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A critical examination of corporate ideology in educational policy and practice: The real cost

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A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF CORPORATE IDEOLOGY IN EDUCATIONAL
POLICY AND PRACTICE: THE REAL COST

A Thesis Submitted
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Designation
University Honors

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Abstract

In this thesis, I provide a historical background and conceptual analysis of how we arrived at our current educational policy landscape. By tracing educational policy and practice through the 20th century, I offer a critical perspective on contemporary educational policy and practice. Specifically, I assess how corporate culture and corporate ideology influenced contemporary educational policy. Additionally, I explore alternatives and possible recommendations for reforming education in both policy and practice through preservice teacher education and funding for public schools.

Methodology

This thesis is a critical policy analysis through the framework of critical policy studies. Critical policy studies are, “mainly rooted in the research tradition in power, politics, and social regulation in and around schools and particularly confronting the crisis of the welfare state and the public role of education” (Simons, 2015, p.1117). Starting in the 1980s, educationalists and sociologists developed their own policy orientation which included three features, “a) the educational, moral, and social concerns underlying the policy studies, b) the broad conception of policy, including politics, the mechanisms of power and the relation with the wider social context, and c) the diverse forms of critical advocacy” (Simons, Olssen & Peters, 2009, p.17). For this framework, it is important to make the distinction between politics and policy. In regards to this thesis, politics are “regarded as a messy field of interests, conflicts and power, which is mainly concerned with addressing goals, strategic options and agendas” (Simons et al., 2009, 20). Policy refers to the domain of rational decision making as well as the allocation of resources. The first refers to the, “broader context of power, social arrangements and discourses around education within the national and global context” (Simons et al., 2009, p. 23). The other focuses on how state policy involves politics in its implementation.

Additionally for this framework, it is important to distinguish between rationalist and critical approaches to public policy. As Bob Lingard explains:

Research that has the most direct and immediate effect on policy is that commissioned by policy-makers for a purpose and framed by a problem-solving disposition. This is research for policy. Interest groups often sponsor this type of research as well. However, the more academic exercise, research of policy, fits within a critical framework and seeks to deconstruct the problem as constructed

by policy and to deconstruct many of the ‘taken for granted’ of the contemporary world. (2013, p. 127)

Critical policy studies as a methodological framework analyzes how social issues are related to policy development rather than how effective a policy is for a desired outcome. Although this thesis takes a broad view of the term "policy" by examining initiatives that might be considered either policies or programs, I argue that Critical Policy Studies can be utilized to analyze a wide array of initiatives. For the purpose of this study, I conduct a Critical Policy Analysis to examine contemporary examples of corporate influence in education programs such as Box Tops and JA Biztown as well as provide recommendations for preservice teacher education and public funding for schools that are not based on the commercialization of student relationships.

Unpacking the Role of Corporate Ideologies Influence on Educational Policy and Practice:

A Literature Review

Efficiency

Since public schools are tasked with meeting the diverse needs of approximately 50 million students in K-12 schools each day, efficiency has become a central value in our educational system (K-12 Enrollment Statistics, 2020). This is in large part due to public opinion and powerful voices who thought their taxpayer money was wasted on public education, which resulted, for example, in initiatives such as the High School Teachers Association of New York City bringing in an efficiency expert named Harrington Emerson in 1912 (Callahan, 1962, p.55). Harrington Emerson stated that, “there are four essential elements of being efficient that schools need to adapt: 1) definite and clear aims, 2) an organization capable of attaining these aims, 3) equipment adequate to achieve these aims, and 4) an authoritative, strong figure to carry out

these aims” (Callahan, 1962, p.56). From there, efficiency in education escalated rapidly. Class sizes were increased to limit the amount of teachers the school had to hire. A price value was put to each subject to determine its importance and how much time should be spent working on that subject. Children became seen as raw goods to be produced, and this has heavily influenced the way we understand schools today.

Raymond E. Callahan (1962) was one of the first scholars to comprehensively study the role of corporate ideology in education in his book *Education and the Cult of Efficiency*. Originally the focus of his study was to investigate the adoption of business values in educational administration (Callahan, 1962, p. VII). He found that the adoption of business values began around the 1900s, and by 1930 school administrators perceived themselves as business managers (Callahan, 1962, p.VII). Callahan's next step in his study was to find the root cause of why this was happening since if we adopt the idea that schools are a public good, education is not a business, and a school is not a factory. In a key finding from his study, he noted:

What was unexpected was the extent, not only of the power of the business industrial groups, but of the strengths of the business ideology in the American culture on the one hand and the extreme weakness and vulnerability of schoolmen, especially school administration, on the other. (Callahan, 1962, p. IIIV)

Proceeding Callahan’s seminal book, critical educational scholars have done similar critiques of corporate ideology and its relationship to public school policy and practice but Callahan’s study laid the groundwork for the critiques that follow.

Essentialism

Despite the advancements society has made in the last century, the philosophy behind schools has remained largely rooted in essentialism. Essentialism in education is an approach

that assumes and proposes that all children should learn the traditional disciplines and basic “essential” subjects thoroughly and equally and was popularized by William C. Bagley in the 1930s (Null, 2003). The main objective of an essentialist approach to education is, “to transfer the traditional knowledge and cultural heritage of a certain society and civilization to students” (Sahin, 2018, p.104). The hidden curriculum that was being taught aligns with the key characteristics of an essentialist education: discipline, civility, and respect for authority.

The key characteristics of essentialism can be seen in the physical and hierarchical structure of the classroom. In the majority of classrooms today, the teacher’s desk is in front of the classroom away from the students’ desks in order to promote authority in the classroom by creating a distance between the teacher and the students in the classroom. Desks are arranged into a grid-like pattern to limit side-conversations and to increase productivity from the student. Decorations around the classroom include anchor charts that are chosen by the teacher to show the students ideas from the curriculum that they find important. Students raise their hands so that the teacher can give them permission to speak to promote authority in the classroom. Single file lines are formed so that the teacher can lead their class around the building in an effective way. Teachers use document cameras and whiteboards at the front of the classroom to effectively lecture to the whole class.

Despite modern classrooms utilization of flexible seating, colorful anchor charts, and technology the overall setup of the classroom has not changed. Essentialism can still be seen in the content being taught, the authoritative teacher as the head of the classroom, and the increased importance of standardized tests in the classroom. Although the environment of the classroom has begun to be more inviting, the way a classroom operates and the hidden curriculum being taught shows how essentialism is still seen in classrooms today.

Standardized tests are created to measure how well the student mastered the essential knowledge that was taught and how well the teacher instructed on the essential topics. Not only do standardized tests distort teaching by prioritizing test scores and making them the paramount goal, but students also receive an inferior education when pressure is applied to raise their test scores (Kohn, 2004). This means that standardized tests actually lower standards. All of these classroom management strategies emphasize discipline, civility, and respect for authority in the classroom.

Essentialism as the central philosophy of education is problematic in the United States for multiple reasons. America was founded on democracy, but yet the organization of our schooling system reflects corporate values. Democracy is based on the idea that each person is equal in value and regard, and that principle should be interwoven in our schools. This philosophy can be traced to the principles of scientific management and the rise of Taylorism which I explore in what follows. An important detail to remember at this point, is that business elites and other professionals, not necessarily educators, are the ones making decisions surrounding curriculum and testing. As Henry Giroux argues, “[s]tudents are conditioned to unlearn any respect for democracy, justice, and what it means to connect learning to social change” (1997, p.6) because they are only given rights when permitted by the person in power, and that goes against the foundations of America.

Taylorism

Scholars such as Raymond Callahan (1962) and Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1976) have traced the convergence of corporate ideology and public school policy to the early 1900s with the rise of Taylorism. Frederick Winslow Taylor, the founder of “scientific management,” had an influential role in shaping the direction of school policy. As Bowles and

Gintis note, “[t]he direction the formal educational system took...was dictated by the power of business interests and the triumphant ideology of ‘efficient management’ (1976, p.44).” The center of the Taylorism approach is, “the concentration of the relevant production knowledge and skills in the hands of management” (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p.185). Put simply, this means that schools were being centered on business interests. Schooling was seen as a forefront for producing individuals who were a new type of corporate order who were motivated and disciplined. Public education quickly became a funnel into corporations, but it was viewed as a positive thing for society. In urban and high poverty areas, school was viewed as the central path that could enhance the individual's life chances. It was a way out.

Urban School Movement’s Influence on Curriculum

Shortly before the rise of Taylorism and scientific management in public schools, the Urban School movement began around the 1890s-1920s, and the objective was to shift control of urban education into the hands of experts. These experts were composed of members exclusively from two different groups: professionals and influential business elites. Their victories can be prominently seen by the size of school boards, reducing by over half in twenty-eight of the largest cities in America (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). School boards were filled with the same people who were advocating for corporate reform: professionals and businessmen.

The content students were learning focused heavily on business. An example to show the extent of optimization of business in education would be the “Thrift Alphabet” that was taught from 1915-1922:

A is for acorn

B is for bank

C is for card

D is for dollar

E is for earn

F is for Franklin

G is for gold

H is for help

I is for interest

J is for junk

K is for khaki

L is for learn

M is for money

N is for nickel

O is for "Only one and twenty-four" (Taken from a Thrift stamp song)

P is for penny

Q is for quarter

R is for ready

S is for stamp

T is for thrift

U is for Uncle Sam

V is for the V (5V's can buy one Thrift Stamp)

W is for W.S.S

X is for X (10 X's will buy four Thrift Stamps)

Y is for you

Z is for zero-for those that do nothing. (Callahan, 1962, p.228)

As evidenced by such examples, students were learning business terms side by side with the alphabet. Not only was the content being taught centered around business jargon and principles, the hidden curriculum was as well. As scholars note, hidden curriculum is what is taught indirectly from schools (Hidden Curriculum Definition, 2015). The hidden curriculum can be understood as implicit messages which includes: norms, beliefs, values, and behaviors. During this time the hidden curriculum reinforced the value of discipline, obedience, and respect for authority: characteristics of a good worker who does what they are told.

IQism

Bowles and Gintis also studied the correlation between IQ scores and income due to the rising interests in the IQ theory of social inequality “IQism.” They studied the question, “To what extent is the statistical association between socioeconomic background and economic success reduced when childhood IQ is held constant?” (Bowles & Gintis, 120). They took a sample of non black males of nonfarm backgrounds between the ages of 35-44. The study concluded that, “IQ-whether inherited or not-plays a negligible role in passing economic status from parent to child” (Bowles & Gintis, 120). This shows that there is no correlation between IQ and success in the economic world despite what corporate ideology believes.

Bowles and Gintis additionally sought to define the role of education in economic inequalities. They concluded that, “the major aspects of educational organization replicate the relationships of dominance and subordinate in the economic sphere (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p.125). This is in part due to the fact that capitalist development is uneven; rapid growth occurs in some economic sectors coupled with the stagnation and exploitation of others. Education has been tasked with the impossible: fix systematic inequalities in our nation. Bowles and Gintis’s study proves that education cannot alone change the consequences of capitalism in America.

The Impending Worker Shortage

During the 1990s, the curriculum chosen to be taught in schools became a tool to address the upcoming worker shortage in America in hopes to give students the necessary skills to succeed in the workplace. In 1990, *Fortune* magazine released an article featuring CEO David Kearns that stated, “by the year 2000 we’d be out of qualified workers” (Molnar, 1996, p.4). On the other hand, the Skills of the American Workforce issued a report titled *America’s Choice: High Skills or Low Wages!* This research article found that, “only five percent of employers feel that education and skill requirements are increasingly significant,” and that most of shortages were in underpaid, women’s’ occupations and traditional craft trade” (Molnar, 4). As these reports were being released the language shifted to “human resources” and “human capital” to describe students. An example of this would be a 1992 report released by Labor Development that stated, “high school graduates lack the skills necessary for employment in what is calls a ‘high performance’ economy” (Molnar, 1996, p.4).

One important idea to acknowledge, is that all of these reports fail to discuss the children's dreams and aspirations when talking about their future employment. In fact, most corporate-sponsored reforms do not,

Consider the possibility that perhaps we should provide decent, human schools for all our children because we love them and because childhood in the United States should be a rich and rewarding time during which children learn to care for each other through the example of adults who care for them. (Molnar, 1996, p.5)

Additionally it is important to point to the article “Skilled Workers Watch Their Jobs Migrate Overseas” that was published on the front page of the *New York Times* in 1995.

This article highlighted the fact that “increasing numbers of U.S corporations were hiring foreign workers overseas-not because of a shortage of skilled American workers (whom they were laying off by the thousands)- but because foreign workers were cheaper” (Molnar, 1996, p.6). When combining the fact that business leaders are not choosing what is best for children and the “shortage” in the workplace was not actually occurring, it is a major concern that business leaders are still influential in educational policy.

Vouchers, School Choice, and Charter Schools: Public Funds for Private Education

Another way corporate ideology's influence over education policy has been studied is the context of school choice. For the sake of this paper, the words voucher, school choice, and charter schools ultimately mean the same thing: allocating tax money to send students to any school in their district.

School choice has been an ongoing debate since the 1950s. At first it took the name of school vouchers, which is the idea of providing students with tax dollars to attend a qualifying school in their district. The original purpose of vouchers was to, “help maintain segregated school systems in the wake of the 1954 Supreme Court *Brown V. Board of Education* decision” (Molnar, 1996, p.118). Racism began to take a different shape: white parents continued to vote no to tax raises for public education to fund public schools that educated black children. For example, between 1970 and 1984, in Sumter County Georgia tax support for schools decreased by two-thirds, but private white academics became increasingly popular (Molnar, 1996, p.118).

To gain momentum for vouchers, the Reagan administration renamed the movement *public school choice*. The decision to shift the language from vouchers to school choice was a deliberate tactical decision to make this reform seem more appealing because the American ethos

is more accepting of language surrounding “choice”. Additionally, the Reagan administration focused on Magnet schools which are, “used by many school districts to promote school integration by offering a diverse array of innovative curriculum options and thereby attract voluntary transfers to integrated schools” (Molnar, 1996, p.120). Most importantly, magnet schools separated choice from the racialized beginnings of the voucher movement. Between 1988-1996, public school choice laws were enacted in fourteen states.

Studies on charter schools have yielded unpersuasive evidence of their effectiveness. One example of this would be the Milwaukee Voucher Experiment. It originally set a ceiling of 1,000 low-income students who could attend, at the state's expense, a private school within the city. Each child in the program would receive a voucher worth \$2,500 (Molnar, 1996, p.122). Since the schools were private, they did not have to meet the same requirements as public schools because public schools are funded by public money which means there is public accountability. This means that the private schools did not have to follow the same curriculum standards (reviewed and accredited by an outside agency), and they did not have to employ certified teachers. Choice schools had to meet one of four educational requirements,

- (1) at least 70% of the pupils in the program had to advance one grade level each year;
 - (2) the average attendance rate had to be at least 90 percent;
 - (3) at least 80 percent of the students has to demonstrate significant academic progress, or
 - (4) at least 70 percent of their families had to meet parent involvement criteria established by the private school.
- (Molnar, 1996, p.122)

Two important ideas Alex Molnar concluded: private schools did not have to accept students with exceptional education needs and they did not have to disclose their finances. By 1955, the findings from the experiment concluded that there was not a statistical significant difference in

the achievement of students from those in the public schools. The study did find, however, that students were more likely to switch schools each year and that parent satisfaction was higher (Molnar, 1996, p.122).

School-Business Partnerships

When the Reagan administration released *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, it created, “a political climate in which the pronouncements of business leaders assumed preeminent status in the debate over educational change” (Molnar, 1996, p.1). Business leaders began preaching to the public that America’s economy was going to crash because they were not going to get any new workers. Quickly after, every area of school was within corporate scrutiny and business involvement. In 1984, the total percentage of school-business partnerships were only in 17 percent of the nation's schools. By 1990, these partnerships made up 51 percent of America’s school districts (Molnar, 1996, p.2). These partnerships included training teachers and administrators, scholarships to certain students, instructional materials, and co-sponsored activities (Molnar, 1996, p.2).

In 1957, one researcher claimed that 9 out of 10 students saw an advertisement in school each day (Molnar, 1996, p.22). One of the first school business partnerships was a program from K-III called Channel One. Channel One was a, “twelve-minute news broadcast aimed at adolescents, offers the free use of TV monitors to every school that signs on to the program-as long as the school guarantees that 90 percent of its students watch the show every day (Molnar, 1996, p.18). The students were not required to watch Channel One because it was beneficial to their learning, but rather for the two minute that were devoted for commercials.

Technology for Classroom

One of the most common marketing tactics to students is technology. For example, the Apple Program which entails, “children, their families, their friends, their neighbors, and anyone else who might want to earn computers and computer supplies for the participating school are urged to shop, shop, shop-at the sponsoring store” (Molnar, 1996, p.23). This provided the opportunity for the purchaser to own an Apple computer and earn computers and computer supplies rewards for the school. Unfortunately, the norm for the program was not as rewarding as it was made out to be. A Wisconsin elementary school announced that they had collected \$500,000 register receipts, and the reward was two computers worth about \$3,000 (Molnar, 1996, p.23). Ultimately this means that for every dollar spent, the school received seven-tenths of one cent towards a computer.

Another marketing tactic for technology in the classroom was the MOM program. The MOM program strived to provide computers for school by having students write to their relatives asking them to subscribe to magazines. Students were encouraged to write letters to their friends and families that often followed this format:

Dear Grandma,

My School needs more computers for our classrooms. You can help us by ordering some new magazines or extending your current subscriptions at this time.

You’ll save money with the school prices and your magazine orders provide more “hands on” computer training for me. Order by the prize deadline and I can earn a school crew shirt.

Please help me if you can.

From: Amy

P.S. I love you. (Molnar, 1996. p.24)

Not only were students being used as advertisement instruments, but teachers had to cut into time spent on the curriculum to write these letters.

Exploiting Students as Market Products: The Real Cost

These “free” programs to get technology into the schools, ultimately are no't free, “the true cost of these “free schemes” would become apparent if the loss of student learning time and the cost of staff time needed to administer them were factored into the calculation” (Molnar, 1996, p.25). One well known school business partnership that displays this was the Campbell’s Labels for Education. Students would bring in labels from Campbells soup in return for free products for their classroom. The rewards were,

For 5,125 campbell’s soup labels, the company offers to provide schools with the filmstrip *Boyhood of Abraham Lincoln*; for 20,000 more labels, the school can earn a remote-control projector with which to show it; and for another 6,750 labels a screen on which to show it will be shipped to the lucky school. (Molnar, 1996, p.23)

For 31,875 Campbell's cans labels, a school could get one movie, a projector to play it on, and a screen. In the 1990’s Campbell's cans were three for one dollar on average, so if the families of the school spent \$10,625 collectively they were able to receive the three rewards.

School business partnerships are clearly beneficial to the corporation, but the benefits for the students are less clear. For example, in 1991, Ronald McDonald made an appearance with the mayor at a Milwaukee school for fire prevention week (Molnar, 1996, p.26). In return for filling

out the safety quiz at the end of the lesson, students received a coupon for a free cheeseburger at participating McDonald's.

From Alex Molnar's study (1996), we can see the challenges that arise as corporations insert themselves into curriculum decisions. The educative value of the lesson takes a back seat to the corporation's interest in promoting their business. A central theme that emerges throughout these "partnerships" is the incompatibility of corporate aims with the goals of public education. Corporations are interested in grooming consumers while public education is primarily concerned with the cultivation of citizens. Alex Molnar argues, "put another way, why try to save children from burning to death by encouraging them to eat a product filled with saturated fat that the school's own nutrition curriculum would tell them to avoid?" (1996, p.26). Although it is unclear how children were benefiting from school business partnerships, it is clear how businesses were benefiting.

Analysis of Contemporary Examples

The Charter School Debate

Despite little conclusive evidence that school choice improves educational quality for students, this debate is ongoing today. On January 28th, 2021, the Iowa senate amended and passed the bill Senate File 159. This bill reads:

An act relating to educational offerings and funding by establishing a student first scholarship program for certain pupils attending nonpublic schools, establishing a student first scholarship fund, providing income tax exemption, modifying and establishing charter school programs, modifying provisions governing the state's open enrollment law including voluntary diversity plans, modifying the tuition and textbook tax credit,

providing for the educator expense deduction, modifying provisions related to education collection and permissible education programs and funding, making appropriate providing penalties, and including effective date, applicability, and retroactive applicability provisions. BE IT ENACTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF IOWA.

If passed by the House, this bill would expand school choice by allocating tax payer funds for scholarships for students in the bottom 5% of Iowa school districts. This bill has not passed by the senate without opposition. For example, the Cedar Rapids Community School District stated that, “the establishment of charter schools serves to reallocate resources away from serving all students to serving the few” (King, 2021). Additionally the school district reminded legislators that charter schools have little accountability to the public, and it gives control of tax dollars to few people who might not represent the school district as a whole. It is important to remember who those few are: the professionals and influential business elites.

Cedar Rapids is one of many school districts in Iowa to be concerned about this law. Parents of students in the Des Moines school district worry that one family’s choice to go to go to a private school would come at the cost of those who stay in the public schools. Crystal Loving, a volunteer organizer with the Des Moines Community Legislative Action team, argues, “if there’s work to be done in my school, then let’s do that work. I do not need to jump ship and think things are going to be better” (Gerlock, 2021). Her argument points to the important fact that charter schools have not been proven to be successful in the past, so legislation needs to focus on improving the schools they have now with the money that was meant for them.

Ultimately the debate over school choice is not about the students. School vouchers, school choice, and charter schools all try to solve a problem that is created by corporate ideology

in the first place. The idea of having schools compete to get more students, to then get more money creates more inequity in education rather than solves it. The idea of school choice fails to address the root problem in education, the cause of failing schools. Rather, a better solution would be to keep public money for public education to focus on the improvement of all public schools, so each student receives a high-quality, equitable education. Furthermore, we might begin thinking differently about what it means to improve schools outside of raising test scores

Curriculum

A contemporary example of corporate ideologies' influence over curriculum would be JA Biztown. JA Biztown, “combines in-class learning with a day-long visit to a simulated town. This popular program allows elementary school students to operate banks, manage restaurants, write checks, and vote for mayor” (Junior Achievement USA, n.d.). The pillars of student success are entrepreneurship and work readiness. The program is five units: financial literacy, community and economy, work and career readiness, business management, and visit and debriefing. Unit one is focused on discovering what it means to be a citizen, examining the flow of goods and services in the community, and paying taxes. The second unit focuses on learning about the benefits of STEM careers, completing a job application, and the interview process. In the third unit students learn how to operate a successful business and they explore pricing, revenue, profit, and advertising. In the fifth unit, students get to participate in JA Biztown simulation and then reflect on their experience (Junior Achievement, n.d.).

The objectives of JA Biztown clearly show the role of corporate ideology in the classroom:

- (1) citizens are introduced to the concept of the circular flow of money and goods in the economy, and discuss the impact of taxes and philanthropy;
- (2) citizens learn

how their interests and skills will one day lead to future careers; (3) citizens work in business teams and prepare for the JA Biztown visit; (4) citizens run their businesses, receive paychecks, make bank transactions, and go shopping. (Junior Achievement, 2018)

Elementary schools spend months implementing this program into their curriculum, and once the day is done students walk away with the confidence to go into the world one day and get a job, make money, and spend it.

I participated in this program when I was in sixth grade. I remember having to make a resume, interview, and then wait for the job list to get posted on the bulletin board. I might not remember everything about the whole experience, but I remember how I felt when I read the word “CEO of Magazine: Grace Brady.” I took those words literally. At that time I wanted to be an ESPN announcer, but in that moment my dream switched to working for a magazine.

Throughout high school I took all the journalism courses offered, and even went so far as to apply to highly recognized journalism colleges across the country.

Luckily, I had a moment where I realized journalism was not for me, and I did not want to work for a magazine for the rest of my life. I can not help thinking about what would have happened if I did not have that moment. I would have gone into a career I knew was not for me because my sixth grade teacher deemed me CEO of the magazine for JA Biztown. I am not the exception to this. The mayor we elected for JA Biztown ended up becoming president of the university she attended in 2020. The radio DJ that was selected, is now a professional DJ and touring at festivals around the country. I was fortunate enough to get a high paying, respected JA Biztown job, but not everyone was as fortunate as I was. Students received jobs they did not even apply for nor want, but had to do because the curriculum said that's who they were

supposed to be that day. Some students were making \$2 less an hour than the other occupations, so they could not afford most of the products that were being sold. In sixth grade, students learned the difference between the working class and upper class in America in JA Biztown, and that is one aspect of how corporate ideologies are being implemented into the curriculum today.

School Business Partnerships

A contemporary example of school-business partnerships would be the General Mills Box Tops for Education program. A Box Top is a little cardboard image on General Mills product box that could be cut out by the families to then be brought into the school to be redeemed for 10 cents for the school. In 2019, the program switched from cutting the little Box Top square out from the cardboard container to being an online digital savings app but the value of the Box Top has remained the same. Since 1996, the Box Tops for Education program has earned \$938,298,838 for schools all across America (General Mills, n.d.). Initially Box Tops could only be found on select cereals, but now they can be found on almost every product General Mills produces such as beverages, snacks, frozen food, and even cleaning and school supplies. The partnership between the school and corporation is evident; consumers choose General Mills products when shopping, and in return schools earn 10 cents back per product. General Mills has even made it easy for consumers in the app, all they have to do is scan their receipt within 14 days of purchase and the app will identify the Box Top products that were bought.

Less evident is the profit General Mills makes when consumers choose to buy their products over the generic brand. On average, General Mills products cost twice as much as the generic brand (ABC News, 2006), but have similar taste and nutritional value. The out of pocket cost is still more than the 10 cents the school receives for the consumer buying the product. Since

schools have earned \$938,298,838 from Box Tops, for every dollar given back to the school General Mills sold 10 products which totals to 9,382,988,380 products that have been redeemed for Box Tops. General Mills claims that they are allowing consumers to earn money for products they were already going to buy, but that might not have been the case without the Box Top Program. Consumers more likely would have chosen the cheaper but similar product. Instead, schools pressure students to buy General Mills products to fund a new playground or equipment for the school. Often this comes in the form of classroom versus classroom competitions. An example of this would be whichever classroom brings in the most Box Tops receives a pizza party. Students most likely will not consider the cost of the product, they care about earning the pizza party.

General Mills conducted a case study on their Box Top program in 2011. Their study concluded that 90% of households with children were aware of the Box Top Program, 67% of households with children participated in the Box Top Program, and 70% of America's K-8 schools actively participate in the program (Luger, 2011). Their objective stated in the case study was, "more products=more families; more families=more schools; more schools=more earnings" (Luger, 2011, p.3). The foundation for the program has one directive: to make more money. The money they give back to the school is just a tiny fraction of their earnings. The partnership defined here is clearly in favor of profit for General Mills over the schools earnings. If General Mills started the Box Top program with the intent of improving schools around the Nation, then they would focus on making their products more affordable for families and donate more than 10 cents per a product to the school.

Recommendations

Preservice Teacher Education

As I was researching, I had one question that surfaced time and time again- why is this the first time I am learning about this? Preservice teacher education programs focus on the best practices and teaching methods, but fail to teach about how schools operate and the reason behind curriculum decisions. The program teaches the importance of encouraging student inquiry in the classroom, not teacher inquiry about their profession. My recommendation to best address this would be to create a required course for preservice teachers that provides a space for open discussion about the teaching profession outside of their future classroom.

The course would cover a variety of topics such as other careers within the education field, teacher unions, the systematic structure of schools, and controversies that surround education today. Additionally, course materials would be created based on the questions that the preservice teachers have. I believe this would not only be beneficial to preservice teachers, but also the communities they will serve one day. America is facing a teacher shortage due to the problem that has been diagnosed as “burnout.” Burn out occurs when a teacher has nothing else to give their students, and for their mental health can no longer take on the role of a teacher. This course would attempt to prevent burnout in teachers by connecting them with a union that advocates for them and their career, gives them real expectation for what teaching in a classroom is like, and they will be knowledgeable about other career opportunities to explore when teaching children directly is no longer a viable option for them.

One key aspect of this course would be teaching preservice teachers about the real cost of advertisements in school, and guidelines to prevent exploitation of students as advertisements in the classroom. As a future educator, I was frustrated that I have not received the knowledge and

tools necessary to filter through the “free” materials that I will inevitably receive one day. In 1957, a study concluded that 97% of teachers interviewed used sponsored materials in their classroom, and received no ethical training from administration on how to filter through materials (Molnar, 1996, p.39). In an era of technology and one-to-one learning, that statistic could have only gone up. The first attempt at a set of guidelines occurred when the Society of Consumer Affairs Professionals in Business composed voluntary guidelines for corporate sponsored materials in 1982 (Molnar, 1996, p.40). It was not until 1989 the International Organization of Consumers Unions issued it’s Code of Good Practice and Guidelines for Controlling Business-Sponsored Education Materials Used in Schools (Molnar, 1996, p.40). Finally in 1996, the National Education Association released “The Preservice Classroom Integrity Pledge” for all preservice teachers to take. The 2020-21 National Education Association resolution document includes one section on business support for education which states,

The Association welcomes from the business community supplementary activities such as cooperative programs, resource assistance, release of employees for parent-teacher conferences, funding for scholarships, and the donation of specialized equipment. The Association also believes that the use of programs that involve the marketing and/or promoting of products that exploit students and/or institutions should be prevented.

[1984, 1996].

Not only have the guidelines disappeared, but the report only includes one sentence about preventing the use of sponsored materials that exploit students. As of 2015, only fourteen states had enacted laws to protect students from exploitation from companies in schools (Walker, 2015). Since lawmakers have not stepped up to regulate business sponsored materials in the

classroom, teachers need to be equipped with the tools and knowledge to filter out materials when they land on their desk.

Teachers cannot have the tools and knowledge without first learning about the role of corporate ideology in educational policy and practice. That is why I recommend that preservice teacher education needs to be expanded past the physical classroom. Teachers should be knowledgeable about their career as a whole as well as have the appropriate tools and insight to protect their students from the curriculum that views children as raw goods or a marketing tactic.

Property Tax: The Funding for Public Education

The greatest challenge facing public education is funding. In order for classrooms to get new equipment, technology, and materials it takes funding that all schools are not currently receiving. A large sum of public education is funded by property taxes, which is consistently being chosen as a tax break incentive for large corporations to build in rural Iowa towns.

As big tech companies continue to expand, they look at Iowa due to land availability, inexpensive energy, water, and fiber optic networks (Richardson, 2019). Amazon, Facebook, Google and Apple are in the process of \$9 billion construction projects in Iowa, that are paired with appealing tax incentives from the State of Iowa plus more from local governments (Richardson, 2019). When the State of Iowa agrees to these deals they are prioritizing employment over the funding of public goods such as education.

Facebook is currently in the process of building its fifth warehouse in Iowa. For its Altoona data center, the city agreed to a 100%, 20 year property tax abatement (Goodman, 2019). That means that one of the most profitable companies in the world is exempt from paying property tax for multiple decades. For a company that makes over \$20 million dollars each day, Iowa has chosen to excuse them from their responsibility of funding public education. In

exchange, Facebook has agreed to pay \$3 per a square foot (around \$3 million) per a year for 20 years (Goodman, 2019). This totals to only 40% of what the property taxes should be, and the money is given to Altoona rather than treated as property tax.

School districts are already dealing with the consequences of this incentive. For example, Bondurant-Farrar school district is facing an \$894,285 loss after the county assessor failed to exempt Facebook's latest data center from property tax (Richardson, 2019). This totals to 3.5% of the whole school systems budget. This means that Bondurant-Farrar had to cut almost \$900,000 from their school budget. \$894,285: that is around how much Facebook would pay in property tax each year to Bondurant-Farrar. That means a minimum of \$17,885,700 of property tax over 20 years that deserves to be funded to the city for public education, is lost. Additionally, that is only one of Facebook's data centers and only one company's tax incentive.

Apple has also been awarded major tax incentives to build in Waukee, Iowa. State and local officials granted over \$213 million, and part of that is a 71% property tax abatement over 20 years (The Des Moines Register, 2017). This totals to \$188,239,943 gone in property tax. In exchange, Apple has agreed to pay \$500,000 per data center a year to the city of Waukee totalling \$100 million a year (The Des Moines Register, n.d.). Once again, the money goes to the city rather than be treated as property tax to allocate specific funds for schools. For a company that has school-business partnerships in place as a philanthropy for children's education, they fail to fund schools in the fundamental way of paying property tax.

The State of Iowa justifies these tax incentives by stating these companies are bringing jobs to Iowa. This is not the case, "study after study shows unemployment does not decrease, incomes do not go up and growth does not improve for places that engage in such deal-making" (Garofalo, 2019). As of 2019, Apple has brought a total of 50 jobs, Microsoft has brought 218

jobs, Facebook has brought 62 jobs, and Google has brought 130 jobs to Iowa (Richardson, 2019). Between four Big Tech companies, only 460 jobs have been created, but they have received around \$10.5 billion dollars of tax incentives. It is no secret that public education needs more funding. It is time in Iowa we hold massive, billion-dollar companies accountable to do their part and pay property tax.

Conclusion

In conclusion, corporate ideologies are deeply embedded in educational policy and practice in America. Through a critical policy analysis, the real cost of corporate ideologies becomes apparent. Students are viewed as raw goods to be produced, exploited as a marketing tactic, and are told who to be without any regard for their aspirations. This is problematic because the public school system does not reflect its democratic values. One of the biggest limitations facing public education is funding. Without proper funding for all schools, all children are not given the same chance at the American Dream that this country was built on. Another limitation facing public education is teacher shortages, which I outline and provide a recommendation for in the preceding paragraph.

I believe that public education can battle corporate ideologies in education through preservice teacher education and proper funding by holding billion dollar companies accountable to pay property taxes. Students should not go to school to learn qualities that make them a good worker, but rather to learn what they are passionate about and the tools they need to make a difference in this world. Instead of asking students what they want to be when they grow up, America needs to be asking them what problem they want to solve. When this shift happens, students learn that they are the difference they want to see in the world and that is when real change in the world will happen.

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