aware of underlying education goals and their impact on students, they begin to challenge simplistic free-market notions that blame public schools, teachers, and students for increasing inequalities, and begin to form their own powerful counter-narratives.

For many, the most powerful aspect of the course is the service learning component. As part of this experience, undergrads conduct ethnographic research on the school community, and conduct in-depth interviews with students and teachers. A key to igniting a passion for

equity is in having the opportunity to work directly with underserved students who help candidates put educational complexities in context, and also serve as models of hope and resilience. As one student put it, “Having the experience in a classroom gets me even more excited about teaching. Now I see how much caring, motivated, teachers are needed.”

Most of our undergraduates are high achievers with a strong social justice focus, but they have little direct understanding of the financial, educational, and societal barriers that the students they work with need to overcome in order to attend a similar elite private college. Typically, only one or two undergrads in our classes have previously attended K-12 schools similar to the placement sites, and they tend to be students of color. Thus, the service learning component not only provides valuable practical teaching experience, but also builds empathy and understanding for the barriers faced by youth at the volunteer sites, as well as appreciation of the challenges faced by minority college peers.

The course is organized around three main areas of inquiry:

(1) purpose of education and social reproduction, (2) inside/outside perspectives on schooling, and (3) market-driven accountability trends. Students engage with a variety of literature, which helps provide perspective from inside and outside of the classroom, reflect on their own schooling experiences, and contextualize their service learning work. Throughout this process, we use a “problem posing approach” (Freire, 1970) to help students interact with the texts. To build critical consciousness, we regularly reflect on the following guiding questions:

- What does the text reveal as the underlying purpose(s) of education?
- Whose perspective is represented? Whose is missing?
- In what ways are the challenges similar or different from your own educational experience?
- What makes learning enjoyable and meaningful?

Purpose of Education and Social Reproduction

The first question we ask students to consider is: *What is the ultimate purpose of education?* We discuss the multiple and often conflicting goals of education, and began to think about how these play out in education rhetoric, the organization of schools, and in our own lives. In *Public Goods, Private Goods* (1997), Labaree describes the competing goals of democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility. Labaree describes how these goals have played out during different historical periods. Accordingly, in order for school systems to promote democratic equality, education must be seen as a public good, preparing citizens to

effectively make decisions for the greater good. However, Labaree exposes the underlying tensions between progressive and conservative visions of the American education system, and shows how this dichotomy has fueled the growth of inequitable institutions, enabling an emphasis on social mobility, namely individual opportunity.

Students reflect on their own schooling experiences, and determine whether these have been organized to create a society that is more just and equal. A conflicted student writes:

In a social mobility education model such as this, individuals want their children to receive an advantageous education, often sending them to private school. However, the result of these compounded actions is not beneficial to the overall population.

A student reflecting on their pathway to college states:

In retrospect (sic) I agree with Labaree and my father, that credentialism has triumphed over learning in our schools, with a commodified form of education winning an edge over useful substance. This aligns with some of my own realizations about how ridiculous competing for the best grades in high school became.

Considering the often assumed “democratic equality” goal of the education system, many students are disappointed to discover how many schools are still highly segregated and inequitable. One student describes what happened when children were bussed to his higher income Boston neighborhood:

The students bussed in from Roxbury were the only black people in town, and though they were supposed to be given a solid education, as far as I could tell they were selected far less often to participate in class activities and were rarely seen in the upper level course offered at my high school despite having a three hour commute each day and seemingly having to work far more rigorously than I ever did.

Those that have benefited from the current education system are often blind to the advantages they have benefited from, and may unwittingly perpetuate inequalities despite their best intentions to help those “less fortunate.” Much of the course content challenged students to question their own “boot strap” mentality and privileged positions at an elite private college. Significantly, one student commented:

I had not really thought about social mobility and greater good even though I attended all public schools until college. I was just lucky to live near high achieving public schools.

Another student, considering the goal of social mobility, notes that:

The possibility of higher education is actually there, but the likelihood of moving up the social ladder becomes significantly more difficult as resources such as financial assistance are not equally shared.

After conducting demographic research and comparing achievement rates with poverty statistics, we consider the role that education plays in transforming or reproducing existing social structures, and ask our students to consider whether it is reasonable or practical for schools to be charged with creating a better society. We discuss the connections between schools and social goals through the work of John Dewey. In Dewey's *Democracy and Education*, (1916) we see how experiential schools were designed to promote a more egalitarian and meaningful learning approach. We also read Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (1970) which emphasizes the liberatory potential of education to interrupt existing social inequalities.

We also consider the work of Howard Gardner, who argues that education should help the individual person develop a *Disciplined Mind* (1999) by exposing him or her to the basic virtues of truth, beauty, and goodness. We contrast this outlook with the work of E.D. Hirsch, et. al, (1988) who contend that schools should work toward creating a cohesive society, in which individuals are fluent in a common "cultural literacy." Again, we ask students to consider what purposes of education undergird Gardner and Hirsch's influential visions for education, how these models would look in practical terms, and to identify which perspectives or voices are left out. In considering changing public school demographics, many students come to the conclusion that both fail to acknowledge the role and multiple meanings of diversity, as well as the fact that cultural literacy should further be tasked with instilling understanding and acceptance of different cultures (Gardner & Hirsch, 1988).

Inside/Outside Perspectives on Schooling

In the next part of the course, we shift our focus, and begin to look at education through the lens of educators and students in the schooling process. We look at different stakeholders from both an *emic* and *etic* perspective (from an *insider* and *outsider* view). We ask class members to consider why so many low income students and children of color are falling behind their white peers on standardized test measures, and unpack the relationship between the opportunity and achievement gap. We ask our class to consider the following questions: *What are factors that contribute to the experiences of students and teachers? How do patterns of teaching reflect multiple goals for education? What does a student-centered versus teaching-centered approach signal about the purpose(s)*

of education? What can we learn from each reading about the role of the teacher? How do context, community, and social and political realities shape how teachers experience their work?

We contrast Hirsch, et al.'s (1988) views of cultural literacy and curriculum with that of Bill Ayers (1993), and the recommendations he makes for truly "seeing" students. We compare this with Angela Valenzuela's ethnographic work in *Subtractive Schooling* (1999), which highlights the important differences in how school staff and Latinx students perceive notions of caring. Undergrads reflect on times they have felt genuinely cared for and "seen" in schools (or not) and watch carefully for such incidences in the schools where they are placed. Based on observations, and interviews with youngsters, many undergrads note that teachers who are perceived to be the most engaging have positive relationships with their students, as well as have a social justice focus in their curriculum.

We compare these classrooms with ones where the dominant emphasis is on test scores and ranking, where students and teachers seem stressed or disengaged, and we ask participants to reflect again on the purpose of learning and the characteristics of academic success. An undergrad and former high school valedictorian writes that:

I completely relate to having a changing definition of "academic success." During high school I used GPA and grades to measure academic success. Now my personal definition of academic success is how much I learned and walked away with, based on my own efforts.

Our students enjoy observing classrooms with a critical lens that leaves them with a greater appreciation for the complexities of teaching and learning. One writes:

It's kind of neat to so recently step outside of the public school system and now be given the opportunity to peel back the folds and look inside. I've slowly been making the distinctions between different techniques that were implemented by my previous teachers (good and bad) and realize what set my superior educators apart from the rest. Too often the conception of "good" teaching is purely defined by statistical results.

We read personal accounts from a variety of well-known educators who highlight important lessons from long careers working in diverse settings. In Michelle Foster's book, *Black Teachers on Teaching* (1998), we hear the experiences of three African-American teachers across different contexts and time periods. We contrast these stories with Vivian Paley's book *White Teacher* (1979), where she talks about difficult lessons she learned from erroneously ignoring race in her work with black children in desegregated schools. A piece by K.M. Sands (2001) highlights the role

of personal identity in the classroom, as the author describes grappling with whether to disclose her sexual orientation to students during her work as a Religious Studies professor.

Readings that honor the role of identity in the classroom, particularly with regard to race, resonate strongly with our students. One student argues:

I believe speaking about race, especially at pivotal moments in children's lives, is (sic) critical. It is the teacher's role as a mentor, to teach students how to be members of the democratic society. Part of this development should be education about racial difference and injustice, no matter the context or location.

In order to contextualize public perceptions of teachers and unpack simplistic notions of "good" and "bad" educators, we look at Larry Cuban's (1993) research on teaching over a hundred year pattern. We investigate current demographics and pathways into the teaching profession and consider how our changing conception of teaching as a career affects who is recruited and how they are prepared (Ingersoll, 2010; Peske et al. 2001; date; Lambert, 1985). Readings highlight the changing dynamics of the teaching workforce, and show how and why these changes are occurring. The undergrads come to appreciate certain elements of teaching and learning that they had not considered before. Another student commented:

Teachers must think on their feet and balance a variety of conflict between students, theoretical concepts of educational frameworks, and their own opinions and biases in order to avoid undesirable power dynamics and other issues within the classroom.

We also track current trends which seek to de-professionalize the field, and emphasize shorter, alternative preparation routes and quick fix solutions to teacher shortages. Many undergraduates who have considered alternative pathways are eager to hear about the potential benefits and limitations of programs like TFA (Teach for America) that often portray elite college students as short-term saviors in low income communities. We take a closer look at research conducted on this and similar programs (Heilig & Jez, 2010) and invite educators to speak about their experiences as TFA fellows.

Exploring the research allows students to make much more informed choices about possible teaching pathways. One undergrad who was strongly considering TFA due to potential loan forgiveness options became much more critical after learning more about the organization and reading testimonies from former TFA educators. She notes:

TFA's website has pages dedicated to networking, grad school and

employer benefits, and financial incentives. While potentially really positive, I worry that these incentives could motivate people to work with TFA for the wrong reasons. Working in a school should not be a resume builder, and students in underprivileged areas deserve the most dedicated teachers out there.

The book *Teacher Wars* (Goldstein 2014) argues that discussions of education in the U.S. have repeatedly been framed in terms of moral panics. According to Goldstein, this leads policymakers and the media to demonize teachers and present “worst of the worst” cases as emblematic of a whole system which is in fact much more complex. Based on readings, observations in schools, and in depth interviews with teachers, undergrads become wary of media reports that either glorify or vilify teachers.

In response, an undergrad student writes:

Teachers are often seen as incompetent or lazy, and schools are seen as generally failing, both unable to get students up to par with common core standards. But the standards themselves, and the politicians who are setting them, are never questioned. For instance, poor parents and their children are seen as inherently less capable and less intelligent, and their teachers and schools are similarly blamed for their “failure”, but the root causes of poverty are not considered.

Similarly, another undergrad believes:

Many teachers and schools have been unfairly labeled as failing to bring students up to grade level and to pass abstract and meaningless tests while battling larger issues at home and in the community. These “failing” schools are often failing because they have so much more to do and so much less with which to do it (sic).

Another counters the myth of the “hero” teacher, arguing:

Focusing on the actions of one teacher, the media perpetuates a myth that all other teachers are not achieving the bench mark (sic) of being a great teacher, and thus all other teachers are failing and their actions need to be controlled and managed by outside parties.

Market-Driven Accountability Trends

During the course we also consider the increasing push for standardized assessments, and push back on the racial achievement gap rhetoric that ignores the role of unequal opportunities and access to out of school factors that are necessary to make real gains in grades and the well-being of poor children of color (Berliner 2014).

When looking at district measures that highlight racial disparities, we take into consideration that Black and Latinx students are far likelier

than white students to live in poverty, to miss school because of illness, to live in bad housing, to be homeless, to have less access to medical care, to live with tremendous economic insecurity. Their families have fewer resources to invest in them, which leads to a significant opportunity gap.

Through the work of Alexander (2010) and Giroux (2015), we consider how disciplinary measures have further disadvantaged students of color who are disproportionately punished and pushed into a school to prison pipeline, essentially reinforcing a system of racial segregation. Another disturbing trend we see under the guise of “school safety” has resulted in a heightened presence of security guards that has a chilling effect on the relationships between teachers and students. Devine (1996), discusses how law, order, and safety once again disproportionately affect students of color, reinforcing negative racial stereotypes that result in a widening opportunity gap.

Another major reform trend we explore is the push towards privatization and charter schools under the banner of school “choice.” Readings by Cuban (1991), Kumashiro (2010), and Ravitch (2013) help us sort out the arguments for and against this movement. Zeichner (2010) argues that proponents of school choice actually skirt the real issues and factors that contribute to such inequity: underfunding of public education, lack of affordable housing, transportation, healthcare, and decent paying jobs, just to name a few. Kincheloe (2009) notes:

Until such complex understandings of the sociocultural and political economic forces at work in contemporary education are widely cultivated in professional education, students in high-poverty schools will continue to find little opportunity to experience rigorous schoolwork with savvy teachers. (p. 34)

After reviewing the literature, we ask our students to consider the following questions: *What might be the underlying agenda behind the increasing push for accountability and privatization? What effects, if any, of these reforms have you experienced in your own schooling experience, or are observing now in the school where you volunteer? What goals and purposes of education does privatization work toward?*

In their quest for admittance to a prestigious college, all our students have experienced competition and the pressures of accountability measures. Those who attended public high schools had a particularly bitter view of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy measures, which resulted in a narrowed curriculum, singular focus on standardized assessments, and increasing stratification of their peer groups. Most had not previously considered how these accountability reforms had impacted their schooling experience prior to this course. For example, one student noted:

I did experience both NCLB and Race to the Top, however as a student I wasn't aware, and didn't understand the consequences of the tests. I think school communities should be informed (students, families, teachers) about the implications and roots of these corporate reforms.

As students spend time in low income classrooms, they became increasingly aware of the stakes and limitations of standardized assessments on the students and teachers they worked with. One describes her frustration after administering a math assessment to a kindergartner who "failed" because he did not provide answers precisely in the manner described in the test manual. She writes:

I was faced with a dilemma. I was supposed to write that 13 was the highest number to which the student could count. However, that didn't seem right either, because clearly the student was a good counter and grasped the material. Not sure what to do, I wrote a note in the margin so that the teacher could determine how best to evaluate the student's skill level. While I know there are certainly systemic problems surrounding education, after seeing what assessments are like, it is clear that tests like this contribute to the perception that students aren't doing as well as they actually are.

Empowered with more knowledge, many undergrads began to challenge simplistic and rigid measurements of achievement. Here's an example of such a counter-narrative:

Students as well as teachers are expected to reach goals and produce measurable amounts of growth aka "significant gains." (sic) The problem remains, however, in finding a standardized system that can actually measure an individual's growth. Gains can be met in many facets of learning and expressed according to the individual's own learning style.

The more time undergrads spend working in schools, the more skeptical they become about the underlying purpose of the assessment rhetoric and calls for "school choice." One student re-frames the narrative this way:

The idea of public schools shooting for universal high standards leads them towards greater stress and emphasis on developing successful test scores and higher grades than the next school in order to gain greater support. Meanwhile, private schools face far less accountability pressure and have greater autonomy to develop creative curriculum.

Promoting Hope and Resistance

While we expose the insidious narrative that threatens public education, we also provide examples that promote a sense of hope and optimism, and provide models of more democratic schooling structures.

In contrast, we look at more holistic reforms that include anti-poverty measures and wrap-around services (Berliner 2014; Brooks & Kavanaugh 1999). We highlight multi-pronged and community-based measures that emphasize collaborative approaches to social services and structural supports for public education.

We consider more inclusive and localized forms of educational reform such as those highlighted in *Place and Community Based Education in Schools* (Smith & Sobel 2010). We read about communities who have pushed back on the common core and high stakes testing as well as other examples of “educational courage” (Sapon-Shevin & Schniedewind 2012). Finally, we highlight examples of the collective power of teachers who resist the neoliberal agenda through mass opposition to standardized testing in Seattle, or mass protests in Chicago that halted the closure of over a hundred schools (Hagopian, 2014).

To encourage a more hopeful, nuanced, and creative vision of the potential reforms we pose the following questions for consideration: *How can we work to return professionalism and autonomy to teachers? In what ways can schools and community resource organizations work together to better support students and families? How can we better inform the public about the success of public education (not just the “failures”) and thereby reinforce a commitment to public education?*

In concluding the course, we encourage our students to move from reflection to action by asking them to consider what role they will take in the public education system. We ask them to tackle an educational dilemma, identify the challenges associated with this issue, unpack how this dilemma is perceived by the general populace, consider alternative explanations, propose inclusive solutions, and pose new questions. Some sample topics that have been tackled by students include: pushing back on TFA recruitment on campus, joining the testing opt-out movement, attending local school board meetings, reviewing school disciplinary policies, implementing restorative justice practices, and pushing for more.

These examples not only reinforce the learning that takes place in the course, but also demonstrate the impact that such content can have upon our students as citizens and participants in the public education system. They come to understand how public education impacts all of us, whether or not one decides to join the teaching profession. After grappling with the purposes of school and how they relate to a democratic citizenry, our students leave the course knowing that their silence about such issues is no longer an option, and many become determined to play a greater role in education.

Implications

As a result of this learning experience, undergrads gain a much more realistic and complex view of the educational system. As one student put it “Now I am more mindful about the limitations conflicts, and structures that teachers face.” Armed with an increased awareness of the educational challenges and rewards, most still choose this career path, while others make a different choice. When surveyed at the conclusion of class, many students continue to be interested, and even more determined to pursue a career in teaching. Here is a sampling of responses to that effect:

I can't really see myself doing anything else; I finally understand what I should be doing with my future by going into teaching; and I think educating young people can be a revolutionary act and can help children to heal themselves and their communities.

Despite the sobering look, it is encouraging to see students remain hopeful and passionate about making changes:

This class has ignited my passions about the education system that weren't there before and I feel so strongly about the issues in the classroom/education system.

Along these lines, another student writes:

This class has made me feel more passionate and mindful about teaching and aware of the complexities of the career.

Importantly, some students were not initially interested in teaching prior to the course, and were even less likely to take this career path after the course. Some come to recognize that they did not have the passion or stamina necessary for the job: It is ultimately an extremely difficult path and something I would not be passionate about to struggle through.

After interviewing teachers and seeing how many hours they put into the job, some note:

What stops me from teaching is fear that my personal life would be compromised.

A few are more blunt stating:

I would rather have a career that pays better for how much work and time I would have to put into it.

Regardless, all come away with a greater understanding of the challenges and rewards associated with teaching and learning. They also demonstrate a more critical lens in which to challenge “reforms” that undermine democratic structures in our public education system. Perhaps

what is most important is that those not interested in teaching seem to become more engaged in playing a role in education in some capacity. Examples of how they might do this include working with educational non-profit organizations, coaching, curriculum design, educational technology, or working with schools in other profit sector jobs.

At the very least, all felt committed to be more active participants in the education system as informed future parents and citizen voters. As one student put it:

I'm not interested in teaching, but am [now] more motivated to contribute to the field outside of the classroom.

It is our hope that offering classes like this one at the undergraduate level will result in potential future educators, parents, and citizens who are well versed about privatization policies, and dehumanizing education that threatens to undermine democracy in public schools. As one student put it:

This class should be a requirement because it requires students to see their own role and opportunities and become critical consumers and engaged citizens.

Another example of personal responsibility is conveyed by this student:

I think that it is important to truly educate people about this subject. I would like to share the lessons I've learned about the importance of public education and dangers of privatization which many people don't recognize. I am now more educated about policy implications and will seriously take into consideration political leaders' policies on education.

Finally, another student writes:

The biggest and most accessible way I see myself working to counter the harmful education propaganda is to continue the conversations we have been having in the classroom with others especially on the issue of charter schools. It's hard for people to see past the neoliberal propaganda to see what charter schools are really doing to our public education system. I will keep myself informed of education issues happening around me, and keep my eyes open for more opportunities for involvement.

Conclusion

Starkly absent from the narrative that blames teachers, students, and schools as "failing," is the manner in which the structural, racial, and institutional oppressions within society interconnect. In this era of neoliberalism, institutions and actors have put into play various policies such as the privatization of public institutions, cuts in government ser-

vices, and capital flight to low-wage countries, in ways that are framed by proponents as “common sense” (Picower & Mayorga, 2015).

Policymakers cheat our children when they seek out magic beans and silver bullets instead of the quieter but much more meaningful investments in the sort of deeply engaging teaching and learning that will produce vibrant, intellectually curious young people in all communities. Our leaders have a choice. They can continue the breathless push for achievement, regardless of where kids start. Or they can turn to solid research about opportunities to learn. They can increase access to high-quality preschools, well-trained and culturally sensitive teachers, childhood nutrition, learning enrichment programs, and other inputs. We know how and why some students thrive. Therefore, we must be more deliberate in naming, challenging, and pushing back against the current neoliberal agenda.

Preparing and supporting prospective teachers to engage in intellectually and politically demanding work is of the utmost importance. Likewise, offering more education courses like this one with both a critical and practical component before one even considers a teacher preparation program is just as vital. Undergrads considering a career in teaching can all benefit from gaining a more realistic and complex view of the educational system, as well as a healthy dose of skepticism when it comes to privatization schemes that threaten our democratic principles.

Some undergrads exposed to classes like the one described here may become more motivated to enter the teaching profession with a social justice lens, while others will wisely choose a different career path. Regardless, all will come away with a greater understanding of the challenges and rewards associated with teaching, a more critical view of reform efforts, and an engaged commitment to contribute to democratic public education system designed to serve all students.

Note

¹ We present a more nuanced understanding of neoliberalism. We build on Bargh, (2007) who understands neoliberalism as a “demonstration and translation of many older colonial beliefs, once expressed explicitly, now expressed implicitly, into language and practices which are far more covert about their civilizing mission” (p.13). In essence, a neoliberal ideology seeks to colonize, suppress, and dominate both the mind and body.

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