

Chapter 2

Reclaiming Schools as Public Sites for Democratic Imagination

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Current Discourses of Education and the Privatization of the Educational Imagination

As someone who believes, like Meier (2002), that schools have the democratic responsibility of dreaming for a better future for *all* our students, I have been deeply troubled by the nature of current educational policies around the world. Ideologically, my chief concern has been the damage that these policies have inflicted on the very notion of the public by embracing, both enthusiastically and unproblematically, the logic of the market as the panacea for public education (Ball 2009; Broom 2011; Klenowski 2009). This concern finds additional justification when examining the political significance of the contemporary infatuation with market-based school reforms. As Rizvi and Lingard (2010) explain, the widespread adoption of this logic of the market is neither a phenomenon germane to education nor one neatly contained within the limits of national states. Rather, these authors suggest that the strong presence of the market in educational policies needs to be conceptualized as a part of the *global neoliberal imaginary* that has informed public policies around the world in the last two decades, an imaginary that promotes a vision of society grounded in individualism and competition and that consequently offers the principles of the market as the best solution for any governmental problem. These authors are quick to warn us that this imaginary does not affect all political or educational systems the same way and that public governmental systems always filter new policies through the national cultural and political traditions. Despite these national and local differences, however, these authors explain current educational policies around the world as sharing an undeniable reliance on the rationale of the market. In their estimation, “there is an unmistakable global trend toward a convergence in thinking about [neoliberal] educational values” (p. 72), values that they identify as

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the underlying principles for the widespread support for school privatization and for the adoption of education reforms that prioritize accountability and efficiency over democracy and equality. The forces spreading these neoliberal values, Rizvi and Lingard further explain, are not just national governments eager to espouse educational policies that promise efficient solutions to the pressing need to prepare young citizens to compete in a global economy. As they note, “[o]rganizations such as the OECD, the UE, APEC, UNESCO and the World Bank have become major sites for the organization of knowledge about education, and have created a cajoling discourse of ‘imperatives of the global economy’ for education” (p. 79).

Pedagogically, my main concern with these policies has been their lack of democratic imagination. A large body of educational literature has compellingly argued that educators and schools need to ground their educational commitment to democracy in an earnest awareness of the multiple and complex ways in which educational systems produce and reproduce social inequality (Anyon 2006; Biesta 2007; Gordon and Nocon 2008; Perry et al. 2003; Tabulawa 2003; Valenzuela 1999). Despite the soundness of this argument, however, current educational policies work with a surprisingly anachronistic pedagogical simplicity. Instead of advancing Dewey’s (1916/1997) understanding of the individual process of learning as a crucial democratic space that should also enrich society and should, therefore, work toward the common good (Broom 2011), for example, current educational policies have mostly ignored issues of curriculum and pedagogy (Nordtveit 2012; Rizvi and Lingard 2010). Broom (2011) explains that in the logic of these reforms and their emphasis on efficiency and the individual, “teaching is narrowed to individualistic and competitive market ideology, and encased in the value of consumption and competition” (p. 143). Not surprisingly, given this emphasis, current educational policies reject ideological and cultural specificity. Far from recognizing the relations of power involved in the process of schooling, the discourses that articulate these policies claim political neutrality. The principle of efficiency, these discourses reason, makes any practice that achieves this goal inherently good. Likewise, rather than embracing the call to contextualize teaching in the deep and respectful understanding of the local and cultural knowledges of the communities served by schools, the teaching practices embraced by these policies are increasingly homogenous and removed from any social context. In the logic of these reforms, achievement rests on motivating students and on teaching them to succeed in the assessment system so there is no need for cultural specificity.

By and in themselves, these ideological and pedagogical concerns are not new. As critical educators have successfully unveiled, public schools have articulated dominant conservative ideologies in many ways (Apple 2001; Cuban 2004; McIntyre 2000; Willis 1981). We also know that with the exception of a few historical moments or geographical pockets and despite the possibilities for social mobility they have offered, public schools have been particularly reluctant to become the democratic institution we wish(ed) for. When framed within the global neoliberal imaginary that requires schools to embrace and prioritize standardization and competition above issues of democracy and social equality (Rizvi and Lingard 2010),

however, these concerns appear as a powerful warning of the fragile status of the *publicness* of public education. When framed this way, these concerns no longer refer only to the well-known inherent difficulties for schools to realize their democratic potential but also to the damage that current policies are inflicting on our democratic imagination. Against the neoliberal landscape that worships the individual and that disdains the collective as the main referent for democracy, these concerns suggest that what is really at stake in these policies is not just the risk of weakening the relationship between education and democracy, as important as this is, but, more importantly, our own ability to *imagine* this relationship within the public referents that current policies are so efficiently erasing.

At a first glance, it may seem that the main challenge to exercise this kind of imagination may be explained by the rapidly increasing number of educational spaces that operate under the logic of the private. As schools are increasingly privatized and the involvement of the business sector considerably expands to school tasks that have been traditionally in the hands of educators such as learning outcomes' assessment or professional development, it is evident that public spaces in education, by whatever definition we apply to this term, have been greatly reduced (Fabricant and Fine 2013; Reid 2002; Watkins 2011). Likewise, schools and educators working in public schools are increasingly required to work *as* private institutions, that is to say, to embrace teaching and organizational practices rooted in the principles of the market rather than in democratic traditions of schooling (Ball and Youdell 2009; Hopmann 2008; Luke 2006; Meier and Wood 2004).

Taking a closer look, however, the challenge to exercise our democratic imagination seems to be mostly an ideological problem defined by the way current educational policies have bounded our imagination to the private. As public schools are increasingly asked to follow the logic of the market, as they are asked to subjugate pedagogy to efficiency, or as they are required to prioritize students' outcomes over the democratic processes that should lead to these outcomes, they are, in essence, being asked to abdicate the educational legacy that has anchored democratic visions in education and to dream within the limits of what private interests can offer. Likewise, current educational discourses are asking both educators and the public to relinquish any hopes for public schools to be agents of change and to entrust the social aspirations of schools to private visions of education. In imposing these demands, educational policies are requiring schools to reject the fundamental proposition that public education is to serve the public good and that "the nature and content of education ought to be—must be—decided by public conversation, not just by a collection of individual choices" (Covaleskie 2007, p. 32). The analysis of two current documentaries, *Waiting for "Superman"* (Guggenheim 2010) and *La Educación Prohibida* [prohibitive education] (Doin 2012), illustrate the power of these discourses and the consequent delegitimization of public schools as sites of democratic imagination.

Released in 2010 in the U.S. and directed by Davis Guggenheim, the first of these documentaries, *Waiting for "Superman,"* narrates the stories of five students, Anthony, Francisco, Bianca, Daisy, and Emily, as they anxiously await the response

to their application to charter schools. Four of these students are students of color, three of whom attend urban public schools and one who attends a Catholic school. The fifth student is White and attends a suburban school. As the film tells the stories of these young men and women, it also presents a diagnosis of the main maladies of public education in U.S. In the estimation of the movie and of the educational experts whom it features, the root of the troubles of public education is the poor quality of teachers. This assessment is presented through the testimony of experts such as Erik Hanushek, an educational policy analyst and Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institute of Stanford University who states that, “[i]f in fact we could just eliminate the bottom 6–10% of our teachers and replace them with an average teacher, we could bring the average U.S. student up to the level of Finland, which is at the top of the world today.” The documentary bases this assessment on two intimately linked arguments. The first targets the notoriously bureaucratic structure that characterizes public schools. It is this malfunctioning structure, the film contends, that keeps bad teachers in schools even when some schools, such as those depicted in the documentary to explain the notion of *dropout factories*, have dramatically failed students like the ones featured in the movie. The second argument presents teachers’ unions as the main obstacle to real change in schools. According to the movie, these organizations have highly profited from the schools’ bureaucratic systems and have stubbornly insisted on defending the tenure system that has kept *bad* teachers in schools. Consistent with this analysis, the film proposes to endorse schools free from bureaucracy and teachers’ unions, in this case charter schools, as the solution for public education. The film makes multiple references to this solution by presenting the testimony of multiple experts and leaders of private organizations and charter schools who see competition and efficiency as the central tenants of education. With the exception of Randi Weingarten, the president of The American Federation of Teachers, who appears only for a few minutes, the film makes no allusion to successful public schools nor does it make any attempt to include the voices of those educational experts who have long understood issues of teacher quality and school bureaucracy as fundamental elements in their advocacy for public education.

As persuasively as the argument in favor of charter schools is articulated throughout the movie, the most compelling call to endorse private visions of education comes through the emotional conundrum the audience experiences at the end of the film. In these last scenes, the film intentionally sustains the viewer’s loyalty to the hopes that the families of these five students have placed on charter schools by chronicling the public lottery process in which the numbers from a pool determine the accepted applications. As these students and their families enact their desires for more educational possibilities, and as they anxiously hold the number they expect to be called next, the audience is asked to anticipate the feelings of relief or consternation that these families would display while learning about their educational fates. This emotional alliance with the families is undoubtedly, one of the most successful ideological propositions of the movie. The emotions in these last minutes are so powerful that even the thought of imagining public schools as possible receivers of these children’s hopes seemed like an act of betrayal. If we *really care* about these families, this documentary implies, we *need to* believe in charter schools as

the best opportunity for these children and to let the magic of the private guide our educational aspirations. As Stern (2012) illustrates when reflecting on why his own students in a graduate educational policy class cried in these last scenes, the audience is asked to enter a “neoliberal Utopian space” (p. 394), a space free from the constraints of the social and from the messiness of education as a democratic endeavor. Ultimately, and as the title of the movie indicates, the audience is compelled to see the charter’s vision of education and the logic therein represented as the educational *Superman* that would secure the academic achievement of not only these five students but of the multitude of Anthonies, Franciscos, Daysys, Biancas and Emilies across the world.

Shortly after its release, many educational theorists raised numerous and important critiques to the analyses and solutions offered within this documentary (Ravitch 2010; Swalwell and Apple 2011). Ravitch (2010), for example, explains that the film conveniently leaves out crucial information such as the fact that students’ academic scores in non-unionized states are no higher than in unionized states. She also contends that the documentary ignores studies on charter schools such as the one conducted by the Center for Research on Educational Outcomes in 2009 documenting that only one out of five charter schools performed better than their public counterparts and that almost 40% of charter schools performed worse than public schools. Despite the significance of these critiques within the educational community familiar with education policy analysis, however, the movie has been positively received by the public at large and has been regarded as a bold and truthful account of education in the U.S. This warm reception by the public suggests that this text has also been an important symbolic medium to channel the social hopes for public education in U.S. away from public schools and closer to private visions of education. This message is hard to miss in the movie. By refusing to present public schools or educational theorists who have worked with the democratic traditions in education, the documentary could safely portray public schools as beyond hope. Once this fact was established, it could also safely present people like Bill Gates and other business-oriented educational leaders as the guarantors of our hopes. Portrayed as the only ones with enough determination and knowledge to assure these hopes, this movie identifies people like Bill Gates or founders of charter schools of the world as the real saviors of public education. This call to relinquish our hope for public schools and to entrust our democratic imagination to private visions of education is poignantly illustrated by the testimony of one these founders who states, “25 years ago there was no proof that something else worked. Well, now we know what works. We know that is just a lie that disadvantaged kids can’t learn. We know that if you apply the right accountability standards you can get fabulous results so, why would we do something else?”

The second documentary, *La Educación Prohibida* (Doin 2012), was released in Spanish in 2012 as an exclusive online documentary and was directed by German Doin, a young professional whose only claim to education is his interest to make schools a more interesting place. The bases of the film are a series of reflections of numerous educators in Latin America and Spain on the role of schools. As in the case of *Waiting for “Superman,”* the director explicitly states that this was not a film

against public schools. Also as in *Waiting for "Superman,"* any viewer familiar with the democratic traditions of education poignantly feels the pressure to surrender to the democratic imagination that only the private seems to be able to achieve. The main problem with schools, according to this film, is that they repress students' autonomy and initiative. The testimonies of the experts in the documentary, interestingly, most of them from private schools, leave no doubt that schools have been very authoritarian and damaging for students as individuals and have greatly curtailed their creative possibilities. The solution offered to this problem is the implementation of active and innovative methodologies that focus on the individual and that nurture their cognitive and emotional abilities.

Taken at face value, it is difficult to resist the persuasion of this argument and easy to understand the rapid popularity of this film in Spanish-speaking countries. After all, the education reforms in most of these countries are justified by the need to educate more democratic citizens who must be able to understand the dangerous connections between the state apparatus and authoritarianism (Silva 1998; Varela 2007). In terms of our educational hopes, however, the film clearly suggests that we look for the democratic possibilities of these methodologies in private schools. Those of us familiar with the ideological critique of child-centered pedagogies know that public schools are not a natural habitat to this autonomous and critical-minded individual (Carter 2010; Rodríguez 2011; Tabulawa 2003; Walkerdine 1984). Rather, as these critiques imply, child-centered pedagogies that dismiss the historicity and subjectivity of students, such as the ones presented in this documentary, promote a fictional idea of a universal and intrinsically democratic individual who seems to exist only in elitist private schools. The movie clearly channeled the viewer's imagination in this direction by filtering the argument for more democratic methodologies exclusively through private visions of education. In this case, the views of the private educational organizations that sponsored the film and which perspectives were represented in the testimonies of the people interviewed by the documentary makers prevent an appreciation of public schooling.

It would be unfair to think that these two documentaries were conceived with the explicit purpose of dismantling public education. In fact, both directors have strongly rejected such arguments when presented with them. When looking at these movies discursively, however, it becomes evident that these two texts skillfully articulate current educational discourses' invitation to ignore public schools as sites of educational imagination and to look for innovative school changes in other venues. Educationally, the grounds for this invitation are highly questionable. Public schooling, for all its shortcomings, has been indeed the home of some important democratic and socially responsible visions of education (Meier 2002; Sahlberg 2011; Apple and Beane 1995; Fielding and Moss 2011; Wrigley et al. 2012b). The positive reception of the two films, despite some of the critiques they received, suggests that they are powerful media texts that direct our attention away from the democratic potential of public schools. Of particular importance in this regard is the fact that this message to redirect our attention to private universes is sent from political sources traditionally opposed to the forces of privatization. The political right's advocacy for private solutions is hardly surprising. But these two documen-

taries come from directors who proclaim leftist political views. Davis Guggenheim, for example, is known for his political closeness with Al Gore, the democratic candidate in the U.S. 2000 presidential election. Guggenheim is also the Academy Award winner for *An Inconvenient Truth*, a documentary about climate change that intended to raise international awareness about this issue. Furthermore, he openly claims a leftist and pro-union stance. Yet, *Waiting for "Superman"* has unapologetically articulated the call for privately-managed schools as the saviors of public education in the U.S. around the unmistakable conservative principles of competition and privatization. Guggenheim's infatuation with privatization despite his political affiliation suggests that the danger of current educational discourses is the easiness with which it moves through the different phases of the political spectrum and the way in which it seems to *make sense* even for those in supposedly politically opposing camps. Without exonerating these two documentaries from their ideological complacency with conservative propositions, the next section examines the larger political context in which conservative views become so dangerously attractive, even to people who claim progressive political stands.

Mapping the Private Grounds of Public Education

Rizvi and Lingard (2010) contend that current educational policies' endorsement of privatization needs to be understood in the larger context of globalization and economic neoliberalism. Considering these larger contexts, these authors argue that privatization articulates new forms of public management germane to what has been defined as the move from government to governance that nations around the world have embraced when attempting to address the challenges of educating citizens for a global and fluid economy (Ball 2009b). When responding to these challenges, Rizvi and Lingard further explain, states started to perceive old public sector structures, including the hierarchical and bureaucratic nature of public schools, as obsolete and obstacles in pursuing economic changes. Consequently, most governments have attempted to replace these structures with new forms of public management borrowed from the business world that promised efficiency and higher accountability. The adoption of these practices, as explained by these authors, led to states effectively renouncing their central role in developing and implementing educational policies, calling for collaboration between the private and the public sector, and opening public educational spaces to private practices and private companies. The term *governance* has come to refer to this change in governments' modus operandi, and to the modes of government and governing that now involve new private actors in government and that call for private practices in the public sector (Ball 2009b).

As a public institution also moving from government to governance, education has also articulated new private visions of education in many areas of educational policy. Of particular importance for this analysis is the role of education in sustaining the "enterprise culture" that redefines social problems as cultural ones in neoliberal regimes. Alba et al. (2000) illustrate this process in countries such as Britain

and New Zealand in the 1990s. As they write, “[i]n the case of Britain, questions of national economic survival and competition in the world economy came increasingly to be seen under the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher and John Major as questions of cultural reconstruction” (pp. 37–38). These authors explain that the notion of an enterprise culture became a central proposition for all governmental practices in these countries. In this proposition, economic problems were no longer seen as the prerogative or responsibility of the state. Rather, the only way to promote economic growth, the logic of new public policies argued, was creating an enterprising culture in which citizens and organizations, including those in the public sector, worked together toward a stronger economy. The task of creating this culture, as Alba et al. further argue, necessarily required “remodeling institutions along commercial lines and encouraging the acquisition and use of enterprising qualities” (p. 38). Not surprisingly, education became a natural target to pursue such requirements as these. If the economy needed an enterprising culture, as Alba et al. document in the case of the educational debates taking place in New Zealand at that time, there was also a need for “reconstructing education so that it will deliver the necessary research, skills and attitudes required for New Zealand to compete in an increasingly competitive international economy” (p. 40).

Acknowledging the commonalities of this process of reconstruction but also recognizing the specificity of the local educational debates that articulated the move from government to governance in different countries, Rizvi and Lingard (2010) explain this new mandate for education to contribute to the enterprise culture by stating that, “around the world, education has become central to the production of the requisite human capital needed to achieve the maximum competitiveness within the global economy for individuals and nations alike” (p. 186). These authors further explain that in the context of the shift from government to governance, privatization increasingly appeared as the only way to ensure accountability and efficiency in the public sector so schools can produce and deliver the commensurate human capital.

Ball (2009a) and Ball and Youdell (2009) help us to further understand the implications of the move from government to governance in education and the resulting endorsement of privatization in schools by identifying important changes in current managerial practices that have changed the way we now expect schools to operate. These authors caution us that governments rarely propose, or adopt, national policies pursuing privatization as a consequence of perceived inaccuracies in the public system. Rather, these policies are usually implemented in the context of larger national goals such as stronger school accountability, school improvement, and school choice, for which consecution privatization appears as the most desirable tool.

This connection between privatization and national aspirations explains the different shapes that privatization takes in different political contexts. Ball and Youdell (2009) argue that in developing nations, for example, privatization is usually implemented through policies such as partnerships between private and public schools, improvement of school effectiveness, or the “establishment of education services in areas where education services have not previously existed” (p. 75). These authors identify the development of national curriculums in countries with no tradition or formal expertise in this area as a poignant example of the latter. In other countries,

particularly in UK and U.S., these authors explain, the practice of privatization permeates all areas of schools in pervasive and, many times, unrecognized ways. For Ball and Youdell, privatization in these countries involves both privatization *in* public education and the privatization *of* public education.

Privatization *in* education, what Ball and Youdell (2009) call *endogenous* privatization, can be defined as “the importing of ideas, techniques and practices from the private sector in order to make the public sector more like business and more business-like” (p. 74). The intent of these practices, or more accurately, of these technologies of education reform as they are referred to by these authors, is to produce a change in schools as public organizations. In the account of these authors, one of the consequences of these technologies has been the redefinition of the role of educators as managers. Referring specifically to the new role administrators play under the logic of privatization, Pongratz (2006) explains that, “[r]unning a school becomes a management task, with the aim of introducing new products and guiding internal restructuring” (p. 479). Within this logic, Pongratz further argues, “[t]he teacher disappears in a corresponding way, to reappear as a project leader or evaluation manager” (p. 479). Indeed, Pongratz argues that it is within the logic and the practices of privatization that sustain it that we have developed a different understanding of schools by which, “[i]ntensified competition among teachers and students is presented as ‘achievement equity’; the introduction of school fees becomes ‘cost-sharing’ and the plea for new structures of control turns into ‘cooperative autonomy’ (Bennhold 2002, p. 293)” (p. 479).

The privatization *of* public education, what Ball and Youdell (2009) name *exogenous* privatization, refers to the forms of privatization that “involve the opening up of public education services to private sector participation on a for-profit basis and using the private sector to design, manage or deliver aspects of public education” (p. 74). These authors identify these practices as a “fundamental feature of international education policy for the developing world” (p. 81) but argue that they have been insufficiently studied. To illustrate this notion of privatization, these authors further direct our attention to the numerous private companies that work at the national and international level in the delivery of educational services such as professional development, curriculum design, or student assessment.

This account of privatization as a new form of educational management is useful to assess the ubiquitous nature of this practice in all areas of education. To fully understand Guggenheim’s appeal to a narrative of public imagination grounded on the private, however, we need to make a brief incursion into the changing nature of the relationship between the state and the market that these new forms of private management have signified, and to the way in which the changes of this relationship redefined educational opportunity as a matter of personal benefit.

Some political theorists argue that the hegemonic nature of neoliberal policies that led to the pervasiveness of privatization are better explained as a part of a new neoliberal rationality of government that shifted the political burden of public policies from the state to the individual (Barry et al. 1996; Burchell 1993; Gordon 1991; Rose 1992 1996). Grounded in Foucault’s (1991) definition of *governmentality* as the changes in the underlying rationality for the practices of government, Gordon

(1991) explains the notion of political rationality as “a way or system of thinking about the nature of the practice of government (who can govern; what governing is; what or who is governed), capable of making some form of that activity thinkable and practicable both to its practitioners and to those upon whom it was practiced” (p. 3). For people like Burchell (1993), in the hegemonic narrative of neoliberalism this political rationality specifically involves renouncing forms of government based on the Keynesian welfare system of liberal regimes and adopting forms of government informed by the logic of the market. Neoliberal regimes, according to Foucault, no longer treat the market as an independent entity. Rather, they believe that the best way for the state to pursue economic growth is promoting the conditions that foster market growth and to require governmental organizations to mirror the practices of the market. In Burchell’s words, in neoliberalism, “[g]overnment must work *for* the game of market competition *as* a kind of enterprise itself [emphasis in the original]” (p. 275).

Rose (1992, 1996) argues that the establishment of an enterprising culture, which redefined the individual as an enterprising self, was chief among these conditions. To guarantee that the competitive and entrepreneurial game of the market is played to its best effect, neoliberalism proposes that all forms of individuals’ conduct adopt the same entrepreneurial rationality of the market. By following this proposal, Rose explains, the individual not only recreates market-based practices but, more importantly, becomes the fundamental pillar of this rationality. As this author further explains, individuals are also asked to take responsibility for themselves, to assume their life as a personal project for themselves-to become enterprising selves. In Rose’s words, in neoliberalism people are asked “to interpret its reality and destiny as matters of individual responsibility...to find meaning in existence by shaping its life through acts of choice” (p. 142).

This move from liberalism to neoliberalism as a way to understand the relationship between the state and the market was possible, following Foucauldian analyses, by employing new forms of governance that appeal to the subjectivity of the individual. Foucault (1988) terms such forms *technologies of the self* and defines them as those governmental practices and rationales that no longer submit individuals to certain forms of domination but that exercise power by eliciting the response of individuals to act freely and to be agents of power themselves. Burchell (1993) emphasizes the importance of these techniques by conceptualizing their articulation as the construction of a “relationship between government and governed which increasingly depends upon ways in which individuals are required to assume the status of being the subject of their lives, upon the ways in which they fashion themselves as certain kinds of subjects, upon the ways they practice their freedom” (p. 276). Rose (1992, 1996) provides a poignant example of this move from the social responsibility of state to the individual in the field of therapeutics. He argues that in fields such as psychology, for example, these new technologies of the self promote the notion of an autonomous being that is being governed by his/her own acts of choice in every aspect of personal life. As he illustrates by observing the dramatic growth of the literature on “self-help,” psychology increasingly relies on

Pedagogies and Curriculum to (Re)imagine Public
Education

Transnational Tales of Hope and Resistance

Rodríguez, E. (Ed.)

2015, IX, 224 p. 1 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-981-287-489-4