
NEOLIBERALISM, CRITICAL PEDAGOGY, AND THE CHILD

Caitlin Howlett
Indiana University

Like so many people, my life is inundated with children. I have always had an affinity for children insofar as they appear to me to be much more inquisitive and open-minded than the average so-called adult, and thus I enjoy springing big ideas on them to see what emerges. For instance, I recently engaged in a twenty-minute-long conversation with a seven year old about capitalism. One certainly could question the way I began and framed the conversation, but, for the purpose of this paper, that matters less than the fact that I was able to sustain a seven year old in such a conversation for twenty minutes and, further, that I learned something myself in the process: that this particular first grader very deeply knows and feels the difference between finding an answer and being given the answer, between learning for the sake of learning and learning for the sake of being right, and, further, understands the sense of injustice that comes along with having educational possibilities limited by money (this human is often very aware of the inequalities that exist between classrooms, schools and homes, for instance). At the same time, it is worth noting that this same child also loves being right *and* loves money—I am constantly scorned for not knowing the answers to his many, many questions, as lack of certainty is very unsettling for this human. Further, on more than one occasion I have helped him count every penny in his piggy bank to keep track of his earnings, and his favorite book is, for now, a story about a grumpy Donald Duck and his attempt to make and save money. He therefore can already raise questions about the relationship between money and education of the sort that I expect from my college students. I bring this up not because I think this child is special in both understanding and having knowledge about the relationship between education and capitalism, but because, I contend, he is not.

This anecdote harkens back to Charles Bingham and Gert Biesta's work on the figure of the child in Jacques Rancière's and Paulo Freire's emancipatory work. Here, Bingham and Biesta argue that the figure of the child marks an important site of divergence for these two scholars. Whereas Rancière posits the child as always already political, the authors argue that Freire's method suggests a view of the child as not-yet political, or as a psychological figure.¹ Pedagogically, this is important because it means that Rancière can situate the child as always already an actor in any political moment whereas Freire must situate the child as someone who is not-yet an actor but who first needs to undergo a method that brings about a psychological shift so that the child can

¹ Charles Bingham and Gert Biesta, *Jacques Rancière: Education, Truth, Emancipation* (London and New York: Continuum, 2010), 69.

participate politically in the future. Building upon this critique of Freire and putting it alongside the above story, I am interested in the way such a dichotomy about children as political is also grounded in an understanding of the child as knowledgeable, such that to view the child as political is to see them as capable of producing knowledge, and to see the child as not-yet political is to see them as not-yet having legitimate knowledge. This paper thus marks an epistemological extension of Bingam and Biesta's argument. Further, I extend this critique to the work of critical pedagogies, particularly that of Henry Giroux, to argue that critical pedagogies that assume the child as not-yet having knowledge leave the child susceptible to the very neoliberal logics they supposedly intervene upon. I therefore offer a theoretical argument that it is necessary to engage children as political and knowledgeable in conversations about neoliberalism on the basis of it being central to their reality, and, further, that the failure to do so marks critical pedagogies' general weakness in the face of neoliberalism.

NEOLIBERALISM, CRITICAL PEDAGOGY, AND THE CHILD

There is a fundamental connection between critical pedagogy and neoliberalism insofar as critical pedagogy locates neoliberalism as a site of oppression, and neoliberalism must either appropriate or erase critical pedagogies in order for it to operate satisfactorily in schools. Henry Giroux argues that neoliberalism is a logic based on the marriage of capitalism to liberal values such that freedom, value, and equality are determined largely through market value. In education, he argues, these logics reduce students to "consuming and marketable subjects."² Further, he notes that an effect of this is the relegation of students who deviate from the norms asserted by that logic to marginal and exploitable positions. Neoliberalism also represents the replacement of creativity, imagination, and even education itself, with market-driven reform, standardization, instrumental rationality, and the "pursuit of profits." Giroux thus argues that the purpose of critical pedagogies is in part to label neoliberal logics as dehumanizing and to orient education around conscientization or critical consciousness. Critical pedagogies have played a central role in challenging neoliberalism by positing a view of students as active co-investigative agents capable of participating in the naming of their reality, in imagining different futures, and in the possibility of liberation, humanization, well-being, or self-actualization. These ideas are largely based off of those of Paulo Freire, and are further exemplified by the work of the likes of bell hooks.

For Freire, education can operate to either serve oppressive or liberatory purposes, however, true education is only that which serves liberatory ones. This purpose of education is grounded in a concern for caring about one's humanity above all else, which has been undermined by powerful global and local systems

² Henry Giroux, "When Schools Become Dead Zones of the Imagination: A Critical Pedagogy Manifesto," *Policy Futures in Education* 12, no. 4 (2014): 497.

of oppression that depend upon the dehumanization of particular groups of people for their existence. This model of education forecloses thinking, treating students as objects and as only deserving of being fed that knowledge that privileges the interests of the oppressors and systems of oppression.³ Education, then, must account for its participation in such dehumanization, especially because it doesn't have to—instead, it can be and should be a site for liberation.⁴ Through liberatory pedagogy, and problem solving methods, grounded in communication and dialogue between student and teacher, education can privilege what Freire calls “the posing of the problems of human beings in their relations with the world” and hopefully articulate and practice new ways of participating in humanization.⁵

This understanding of education as a site of resistance is precisely what motivates bell hooks's interest in Freire and critical pedagogy. For instance, in *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks discusses how she was inspired by Freire's critique of education and its resonance with her own educational experiences growing up as a black girl in the American South. She thus famously attempts to extend Freire's work to engage more directly with issues of race, sexuality, emotion, and pleasure in the classroom.⁶ Given the cold, serious, stale atmosphere of education produced by the banking model in schools, it is an act of resistance to become excited and desirous of emancipatory knowledge.⁷ In order to develop such excitement, she argues that the classroom must be understood as and made into a communal place in which teachers and students alike can become personally engaged with each other, boundaries between individuals and groups can be challenged, transgressions of and against oppressive systems of knowledge and logics of being can be encouraged, and new visions for human interaction can be created.⁸ Unlike Freire, however, she examines oppression through an intersectional approach, seeing race, sex, gender, and class as systems that work together and situate each individual uniquely within systems of domination and marginalization.⁹ The implication of this approach for education is that it must specifically dedicate itself to a critical interrogation and problematization of those topics and issues most absent—and, she notes, *purposefully* absent—in the curriculum: race, gender, sexuality, class, capitalism, heteronormativity, neoliberalism, and imperialism. Without this, white, Western, capitalist logics will continually define humans and their freedoms in opposition to difference and only in complicity with homogenization.¹⁰ Against an education that privileges these standards and

³ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 30th Anniversary Edition*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Bloomsburg, 2000), 76–77.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁶ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (London: Routledge, 1994), 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 8–12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28–29.

forms of knowledge, she posits the need for engaged pedagogy, the name she gives to education as a practice of freedom, grounded in the promotion of well-being through self-actualization, risk, and vulnerability, which enable student and teacher to be whole humans in the classroom.¹¹

The appeal of these critical pedagogical approaches is challenged, though, when we return to a consideration of the figure of the child. One way to state my concern here is that while Freire takes seriously marginalization on the basis of nationality, ethnicity, and class, and hooks adds to his concerns the need to approach oppression intersectionally, there is still a need to address a different aspect of one's identity: age. By age, though, I don't really mean age—it is not that I think that people can, should, or need to challenge the amount of time they have on this planet, though maybe someday they will—but instead, how individuals are understood by themselves and others in terms of their so-called developmental stage, even, more simply, whether they are a child, a teen, an adolescent, a “youth,” or an adult. These terms are often treated as interchangeable, particularly when it comes to students: across multiple situations the same student can be considered a child, “youth”, teenager, or even an adult. For Freire, it makes a difference that much of his work focuses on adults, older grade school students, and, at best, teenagers. hooks, too, actually articulates her own pedagogical theory in *Teaching to Transgress* primarily in the context of higher education. And though they both speak of children, share their own experiences with children, and even identify their own childhood as central to the emergence of their theories, when it comes to implementing their proposed practices, the students in mind are rarely understood as younger than twelve. In either case, there is no evidence that children are understood as either knowledgeable or political in a way that would require their engagement as part of the process of liberation; the child remains absent and left to passively undergo the processes of humanization, just as Bingham and Biesta suggest.

To return to Giroux's work, it takes a bit more effort to understand what figure of the child is at play. Given that two of his most recent books are titled *Education Deficit and the War on Youth* (2013) and *Hearts of Darkness: Torturing Children in the War on Terror* (2010), one might assume that Giroux's work marks a deviation from Freire's and hooks's work precisely by giving special voice to the child. However, children remain central only to the articulation of the problem of neoliberalism for Giroux, and disappear when it comes to their role in critical pedagogy. In both of these texts, he is clear that neoliberalism is particularly hard on children,¹² as it leads children to “acquire the debilitating habits of what might be called a moral and political deficit disorder, which renders them passive and obedient in the face of a society based

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹² Henry Giroux, *Hearts of Darkness: Torturing Children in the War on Terror* (New York: Routledge, 2010), xxxiv; Giroux, *America's Education Deficit and the War on Youth* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2013), 16.

on massive inequalities in power, wealth and income.”¹³ However, in each case, and especially if we consider them together, Giroux’s articulation of a concern for the way children are being treated, used, terrorized, threatened, dehumanized and even silenced or killed because of neoliberalism, is challenged by his own assumptions about children and their role in the very practices, including critical pedagogies, that are to help them out of these circumstances.

Despite his own words and statements of interest and concern, Giroux tends to pay virtually no attention to children themselves in his suggested solutions. In *Hearts of Darkness*, children are important in the description of the problem, but are then given a total of two paragraphs worth of attention in the first four chapters. It is only in the fifth chapter, titled “The Unthinkable,” that Giroux takes up questions regarding the impact of the war on terror on children in a way that privileges the children’s views. However, his views of the role of the child in addressing the problems of neoliberalism, war, and globalization are revealed as he turns to the voices of children. Here, he offers only male voices, and all of those voices are from people aged thirteen and older. Additionally, the voices of these children are not highlighted to show any political or epistemological insight they may have for solving these problems but rather to show, in this case, the depth of Guantanamo Bay’s destruction. In the conclusion, children again are depoliticized and stripped of their knowledge as children are argued to be in need of protection from “undo suffering” and as the penultimate solution is found in a plea to then-President Obama to encourage self-reflection and the resurgence of democratic life in America.¹⁴ Despite his concern for children, they are given little voice and granted no space in which to participate, as knowers, as political actors, in the critical task of undoing neoliberalism.

The same phenomenon occurs in *America’s Education Deficit*, wherein Giroux’s argument about education and the youth in desperate need of it in the face of neoliberalism culminates in a similar exclusion of children from the realm of political action. Instead, the book is for progressives and “educational activists” who are asked to participate in a variety of progressive-oriented movements.¹⁵ In this way, we see that the main subjects of neoliberal intervention are, arguably, adults and education itself. There is little space here for children’s voices to be engaged with or represented, or for them to be considered on their own terms as capable of producing important insights regarding intervention, and the process of reform is relegated to the realm of policy and law changes at the institutional level, areas historically and intentionally left overwhelmingly inaccessible to children. In neither of these texts, then, are children actually seen as political or knowledgeable, nor are they seen as important to the solutions to the problem of neoliberalism. In other words, Giroux treats children as inherently not-yet political and not-yet knowledgeable and the role of critical pedagogy exists only as something for

¹³ Giroux, “When Schools Become Deadzones,” 493.

¹⁴ Giroux, *Hearts of Darkness*, 101.

¹⁵ Giroux, *America’s Education Deficit*, 22.

children to undergo in order to be seen as political and knowledgeable, or as fully human.

If critical pedagogy can be understood as a necessary or important part of disrupting neoliberalism, to what extent does the exclusion of the child, and the knowledge of the world that actual children have, effect the possibility of that disruption? In other words, does the absence of the child as a political actor and knower in these discourses matter to resisting and intervening upon neoliberalism in education? And, if so, what difference does it make?

FILLING THE VOID

I want to briefly argue that, yes, of course this absence matters and it also makes a tremendous difference. First, the absence of the child matters in part because children are very much central to neoliberalism's successes, and, further, they already are resisting in ways that we ought to pay attention to, so we ought to consider their participation in resisting neoliberalism just as we would any teen, college student, or adult who has a relationship to it. Daniel Thomas Cook's work on the commodification of childhood and children feeds the first argument. Cook argues that if we look closely at early 20th century American history, personhood was explicitly extended to children formally through law, policy, and certainly education, primarily because of the realization by the business-owning or professional class, including psychiatrists and academics, that children could play a unique role in the marketplace of both goods and services.¹⁶ That goods and services could be catered specifically to children in a way that encouraged adult participation in the market, precisely because of the acknowledged agency of children, is part of what triggered the toy, clothing, child psychology, pharmaceutical, and educational industries, for example, and thus also the extension of personhood to children themselves. His argument, then, is that in America, our very conception of the child as person has always been understood in capitalist and neoliberal terms, and that neoliberalism has always seen the child as central to its growth and power. As such, Cook concludes that children ought to be engaged with more explicitly as a means of articulating neoliberalism's effects and identifying its weaknesses.

Further, there is an important set of scholarly work that has convincingly argued that insofar as neoliberalism depends upon the negotiation of human life along particular *racial and sexual lines*, and not just capitalist ones, the idea of the child is central to understanding how we come to envision adults along such constructed lines. This also implicates adults' treatment of children, and therefore adults' understandings of themselves. Here, I am primarily thinking of the queer theorists Kathryn Bond Stockton and Lee Edelman, and queer-of-color critic Sara Ahmed. While they each take distinct and sometimes

¹⁶ Daniel Thomas Cook, *The Commodification of Childhood: The Children's Clothing History and the Rise of the Child Consumer* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004).

opposing positions on *the way* the idea of the child and also real individual children can be encouraged to serve systems of oppression, including neoliberalism, they do agree that the attempts to preserve an understanding of the child based on innocence and vulnerability erase those children who already complicate and challenge such definitions. For Stockton, the child is a concept that exists primarily to serve the needs and demands of adults, and each argues that definitions of the child—whether they be through discourses of innocence, development, nature, or need—almost exclusively reflect the desires and needs of those adults.¹⁷ As such, to avoid addressing the instability, incoherence, and inequalities that are central to most adult life, children are seen and defined as best kept from discourses of race, gender, nationality, class, health, and sexuality, and adults continue to define knowledge “appropriate for children” as that which de-races, de-genders, de-sexualizes, and de-classes *knowledge*, as if it were possible, and dismisses the child as a reliable knower, knowledge producer, and critic in and of their world.

Ahmed takes this one step further and argues that it is happiness itself that is often used to justify this definition and treatment of children as they enable “both a myth of happiness, of where and how happiness takes place, and a powerful legislative device, a way of distributing time, energy, and resources.”¹⁸ This is precisely what Lee Edelman has so famously argued to be not just problematic, but violent for *everyone*. Edelman shows that through these and similar processes, the child has become a kind of universal conglomerate of norms around which politics revolves that situates politics itself against queerness and the possibility of queer life.¹⁹ We can also see on almost a daily basis the way the general child is used to promote various forms of white supremacy and privilege, whether it be through the negation of their ability to live with their families, go to schools in their own communities, or access a variety of institutional protections, including, notably, the protection of the police.

This scholarship has also highlighted the ways in which white supremacy, ethnocentrism, and heteronormativity are all left in place, and justified, through the idealization of an understanding of child left uncritically examined, which often means rooted in innocence, protection, growth, and development. Each of these qualities, they argue together, cut children themselves off from an infinite range of lifestyles, desires, and self-definitions, even as such things are said to be preserving their “natural goodness.” This also extends to capitalism and neoliberalism for both Stockton and Ahmed, as they

¹⁷ Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*.

(Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 5.

¹⁸ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 45.

¹⁹ Lee Edelman, “The Future is Kid Stuff: Queer Theory, Disidentification, and the Death Drive,” *Narrative* 6, No. 1 (January 1998): 18–30.

argue that each of these definitions have been rooted in, and negotiated through, norms of marketplace participation. Its incoherence, then, is largely a result of the exclusion and erasure of those children who resist, challenge, or downright refuse such definitions. Because of the threat to the stability of the system that such children pose to each idealization, all consumed by neoliberalism, neoliberalism will and must consistently exert its energies across institutions and locations, including schools, to promote their silencing and their ignorance. Their literal silence in critical pedagogies, despite all attempts to say such work is being done for and by kids, then, is highly suspect: a young child entering a classroom that is supposedly grounded in critical pedagogy who is not granted equal epistemological and political authority as one who is, say, age twenty, or even fifteen, is thus entering into an uncritical space.

RELOCATING AND RESISTING

In this light, I think that there are at least two ways that critical pedagogy can be seen as participating in neoliberalism, whether it be inadvertently, accidentally, or purposefully, if we take seriously the overwhelming absence of the child in the *process and practice* of critical pedagogy. First, if neoliberalism requires the silence and passivity of the child, as mentioned, we ought to consider the way critical pedagogy's own erasure of the child, again as political and knowledgeable, actually promotes neoliberalism by, at the very least, failing to offer any protection against neoliberalism. Second, even if the child is acknowledged as existing in the process of critical pedagogy's goal of humanization, if we take seriously the above queer critiques, we are compelled to treat the child as always a classed, raced, sexual, sexualized, and gendered being and as having their own communicable understanding of such experiences. If critical pedagogies engage with the child but do not acknowledge these aspects of the child's existence, they can be read, I think, as failing to resist the very logics through which neoliberalism thrives. In other words, assuming children to be not-yet political and not-yet knowledgeable leaves them in the precise position required for neoliberalism to succeed: as passive, moldable, not-fully-human subjects.

An answer, I think, lies in beginning to treat children as always already both political and knowledgeable. It is the threats the political actions and knowledge of children pose to neoliberalism, then, in which we ought to revel. As J. Jack Halberstam has uniquely argued, children do much of the questioning and resisting of dominant and oppressive systems, particularly as they relate to sexuality, race, and, of course, neoliberalism, and thus out to be models for adult resistance. These practices exemplify, he argues, "gaga feminism," or "the art of going gaga: a politics of free-falling, wild thinking, and imaginative reinvention best exemplified by children under the age of eight, women over the age of forty-five, and the vast armies of the marginalized, the abandoned, and the

unproductive.”²⁰ Specifically highlighting the various ways in which children act both as a site for the possibility of imagining new possibilities for gender and sexuality, and as those who are most susceptible to being forced to adhere to such norms, a process I think we can understand as racialized, Halberstam’s work clearly supplements the work of his queer theory colleagues in showing how if we are looking to create spaces and experiences that disrupt neoliberalism, we ought to start taking the child seriously as a knower and a reliable source of knowledge and critique.

To be clear, though, this is *not* a call for inclusion, but a call for relocating the very epistemological framework within which we operate to the unsteady, uncertain, space of imagination. Perhaps more familiar, we might connect this to the possibilities opened up by Chris Mayo regarding the value of incivility in education, which she argues “interrupts the active form of ignorance by reminding its bearer that they do already know, that that knowledge has been repressed in order to avoid muddying civil interactions or in order to avoid responsibility for privilege.”²¹ If neoliberalism is the dominant organizing power in our society and our schools, then, I hope we can begin to re-envision our political possibilities, not from a call for unity and sameness, but from a place of commitment to the cultivation of radical difference; and not from a concern for protecting or persecuting any particular adult group, but for the sake of reconceiving of such groupings themselves. And what better place to start than by shifting our authoritative trust, at least occasionally, towards children?

²⁰ J. Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), xv.

²¹ Cris Mayo, “Civility and Its Discontents: Sexuality, Race, and the Lure of Beautiful Manners,” *Philosophy of Education* (2001), 85.
