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Examining Economic Justice Issues in Education*

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The Politics of Educational (Un)deservedness and (In)visibility: Examining Economic Justice Issues in Education

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Prior to the Supreme Court ruling in *San Antonio v. Rodriguez* (1973), research across the social sciences documented a range of economic inequalities both between districts and within schools across most states, with the result being vastly divergent student educational experiences. Thus, the implications of *Rodriguez* were profound, as unlike the classification of race in *Brown* (1954), the Court held that wealth could not be treated as a “suspect classification,” and furthermore, education was not an explicit right in the United States. School funding equalization claims thereafter were tied to rights guaranteed in individual state constitutions. Though some states have reformed their funding formulas, even being deemed successes, disparities have decreased only nominally (Baker & Welner, 2010; Lemke, Jackson, & Lehr, 2014) and persist to the present day. “Separate and unequal schooling” by socioeconomic status, race, and language now is the norm with inequality on the rise as a result of recent economic devastation wrought by the 2008 recession and widespread conservative efforts to scale back basic political rights including the vote (Scott & Quinn, 2014, p. 750).

Rodriguez is one of many reasons for spatial hyper-segregation and intellectual stratification witnessed in U.S. public education today. Among other contributing factors are toxic state-level accountability-driven learning environments (Nichols & Berliner, 2008), education boards antagonistic to critical inquiry (Lemke, 2015), and an onslaught of commercialism in schools (Ritzer, 2015). Yet, while much has been made about the contemporary thrust of efficiency and sanction-based educational models, let us also not forget that schools in fact have been central to the reproduction of inequality (Bowles & Gintis, 2011) and contemporary neoliberal project (Aronowitz, 2003). Indeed, there is a lengthy history of corporate involvement in educational policy and respective institutions (Cuban, 2004).

Public school leaders increasingly must confront elite networks and organizations (Trujillo, 2014) that in their aim to maintain a vision of education consonant with an unbridled free market, demonstrate open hostility toward public education, its employees, students, and families. As demonstrated by Anyon (1980), Lareau (2003), Bourdieu (2010), and others, the historic uneven distribution of “public” educational dollars and resources has been coupled with economic stratification at large so that a primary political goal of schooling is achieved—manifest (e.g. skills-based) and latent (e.g. norm-based) dynamics coalesce to do little more than prepare students for an economic system that inherently is hierarchical. Thus, through both overt and hidden legitimization patterns (Lareau, 2003) certain knowledge, behavior, and characteristics are privileged while others are marginalized and labeled deviant. Moreover, as many reformers have infiltrated public education itself, those loyal to that system must navigate difficult professional relations. The stakes are even higher within the current political climate where it is commonplace for leaders, from the president down, to utilize the politics (and policies) of fear, so to buttress what has become a uniquely American neo-democracy.

All of this, and scholarship also, has been attentive to how social welfare policies have shifted in ways that deprive the most vulnerable from needed assistance. Contrary to commonsense understanding of the social welfare state, spending has grown steadily since the 1970s (Moffit, 2015). What is important about this spending however is that there has been a redistribution of resources away from perceived undeserving to deserving groups, namely away from younger, nondisabled, single-parent, and the poorest families to elderly, disabled, married-parent, and higher income families (Moffit, 2015). Thus, the post-Depression era egalitarian policy commitment to a bottom line be-

neath which individuals cannot sink has waned significantly. Furthermore, whether societal norms about pauperism in the early 1800s (Moffit, 2015), or stereotypes about African Americans during welfare reform in the mid-1990s (Gilens, 1999), simply receiving government relief often has been viewed as undeservedness. Though normative values concerning worth have shifted over time and can be context specific, undeservedness often carries the stigma of moral ineptitude, laziness, and blame for one's lot in life, whereas deservedness signifies possessing genuine need through no fault of one's own. Indeed, research demonstrates how policy processes, actors, and media discourse help frame the target population of policy as morally deserving or undeserving (Gilens, 1999; Katz, 2013; Ingram & Schneider, 2005; Katz, 2013; Schneider & Ingram, 1993, 1997).

In education, such traditionalist normative understandings of deservedness are argued as responsible for negative portrayals of public school leaders and teachers in relation to school choice (Mintrom 2000), as well as the failure to enact wholesale equity-based educational reform (Engvall, 1996). At the local level, such thinking, I would argue, makes it difficult for well-meaning educational leaders to enact with consistency, whole child, culturally relevant, trauma-informed, and “wrap-around” services, which work across the school, home, and community to meet student needs. Also, a consideration is that, akin to historic tactics to keep so called underserving groups from attaining political, cultural, and economic capital, those minoritized student groups who fail to meet the normative standards of schools are disciplined, incarcerated, detained, and pushed-out into dangerous street economies at rates that far exceed that of their white, heteronormative counterparts.

U.S. policies dating to the founding established individual and group (un)deservedness, and thus societal (in)visibility. With this understanding, it is important to emphasize that those deemed undeserving by the status quo, do not lack knowledge and skills necessary to convert capital into other assets. Rather, it is a unique and purposeful failure of the power structure neither to consider nor value such factors. Still, it should come as no surprise that complex justice-oriented problems coalesce in urban (Oliver & Shapiro, 1997), rural (Sherman, 2006), and suburban (Drier, Mollenkopf, & Swanstrom, 2014) school contexts in ways that foment disadvantage for those already invisible and historically deemed undeserving student populations. Yet, the ability to affect change in this regard is restrained and regulated by neoliberalism, which in its preference for technocratic standardization of thought and action, shrinks critical consciousness within educational spaces. Such processes leave institutional inequalities unabated and ultimately reify existing power structures that perpetrate harm against not only the marginalized but the larger body politic. Thus, it is incumbent upon those possessing privilege of any kind to actively strive to make visible those issues, histories, and lifeworlds made invisible by power.

Overview of the Special Issue

Addressing notions of (un)deservedness and (in)visibility within public education is multidimensional and takes on many forms. This special issue of *Texas Education Review*, “The Politics of (Un)deservedness and (In)visibility: Policy and Leadership Students Engage with Economic Justice Issues in Education,” is one of those forms. It takes up issues such as the neglected realities of migrant youth labor as relevant to education, the advance of commercially-driven standardization, and burgeoning pipelines between invisible youth of color and the streets. Ultimately, this special issue examines how educational policy and practice establish the foundation for or fail to create economic justice for students attending U.S. public schools and higher education, as well as for those living within those tangential sites, institutions, and communities that routinely intersect with public education.

Analysis of economic policy should not be separated from consideration of sociopolitical, cultural, normative, and geographic contexts. The six articles in this special issue therefore aimed to

unpack the historic dimensions of specific U.S. educational policies in light of how the current political and economic climate is shaping educational spaces, programming, and opportunities. These articles center critical education policy and leadership scholarship. Given the complexity of the issues examined, they also draw from interdisciplinary research to help frame thinking about cultural political economy and unpack how “commonsense” views of concepts like worth, access, merit, choice, and equity, in turn shape public knowledge of the actual function of educational policy. Focused on the interplay between policy process and its actors within federal, New York State, and local policy arenas, articles also juxtapose “so called” neutral aims of legislation as enshrined in texts and actor discourse and the often value ridden consequences for student educational experience. Finally, as many of the authors also are educational practitioners, recommendations for policy and practice are offered in each article

To begin, the first two articles provide insights into the ways federal and state-level educational policy affects specific demographics of students. In “ESSA, Low-Wage Migrants, and the Persistent Neoliberal Education Structure: A Critical Review,” Kathleen Reeb-Reascos and Jennifer Serniuk unpack how low-wage migrants simultaneously have been exploited, but deemed undeserving due to their race, economic, and language status. Specifically, they examine what Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) could do for low-wage migrant students while underscoring the ESSA’s shaky ground given the current anti-immigrant policies and rhetoric of the Trump administration. Jon Veenis explores the relationship between Latino/a students and the charter school model of education in “Paradoxical Choices: The Realities and Limitations of Privatized Education for Latino Students.” As discussed in this article, not only are Latino/a students overrepresented in charter schools, but such privatized school settings reflect similar patterns of segregation as found in traditional public schools and if unaddressed, could intensify them.

The next two articles examine certain challenges posed by privatization in K-12 education and seeming opportunities offered by new funding schemes in higher education. Looking at the issue of charter schools in New York State specifically, in “Charter Schools: The Destruction of Teacher Certification in New York State,” Michelle Wing and Jennifer Saboda turn their attention to the ways charter school operators are sidestepping the more stringent teacher certification requirements placed on public schools. Through an analysis of NYS Education Law §355(2-a), they outline the negative short- and long-term effects such a policy shift, if enacted, could have on students attending charter schools. Christian Pierce and Justin Siraco examine another area of NYS educational policy in “Excelsior, New York States’ ‘Free’ College Scholarship.” Specifically, they dissect how the Excelsior Scholarship addresses, if at all, low income student higher educational access in comparison to what we know about similar older programs, including the Georgia Hope Scholarship, Indiana 21st Century Scholarship, and the Wisconsin Covenant.

The last two articles in this special issue investigate what happens to historically minoritized and normatively labeled undeserving youth when the U.S. educational system fails them. In “Prison Reform and Redemption for Whom?” Jennifer Mdurvwa Wolcott uses Critical Race Theory to discuss the ways educational policies pipe students of color into the school-to-prison pipeline, as well as the problematic aspects of federal policy concerning the use of private prisons. Centering the question of who benefits, she discusses the Trump administration’s Prison Reform and Redemption Act (2017), concluding that it does little to benefit those youth and communities plagued by mass incarceration. Finally, and in a similar vein, Tara-Jeneil Fenton unpacks dynamics that push youth into underground labor, sex, and drug economies in “Avenues into the Street Economy: Childhood Trauma and the Unsuccessful Navigation of the Public Education System in the United States.” Given the high rates of childhood maltreatment and poverty in the U.S., students from multiple backgrounds are susceptible to life on the streets, which she argues should be a pressing concern for all educators. Yet, this concern should turn on one key factor—more than any other group, youth of

color constitute the majority of the street economy, and thus solutions to it must make their experience visible.

Change in education seems to be accelerating so rapidly that the development of sound policy and practice cannot match the pace of change. In many ways, this special issue could not have arrived at a more important moment for educational researchers and practitioners concerned with tackling certain of the most pressing challenges facing education today. The varied economics topics discussed in these articles bring home the complexity in raising and answering questions about, as well as proffering solutions to educational inequity. By focusing on hidden policy processes and corresponding taken-for-granted deservedness, this special issue also was designed to stand against student isolation and disempowerment. Taken together, these articles educate us about how certain groups face challenges not only in attaining an equal education but accessing one at all. Moreover, given the current political climate, these student authors authentically voice recommendations for us regarding the lengths to which we still must go to eliminate injustice within school contexts *and* the kind of multisector work we must do to reach those children and youth who exist within zones of abandonment and invisibility outside the educational system.

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