

Obama's Election and a New Social Agenda in Education

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Astonishingly, out of the doldrums of eight years of reaction, racism, and the politics of fear, people in the United States mobilized to elect an enlightened, citizen-of-the-world, African American as President of the United States. The campaign to elect Barack Obama re-energized a grassroots multi-generational, multiracial spirit of civic engagement and hope that we could, to quote Obama, “Put [our] hands on the arc of history and bend it once more toward a better day.” His own biography symbolizes the cosmopolitanism and openness to difference and complexity that characterizes the world we actually live in. After eight years of hunkering down, there is a sense that people are coming up for sunlight. This is a mood-producing factor that should not be discounted as a material force. The sheer fact of a Black man in the “White” House, built by slaves, a man whose father was African, whose middle name is Hussein, signals a seismic shift and an historic milestone in the African American freedom struggle. Yet, with deep respect for the generations of struggle and sacrifice that made Barack Obama’s election possible, while it was a blow to white supremacy, it did not end it. The structures and ideologies of racism and their material and cultural consequences remain in place. Moreover, as I will discuss further, the crises we face as a country and planet are daunting.

Although inchoate, Obama’s election was a mandate to break with the status quo, and, one could argue, to turn away from the failed policies of not only the last eight years but the last 25. A new direction in everything from the economy, to the environment, war and foreign policy, social policy, health care, civil liberties, the social and economic polarization in our cities. But “change” is undefined. How it takes shape, or not, will be a question of social vision and political will. So the starting point is to be explicit about the

kind of society we wish to have. Moreover, whatever President Obama's policies are, or may become, it will require the collective action of millions to press for a social agenda grounded in economic and social justice.

In this essay, I argue that the spirit of hope and desire for change reflected in Barack Obama's election and the national and global crises converge to create an historic opportunity to create a new social paradigm. I argue that this convergence opens a space to question fundamental social structures and ideologies and to chart a new social vision and programs that concretely embody that vision in every sphere, including in education. This is a critical moment to stretch beyond tinkering at the edges of a dysfunctional economy and encrusted inequalities and injustices and to harness collective wisdom and political will toward fashioning a sustainable, democratic, socially just alternative.

Although I am writing for an education audience, I take a wider stance because, as Paulo Freire argued throughout his life, whatever we do in education furthers a particular social agenda, whether intended or not. I propose that we act on this historic moment to reframe the market driven discourse that has shaped US education policy since the early 1980s. I also propose for discussion an ensemble of policies that redefine public education and concretely move us closer to a new educational and social vision. I situate this education agenda in a larger re-visioning of society based on collective human development. I also situate my discussion in the political economic and social context in which we find ourselves, and in which we are complicit – a social conjuncture ripe with danger and opportunity. I argue we are at a crossroads when it is possible *and* necessary to be both visionary and practical.

A moment of danger and opportunity

It is not an exaggeration to say that we are facing an historic crossroads. Few generations have been handed a situation filled paradoxically with such danger and opportunity. On one hand, the Obama election signals a new spirit of activism and willingness to break with the politics of reprisal and division in which the country has been mired. On the other hand (and in part the catalyst of this social agency), is a constellation of profound economic and social crises: a deep capitalist economic crisis coursing through a globally intertwined economy, accentuated economic inequalities and impoverishment in the US and globally (Jomo with Baudot, 2006), wars ravaging Africa and the Middle East and parts of Asia, dislocations of populations at all spatial scales, the unprecedented hyperurbanization of poverty so graphically documented by Mike Davis in *Planet of Slums* (2006), and threats to the cultural and social integrity if not extinction of marginalized and indigenous peoples and ways of life. An economic system and political philosophy geared to “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey, 2003) has ravaged the world from Brazil’s rainforests to Chicago’s gentrification of former public housing space and closing of schools only to turn them over to private charter school companies, “turn around specialists,” and elite selective enrolment schools . And then there is perhaps the greatest challenge in human history – possibly irreversible climate disaster.

In the U.S. and much of the world, the four-decades-long neoliberal fix is played out, at least in its present form. Some of the most powerful financial institutions in the world have collapsed or come hat-in-hand to governments for a bail out. The era of government deregulation and unfettered flows of speculative capital is in disarray. The depth and sweep of this economic crisis demonstrate that neoliberal market-driven policies are no longer viable. In fact, it is becoming apparent that capitalism itself, with

profit over people as its central logic and growth as an imperative, is not working for the majority of people on the planet or for the planet itself. Just 15 years ago, pundits touted Frances Fukuyama's prediction of the "end of history" – the universal evolution of societies in the direction of capitalism and the superiority of Western liberal democracy as its political form (1992). Now the stabilization of the capitalist system, and at what cost, is in question. There is no clear solution to jumpstart an economy which has churned along by relying on speculative activities and debt, including consumer debt, to inflate profits, attract investments, and fuel consumption.

Pedagogically, this is a teachable moment. 9/11 opened up a space to question the US role in the world, but that was quickly closed down by the neoconservative literalism (good vs. evil, us vs. them) and repressive patriotism of the Bush administration. That space has opened up again on new ground. As homes, jobs, and futures disappear, a system of economic growth and obscene wealth acquisition of a few based on arcane financial schemes, multibillion dollar bets, debt, and phoney accounting systems looks like a house of cards. With CEOs set up with multimillion dollar severance packages even after their companies go bankrupt while more workers have been laid off than at any point since the deep recession of the 1980s, the economic system has lost credibility. When there are more African American males incarcerated than in higher education and almost 60 percent of black male high school drop-outs in their early thirties have spent time in prison, even though an African American has been elected to the Presidency, the legitimacy of a social system claiming justice and democracy is untenable. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have already taken (an estimated) over one million Iraqi, 20,000

Afghan, and 5000 U.S. lives and ruined hundreds of thousands of others. The Emperor seems to be losing his clothes.

For educators this is an opening to raise provocative questions and organize critical inquiries into the nature of the economy and the U.S. role in the world and to deparochialize social paradigms and epistemologies, in particular by engaging perspectives from the global South (Lingard, 2007). But I want to take this a step further. With existing policies and social institutions so clearly not working and the contradictions of wealth and impoverishment, injustice and power so stark, there is an opportunity and, frankly, a necessity, to shift our social paradigm. Short term solutions are unlikely to solve the multiple crises we're facing locally, nationally, and globally. The magnitude of the crises and their global reach open up a space for a wider discussion about the future we wish to have and programs that can move us toward it. It is a moment when it is both visionary and practicable to put heads and hearts toward fashioning a sustainable, democratic, and just social alternative, because short term solutions cannot address climate change or fix an economy whose core imperative is growth in profits regardless of how obtained. Short term solutions cannot resolve the unprecedented dislocation of populations and profound destruction of communities, ranging from gentrifying inner cities to immigrants driven to cross borders by neoliberal economics and violence.

Although President Obama's election is a setback for reactionary social currents, this is also a moment of danger in which fear and anger can be deflected downward, drawing on the worst elements of our history – racism, homophobia, anti-immigrant hatred, xenophobia, and militarism. We are reminded that the rise of fascism in Europe

grew out of just such an economic crisis. We have already had a taste of this in the recent brutal attacks on Latinos in New York State fuelled by official anti-immigrant policy and rhetoric. Or, in a final act of suicide, the energy crisis may be used to justify squeezing out the remaining fossil fuels in the earth's oceans and forests and hills. Or those in power may more finely hone what Loic Wacquant (2001) has named the penal state, that nexus of white supremacy and capital accumulation crystallized in the prison industrial complex (Gilmore, 2007) in order to contain those whom capital and the racist state find redundant and to wall off the elite in fortress enclaves. The material and ideological infrastructure are already in place: immigrant detention centers, a vast network of public and private jails and prisons, surveillance and policing of communities of color, numbed consciousness to the incarceration of over two million people, disproportionately African American and Latino, the War on Terror, and military training for urban warfare. In other words, state authoritarianism can also fill the void of legitimacy to police the survival of the existing social order. This is evident in coercive school policies as a solution to the lack of legitimacy of schools in low-income communities of color.

A new social paradigm

Since the 1950s, anti-communism, distorted state socialism, and the neoliberal TINA thesis (There Is No Alternative), have reinforced the hegemonic idea that there is no substitute for the present social order. The inability to think beyond present social systems and their expressions in specific social arenas, including education, is one of the most disabling conditions we face. Near the end of his life, Paulo Freire warned against “an immobilising ideology of fatalism,” noting that “the most dominant contemporary version of fatalism is neoliberalism” (1998, 26–7). Yet, as Stephen Gill (2003) and others

remind us, the present social conjuncture is defined by *neoliberalism and resistance*, including creative social alternatives, particularly in the global South.

So, as a place to start, I want to re-claim the essence of an essentially humanist social vision refracted through perspectives from the global South. Marx and Engels envisioned a society organized for the development of human potential, “a free association” “in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.” Michael Lebowitz (2006) summarizes the relevance of this core idea for the present situation through his experience living and working in the South, in Venezuela. Lebowitz notes that it is a profoundly moral and ethical social vision in which people relate to each other as members of a human community rather than self-seeking owners in a set of exploitative, competitive, individualistic, dominating relationships. In the U.S., as in Venezuela, the free development of all necessarily requires an integral struggle against structures and ideologies of domination – racism, patriarchy, heterosexism, colonial and imperial relations, and so on – as well as economic transformation.

Paradoxically, such a society can only be created by people who are necessarily limited by the distortions of the one in which they live. Lebowitz, again drawing on Marx, argues that in the course of actively changing society people are changed and become fit to live in the society they wish to have. For example, Venezuelans and others in Latin America are attempting to tackle this through grassroots cooperatives that not only promote economic development but change social relations and social consciousness. For Freire this is *praxis*, the dialectic of reflection and action through which we develop knowledge of ourselves and the world and change the world in the

process of coming to know it. I take these ideas as a point of departure for a new educational and social vision that is premised on the “totally developed human being” (Lebowitz, p.49) and the principal that the free development of each individual is conditioned on the free development of all.

Reframing Education Discourse

William Bennett, President Reagan’s Secretary of Education, used the Department of Education as a bully pulpit to shift the national discussion on education away from equity (which was put on the agenda by the Civil rights, bilingual education, women’s, and disability movements of the 1960s and 1970s) to workforce preparation and economic competitiveness. This set the stage for the high stakes accountability and market policies begun under President Clinton and fully implemented by George W. Bush. Bennett and those who framed germinal reports such as *A Nation at Risk* and the framers of recent calls to action such as *Rising Above the Gathering Storm* understand the significance of discourse to structure the way people think about education and to shape how educational problems and solutions are posed.

Their “discourse policy” ushered in a regime of accountability, competition, and privatization that has accomplished little, and done much damage, from the standpoint of equity and justice. Twenty-five years after *A Nation at Risk* only a little over half of high school students graduate from urban schools. In Chicago, 39 percent of African American males graduate by age 19 (Allensworth, 2005). School systems are becoming more stratified, correlated with a highly stratified labor force, with selective enrolment schools for some and a much more basic, regulated education for most, particularly in urban districts (Lipman, 2004). Chicago is a prime example. Driven by a neoliberal agenda, the

school district, under direction of the mayor has closed neighborhood schools and opened selective enrolment and charter schools, sending students and parents shopping city-wide for decent schools (Lipman & Haines, 2007). In October 2008, over 50,000 parents and students packed the cavernous McCormick Convention Center for the annual High School Fair to shop and compete for high school admissions. Disinvestment in urban schools and communities of color have created the conditions to turn “failing” urban public schools over to the market while *No Child Left Behind* provides the tools to classify and name them. In “low performing” working class schools, especially those serving students of color, an accountability system based on high stakes testing is driving out critical thought, cultural relevance, bilingual education, imagination, and creativity – the very qualities needed to devise solutions to the problems we face as a society.

The failure of these policies and the spirit of hopefulness generated by Obama’s election is an opportunity to turn toward a more expansive educational discourse centered on the full development of all human beings and school communities as central to democratic processes of school renewal. This also means a rejection of discourses of pathology and deficit that frame youth of color in particular as problems to be treated, tamed, disciplined, and controlled through coercive school cultures, punishment, and militarization. These discourses link schools to the prison system and help legitimate coercive, racist neoliberal policies more broadly. We need to reframe the students in our classrooms as the future Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, W.E.B. Dubois, Helen Keller, and Cesar Chavez (to paraphrase K. Wayne Yang). This counter-discourse already resonates in teacher-activist organizations, social justice and Freedom Schools, and youth activist

projects which aim to help young people develop critical consciousness and personal and social agency as integral to intellectual and social development.

I also want to second Jean Anyon's (2005) reframing of what should count as education policy to include quality affordable housing, free public health care for everyone, public works to rebuild urban and rural areas for the people who live there, an increase in the living wage to reduce poverty – in short social policies that attack poverty and inequality and racism. I would add that ending war and domination of other countries as foreign policy and an economic structure that supports the obscene profits of a few against the impoverishment of the majority should also count as education policy. These are at the heart of the distorted goals, stratifying effects, and inadequate resources available for public education.

Then there is the discursive reconstruction of what counts as educational expertise and who is qualified to define the meaning of quality education. The neoliberal education regime has positioned business leaders as education experts and school managers, disqualifying the knowledge of educators, schools of education, and most of all, families and youth. Unfortunately, by selecting the CEO of Chicago Public Schools to head the Department of Education, President Obama has not broken with this framework. But other voices need to be heard. Public education that puts the collective development of all students at the center requires diverse forms of knowledge and expertise: committed teachers and administrators and school employees, parents and community people, youth, progressive union members who want to rebuild teachers unions in solidarity with families and children, families who have opted out of public schools for culturally-

centered schools and charter schools because public schools are failing them, and education scholars and teacher educators.

We need an epistemological rupture with managerialism and the neoliberal techno-expert, data-driven, rationality that has become the gold standard of educational authority. A counter-hegemonic discourse of expertise positions all members of school communities as part of a web of knowledge that is constructed through dialogue and participation in educational practice. This repositions all participants as qualified to speak, and redefines knowledge as the product of social practice. Boaventura de Sousa Santos notes “we are talking about the new ways in which citizens claim their qualifications to enter supposedly technical but indeed also political debates, whose outcomes may affect their lives.... We need alternative knowledges for alternative societies and sociabilities” (Dale & Robertson, 2004: 158).

What I have said so far does not account for entrenched inequity -- racial, ethnic, and class disparities in educational resources and outcomes, and the persistent history of “miseducation.” Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) argues we need to shift the metaphor from the “achievement gap,” which focuses on short term solutions, to the education debt, which focuses on the “historical, economic, socio-political, and moral decisions and policies” that have characterized the U.S. and produced an “education debt” (p.5) responsible for disparities in educational outcomes. Repairing the education debt is central to a social vision of interconnected development. It presupposes both structural and cultural initiatives to rectify inequitable school funding, school buildings, and educational materials and the intellectual resources that ensure an intellectually rich

curriculum that centers the cultures, histories, experiences, intellectual contributions, struggles and accomplishments of historically marginalized people.

Toward Policies for a New Educational Vision

What policies might concretely advance this new education vision and in the praxis of working toward them nurture new people for a new society? This is a polyvocal conversation. What follows is meant as a contribution to a broad dialogue. Moreover, my ideas are so influenced by the insights of colleagues and the teachers, youth, and community people with whom I work every day, and especially the collective knowledge that has emerged through struggles for equitable education in Chicago and elsewhere, that I cannot claim them, though the flaws of synthesis and framing are certainly mine. With that in mind, I want to propose an ensemble of interrelated first steps to repair the education debt and to put the full weight of our economic, intellectual, cultural, and moral resources to the development of people with the capacity to tackle the multiple crises we face. These are practical measures we might advocate for as part of a social justice education agenda.

1. Free high-quality Pre-k to 16 public education for every person. At one time in our history, free public education past third grade was seen as a radical idea, and it was not for everyone. Now it is normalized and the World Bank (not unproblematically) has made this part of the World Millennium Goals. City College of New York was free until 1976, and was the “Harvard of the working class” producing some of our most illustrious intellectuals. President Obama has proposed increasing funding for zero to five childhood education and college assistance. This proposal should be expanded, and for adults whose educations were cut short, there should also be the

option of free education through 16 years. The standard of 16 years of high quality education is a minimum for the development of rich human beings in a complex national and global context.

2. I propose the Septima Clark National Teacher Core to provide full scholarships and living wage stipends for thousands of mothers, fathers, young people, and community activists to attend the university to become highly qualified teachers urgently needed in urban and rural schools. Much research and community wisdom attests to the need for highly qualified teachers with the cultural knowledge, compassion, understanding, and respect for working class and low-income children, particularly children and youth in communities of color. This would be an important step to change the class and race composition of the teaching force and the racist and anti-immigrant deficit discourses in urban schools. It would provide support for adults who are committed to the development of youth but who lack the economic resources to become educators.

There is strong precedent for this. As part of the New Deal, President Roosevelt established the Works Progress Administration which provided almost 8 million jobs building bridges and schools and the Federal Writers and Artists projects which employed thousands of writers, poets, actors, and artists to create community murals, theatre, literature, and poetry that continue to enrich our lives. Grow Your Own Teacher programs could serve as a starting point.

3. An urban public school bailout. President Obama has already set in motion the conditions for this step with substantial education funding in the economic stimulus plan. However, there is no guarantee that new funding will be used to address the

education debt. Urban-suburban school disparities need no further documentation, and in urban districts, schools with outmoded, even crumbling facilities, inadequate and outdated books and other educational materials, overcrowded class rooms, dysfunctional bathrooms, and lack of resources for all-rounded development such as art and dance studios and first-rate athletic facilities struggle on alongside schools with an embarrassment of riches. Yet, all schools are measured by the same high stakes tests. An urban school bailout to ensure that every student has access to a first rate education in first rate schools is fundamental for a national education system aimed at the full development of all.

4. Restore democracy to public education, including what counts as qualifications for participation in dialogue and decision-making. Education decisions are being made by those farthest away from students, teachers, and schools – the corporate managers and CEOs who increasingly head up urban school districts and the corporate funded policy centers and think tanks whose frameworks and reports have shaped education discourse and policy since the early 1980s, and more recently, the venture philanthropists who use their largess to create agenda setting “models” and programs. We cannot redefine the education agenda when those in charge are concerned primarily with economic competitiveness for capital accumulation.

We need community forums for democratic debate and dialogue about the kind of public education we want and where all those involved in children’s education and development, including children and youth themselves and education scholars respected by the community, have parity of participation. The building blocks are present in the many grass roots organizations of knowledgeable parents, youth, and teacher activists

fighting for quality education. Institutionally, democratically elected and publicly accountable bodies made up of administrators, teachers, parents, community members, and students empowered to make local school decisions are a way to ensure mutual responsibility for progress toward education goals as well as to hold government accountable to support these goals. Chicago's elected Local School Councils, made up of a majority of parents and community residents, are a starting point.

5. Restorative justice, democratic school cultures, and youth leadership development. The regimentation and policing of urban public school students, in particular, is a daily reminder that the purpose of schooling seems to be more about controlling children and youth – and displaying their need to be controlled -- than supporting their development. The shift to human development requires demilitarization and decriminalization of schools, in the first instance by delinking public schools from the US military (Chicago has five public military high schools, 10 military academies inside high schools, and 20 middle school military programs) and delinking school discipline from police records (an information sharing provision written into No Child Left Behind).

Restorative justice coupled with a rich, culturally and socially relevant curriculum, is a step to reclaim our youth from the school-to-prison pipeline, end the punitive and criminalizing culture in our schools, and give children and youth support to redefine themselves and find their moral compass through participation in community service and community action. There is already much to build from in restorative justice and youth activist projects in schools around the country. As Julio Cammarota and Michelle Fine (2008) document through youth Participatory Action Research projects,

when young people have opportunities to develop leadership and social agency in contexts that respect and challenge them, they soar, becoming new people for a new society.

6. National Teacher Fellowship Program and professional compensation and support for all teachers. When teachers don't have time for the bathroom, their classroom is on a cart, their office a space is the hallway, and professional development is an exercise in mind-numbing and irrelevance, it is little wonder the task of developing the next generation is degraded. Salaries for all teachers should be comparable to other vital professions, and all teachers should have professional working conditions. Most important, teachers need support to become truly highly qualified teacher-intellectuals with the pedagogical and content knowledge and socio-political consciousness to contribute to the full development of all students. Teachers' work should include time for thinking, further education, planning, and reflection. Some countries already structure teaching to include time for planning and working collaboratively. The Japanese lesson study in mathematics is just one example.

Teachers also need sustained periods of in-depth study, reflection, and revitalization. New York City teachers have a union-won sabbatical. Select Chicago-area "Golden Apple Teachers" are awarded a semester sabbatical to pursue further study. Although insufficient, these are starting points for a publicly-funded National Teacher Fellowship Program for practicing teachers to pursue further education and development in the U.S. or internationally or through internships with community-based organizations.

This proposal runs counter to merit pay which commodifies improved teaching and undermines collaboration. Merit pay is an instantiation of the self-interested,

individualistic market discourse in education and the social paradigm it supports. An educational program posited on a social vision of collective human development promotes this ethos as the *raison d'être* to improve one's teaching, and adequate material and intellectual support is a basic condition.

7. Curriculum, instruction, and assessment that prepare new people for a new society. Scrap the top-down, test, punish and reward *No Child Left Behind* paradigm in favor of intellectually rich, culturally relevant curricula and instruction that support critical thought, social responsibility and agency and rich forms of assessment, grounded in systems of public, mutual accountability, such as those I suggest above, while retaining the insistence that we transparently evaluate schools by how well they educate students historically underserved. Many of the steps I outlined address aspects of good sense in NCLB: disaggregation of data by race, ethnicity, language proficiency, etc.; insistence that all teachers be highly qualified; a system of accountability to ensure results; concerns for school safety. Certainly there are other robust proposals that address these concerns and move toward an alternate social paradigm. The pages of *Rethinking Schools*, various educational journals, and the practices of hundreds of educators have amassed a rich body of knowledge about centering the cultures, languages, histories, and experiences of the diverse students in the U.S. There is a rich and growing literature and practice in critical and anti-colonial pedagogy that promotes the full development of all.

Conclusion

Public education is under attack, but public education in the U.S. has never really been in the public interest because it has not been guided by a political economy and ideology centered on the development of rich human potential. Quite the opposite. To

move beyond the place in which we are stuck, we need to concretely reframe what public education might mean. This paradigm shift requires a full remix of priorities. We can fund the kinds of measures I propose and parallel ones in healthcare, job creation, housing, transportation, environmental protection, etc., but only if we defund the massive militarization that is siphoning off our treasury, and only if we restructure corporate wealth acquisition as a first step to restructuring the economy. These are practicable moves, but they require political will. In his election night speech, Barack Obama called on the thousands gathered in Grant Park in Chicago and the millions watching on television to “join in the work of remaking this nation,” noting that his election victory was not change, but “only the chance for us to make that change.” In that spirit, what matters most is not President Obama’s policies, but our ability to shape a new social vision and muster the kind of social mobilization that ushered in the New Deal, made it possible for an African American to be elected to the presidency, made Dr. King into a leader, and ended the privatization of water in Bolivia and produced an Indigenous president with an endogenous version of social transformation.

Education has a pivotal role to play in such a far-ranging project. We can choose to grasp the enormous possibility of this historical moment to radically rethink the very language we use to frame education goals and priorities and to propose and work for bold initiatives that concretely embody a liberatory social vision. And we can participate directly as researchers, scholars, teachers, students, and parents in a large conversation about the kind of world we wish to see and in an education social movement that is already emergent across the U.S.

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