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# Raising the Charter School Cap in Massachusetts: The Consequence of an Uncapped Neoliberal Rationality

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Charter schools have found increasing political support in Massachusetts despite a lack of research<sup>1</sup> conclusively demonstrating that they are more effective than traditional public schools. Charters are attractive to politicians, in part, because they align with values, such as privatization, individualism, and choice, which are central to neoliberal ideology. Harvey (2006) noted, the “founding figures of neoliberal thought took political ideals of individual liberty and freedom as sacrosanct, as ‘central values of civilization,’ and in doing so they chose wisely and well, for these are indeed compelling and great attractors as concepts” (p. 146). Beginning with the *Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993*, those neoliberal ideals began to infiltrate public education

discourse in the state. Additionally, in 2010, charter schools in Massachusetts were explicitly touted as socially just options for parents seeking alternatives to their public schools under *An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap*.

The privileging of neoliberalism was secured in the U.S. ethos with what Giroux (2014) called the “political marriage of Margaret Thatcher to Ronald Reagan.” Moreover, Thatcher is infamously known for suggesting, “There is no such thing as a society. There are individual men and women, and there are families... It’s our duty to look after ourselves... People have got the entitlements too much in mind, without the obligations” (as cited in Lipman, 2011, p. 11). Reagan’s and Thatcher’s distorted view of individualism, usually promoted as individual choice, destroys social responsibility while insulating the neoliberal project.

Hyper-individualism is at the heart of neoliberal ideology, or what Block and Somers (2014) called *market fundamentalism*, weakening communal responsibility and annihilating the social contract. For this article, neoliberalism is defined as “a political, economic, and ideological system that privileges the market as the most efficient platform for distributing social goods, [and] minimizes the role of government responsibility in assuring collective well-being”

(Fabricant & Fine, 2013, p. 4). Charter schools become vehicles for reproducing hyper-individualism, and proponents mask the profit-based, exploitative, and discriminatory practices of charters with social justice arguments.

In 2015, Massachusetts' charter debate took on renewed life when Governor Charlie Baker advocated lifting the charter school cap, which was a ballot question for the 2016 election. Despite its defeat, a charter referendum will no doubt resurface, especially given Baker's statement, "My view on this is simple...I don't really care how the cap gets lifted, I just want the cap to be lifted" (as cited in Schoenberg, 2015, para. 2). Much of the media coverage was predictably framed as a division between those who view charters as siphoning much-needed money away from traditional public education and those who view public education as a burdensome drain on local economies; however, more is at stake than budget allocations. Charter schools, as the progeny of neoliberal ideology, privatize and corporatize a fundamental democratic institution: public education. Thus, while funding is an important aspect of the conversation, as charter proponents reassess and strategize anew, opponents need to focus on exposing the underlying neoliberal ideology and policy players

that manipulate social justice claims, deny socio-historical factors that perpetuate inequality, and allow some groups to profit from education. In Massachusetts, relationships between key policy makers, think tanks, and entrepreneurs must be transparent to voters, especially those involving Governor Charlie Baker, his appointees, and the Pioneer Institute.

### **The Pioneer Institute**

The Pioneer Institute is a conservative think tank in Massachusetts guided by free market ideology and the belief that competition improves education. According to its website, the Pioneer Institute is:

An independent, *non-partisan, privately* funded research organization that seeks to improve the quality of life in Massachusetts through civic discourse and intellectually rigorous, *data-driven* public policy solutions based on *free market* principles, *individual liberty* and *responsibility*, and the ideal of *effective, limited and accountable government* [emphasis added to underscore neoliberal diction]. (Pioneer Institute, n.d.a)

The Pioneer Institute's website also proposed an argument that, "The application of free markets is neither a conservative nor, even, libertarian dictum. Markets work. Over the

past half-century, governments of all political persuasions have used markets to provide more effective and efficient services” (Pioneer Institute, n.d.b). Free market ideology is the cornerstone of neoliberalism and, for charters, this notion of privatizing public goods to alleviate the strain on the state budget and taxpayers sounds appealing to the populace, but an ethos of individualism and competition is reproduced at the expense of the social contract.

Furthermore, upon closer inspection of the institute and its relationships, one sees ties to well-funded proponents of neoliberalism, such as David Koch, the Lovett and Ruth Peters Foundation, The Stanton Foundation, and Walton Family Foundation. These are some of the “Lead Donors” with contributions greater than \$100,000 (Pioneer Institute, n.d.c). In addition to the Pioneer Institute, these individuals and foundations provide millions of dollars to private organizations, non-profits, super PACS, and political campaigns to promote their neoliberal ideology.

Notably, Governor Charlie Baker, as a founding member and former executive director of the Pioneer Institute, maintains ties to Pioneer through several key relationships. First, his father, Charles D. Baker Sr., serves as an academic

advisor for the institute. Second, James Peyser, Baker’s current Massachusetts Secretary of Education, a position one would assume advocates for public education, is a former executive director of the Institute. In addition, Peyser helped create the Massachusetts Charter School Resource Center and was the managing director at New Schools Venture Fund, both of which provide support for charter schools. Lastly, Paul Sagan, Baker’s choice for chair of the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, supports charter schools, having served as chairman of the Massachusetts Business Leaders for Charter Public Schools. Additionally, Sagan was also a former senior advisor to the World Economic Forum (Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2015), which was “founded to serve global business interests...[and] emphasizes human capital and entrepreneurship education” (Spring, 2015, p. 105).

Governor Charlie Baker and other supporters of charters should not be seen as malicious or deceptive, but their neoliberal ideology is misguided and will have devastating consequences for the state and public education. Their pro-charter position is founded on a problematic ideology that advocates the superiority of market-based solutions to

societal problems, causing education to be seen as a consumable product rather than a public good. Notably, one cannot discount that public education is a \$600 billion dollar sector (Lipman, 2014), and profits are made in privatizing public education. In a consumer-driven society that has been reproducing this ideology since the 1980s, talking about education in economic, market-driven terms seems commonsensical. Governor Baker and the Pioneer Institute view the achievement gap as an educational issue that presumably can be “fixed” by offering additional choices into an educational marketplace.

### **The Flaws of Neoliberal Ideology**

Problematically, disciples of neoliberal ideology discount fundamental socio-historical factors that affect race and class in the United States. Governor Baker, Secretary of Education Peyser, and Chairman Sagan could make the argument that examining history does not change today’s reality; however, current segregation in communities is the result of historic policies intended to divide. Eurocentric, White ontology is embedded in the way the achievement gap is defined. This “[eurocentrism] is an apparatus of violence and a discourse of assimilation that actively dominates and destroys” (De Lissovoy, 2010, p. 285). Whites consistently do not recognize their

social position and privilege partially because White ontology has been normalized to appear as natural and commonsensical (Brown & De Lissovoy, 2010; Inwood & Martin, 2008; Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005).

While often overlooked, the fact that many Black and Brown students in urban schools are living in poverty is no coincidence. Richard Rothstein, a historian and research associate at the Economic Policy Institute, commented in an interview with Terry Gross for NPR’s *Fresh Air* in 2015 that U.S. citizens are ignorant of their history and the racialized policies intended to maintain segregation, even after it became illegal. Rothstein described the various policies under the Federal Housing Authority and Public Works Administration that fostered racial segregation; the G.I. Bill that provided mortgage loans to White, not Black, veterans; and the generational appreciation of wealth afforded White families because they were permitted to purchase homes early in the twentieth century. In particular, the impediment to home purchases has a direct correlation to today’s wealth disparity between White and Black families. Rothstein explained that the loss of opportunity for African-American families has compounded over time so that today

“African-American wealth is about 5 percent of White family wealth” (Gross, 2015, para. 9). Clearly knowing this history impacts how one articulates the idea of meritocracy and choice. Black and Brown families are not less affluent because they did not or do not work as hard as White families or because they choose to live in urban settings; but rather, this segregation is the result of generational, systemic racist policies meant to subjugate and limit access and real choice.

Conversations about institutional racism and racialized economic policies that harm communities, families, and children are problematically absent from the charter school discourse. At the heart of the U.S. master narrative is privileging Whiteness and ignoring structural racism. The common-sense normalization of White, Eurocentric structures and its relationship to neoliberalism masks the systemic racism. With respect to the charter debate in Massachusetts, this idea is particularly relevant given that 52 of the current 71 Massachusetts charter schools are located in cities in which more than half of the students attending come from families designated as low income, and the majority are Black and Brown students (Massachusetts Commonwealth Charter Schools, 2015). Thus, without explicitly attending to the

racial and socioeconomic factors, charters will simply continue to reproduce the “tacit ‘racial contract’ that naturalizes domination” (Brown & De Lissovoy, 2010, p. 608).

### **Charters and the Myth of the Meritocracy**

In addition to maintaining White Eurocentrism, charters reproduce problematic meritocratic claims. Supporters use the argument that charters are better equipped to close the achievement gap, framing their position as socially just and, thereby, co-opting and distorting truly emancipatory, socially just education. Saltman (2012) argued that the market fundamentalists’ view of education “has little to do with social justice in the sense of transforming the economy by ameliorating the devastating effects and dire inequalities of wealth and income” (p. 75); instead, neoliberals pilfer the true tenets of social justice, masking their intent with appealing tropes such as *inclusion*, *choice* and *economic equality*. Unfortunately, this emphasis on economic outcomes and the perversion of socially just education undermines the role education can and should play in preparing compassionate citizens capable of defending truly democratic ideals (Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2011; McChesney & Nichols, 2016).

As job insecurity increas-

es, especially for Black and Brown students in cities in which unemployment numbers are usually 60% greater than those of their White peers (McChesney & Nichol, 2016), the meritocratic and human capital arguments are beginning to erode. Moreover, speculation about future jobs tends toward *high talent* and creativity (McChesney & Nichol, 2016), and the standardized education provided to students in charters does not encourage imaginative thinkers. Many charters focus on *drill and practice* and *teaching to the test* to increase their standardized test scores, which charters use to bolster their claims that they are closing the achievement gap.

Consider Eva Moskowitz's Success Academy Charter Schools in New York City, which were criticized in February 2016 for their *tough love* and *no excuses* discipline. Supporters argue Moskowitz's schools get results, which is limited to performance on standardized assessments; however, this reliance on standardized testing reflects a "denial of the politics of knowledge" (Saltman, 2012, p. 76). Knowledge is neither static nor to be consumed without context. Furthermore, these corporatized charter schools, with their emphasis on discipline, appear to be more focused on teaching compliance. The columnist Michelle Gold-

berg (2016) commented about the Success Academy in her neighborhood and noted, "I know that there are Success Academy parents who love the charters. [But] one thing seems to be undeniable: The schools in my neighborhood teach some children to challenge authority, and others to submit to it" (paras. 5–6). Goldberg highlights the way in which charters, like Success Academy, emphasize obedience over imagination. Thus, just as there is a class hierarchy in the United States so too there is a tiered education system in which some students receive an education that prepares them for high talent occupations. Others, like the students at the Success Academies, with their emphasis on *tough love*, are taught submission.

### Concluding Remarks

As part of the neoliberal ideology, charters are attractive to politicians, like Charlie Baker, and think tanks, like the Pioneer Institute, because of a perceived superiority in the privatization of services and claims about choice, individualism, and closing the achievement gap. As noted, public education is a \$600 billion sector (Lipman, 2014), and, while the profiteering has not been exhaustively discussed in this article, mentioning it again is worthwhile. For example, Mockowitz received a personal salary close to \$600,000

in 2013, and her schools took in \$34.6 million that same year (Chapman, 2014). Furthermore, like the Lead Donors Circle, contributing thousands of dollars to the Pioneer Institute, Diane Ravitch (2014) noted that Hedge Fund managers make sizable donations to charters as well as to political candidates who can protect charter school interests: “They are big givers to charters, and they are big givers to political candidates who support charters” (para. 1). In Massachusetts, charter schools are potentially lucrative, and these financial incentives, coupled with discourse around choice, freedom, and individualism, make for compelling arguments.

Supporters of charters ignore socio-historical racism, advocating a model of education that reproduces static, Eurocentric knowledge and neoliberal, individualistic, and meritocratic claims. The neoliberal rationality underlying charter support advocates competition as a means of improving education and uses perverted social justice arguments to further its agenda. Although public education is not without problems, as long as it remains public, hope exists: “Losing public schools to corporate control results in public schools being captured as one more site for corporate knowledge reproduction and the expansion of

consumerism and anti-democratic Social Darwinian forms of sociality” (Saltman, 2012, p. 91). Once privatized, the values and beliefs of the “owners” and constituents, like those in Pioneer Institute and the funders to which they are beholden, dictate the curricula.

Sadly, in the U.S., our collective humanity has been forgotten and replaced with an economic rationality. The only way to “[replace] the logic of the market is with social logic” (Robinson, 2014, p. 233), which will be achieved through Freire’s process of *conscientização* or critical consciousness, especially regarding the neoliberal rationality that has pervaded Massachusetts’ education policy decisions for the last twenty years. Raising critical consciousness and uncapping awareness requires a social pedagogical project that reflects what De Lissovoy (2010) called “a pedagogical orientation of lovingness” (p. 288) or Freire’s concept of a pedagogy of love: “A pedagogy of love can best be understood as deeply purposeful educational practice fueled by an emancipatory political vision rooted in what Freire considered our ‘true vocation: to be human’” (Darder, 2015, p. 63). Those opposed to raising the charter cap have to expand the argument beyond funding concerns and begin to raise critical consciousness about the



selfish and socially unjust effects of neoliberal ideology. In other words, they need to rehumanize education.

<sup>1</sup> See Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) 2009 national and 2013 urban studies of charter schools and Abdulkadiroglu et al.'s 2009 Boston charter study.

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