



Class war in the classroom

Andrew Stewart

June 22, 2016

The first vegetable flowers are blooming and the kids are getting out of school this week. What a wonderful time to welcome home your little union busters!

Sorry folks, but if your kids took a standardized test as part of the awful Common Core curriculum, they were in fact involved in a union busting effort that would leave a Gilded Age robber baron green with envy. Not since the Children's Crusade have we seen such a devious misuse of the young people of our society, a calamitous congregation of neoliberal ideology combined with the intentional domestication of a rebellious spark that would prove to be the seeds of our future.

Here's how it works.

First, you have the Democratic Party, the traditional political party of teacher unions, appoint heathen lunatics like Arne Duncan as Education Secretary. Duncan was the nitwit who infamously described Hurricane Katrina as a blessing because it allowed for the privatization and roll-out of corporate charter schools in New Orleans.

Second, you have the Department of Education, a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Waltons, Gateses, and the textbook publishers, formulate a curriculum, called Common Core, that centralizes the education benchmarks of the entire national population and uses neoliberal statistical nonsense to quantify the growth of a young mind as you would your aforementioned tomatoes. For good measure, they threw in such strictures around the humanities that they essentially serve as a cash cow for the textbook printers while making certain to cut out as much as possible the space to read something revolutionary like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* or *A People's History of the United States*. Heathens, I say, the lot of them!

Third, you roll out a Race To The Top program where school districts compete for funding based on how quickly they can adapt to the new standards while failing to mention that in a few years these same testing statistics will be used to privatize "under-performing" schools. And let's be sure not to mention how the Rhode Island ACLU emphasized last year that the darker the skin the lower the student scores.

Fourth, incentivize taking the tests. This year I saw Principals sending home notices that, if your kids attended all days of testing, they would be rewarded with pizza parties and other fun. Other

parents described how, when their child opted out of the test, they were sent to the library alone to sit quietly. Could there be anything more devious in this world than punishing a kid for naturally thinking outside the box?

Things in this regard would have gone much easier for Obama's education reform efforts if it were not for one snag: they broke math.

The new Common Core math tabulation system proved to be so ridiculous that even NBC news gave a tutorial on their evening broadcast, possibly in an effort to be a saving grace for parents but also probably because they wanted to pretend they are not all morons at Rockefeller Center.

Yet even with the soothing baritone of their evening anchor, millions of parents and your loyal correspondent were left staring at the television, asking what in the name of Albert Einstein we had just witnessed.

I knew that Obama was bad but I had no idea until then that he had the ability to throw thousands of years of calculation down the drain and stimulate a million temper tantrums overnight. Unless of course this was all part of the plan, engineered into the program to create further antagonism between unionized workers and their neighbors at a time when we need communal solidarity more than ever. Nevertheless, everyone from the Donald to the Cato Institute unleashed hell over Common Core. Go figure.

Dr. Henry Giroux has previously written on the school shootings and, to my knowledge, has not made the explicit connection that there is a causal relationship between neoliberal education policies and Columbine. Yet I think it is obvious that neoliberalism is creating the antagonism that fueled increased violence. School violence had existed in poor community schools dating back decades, something one can examine [here](#). The under-funded school ceases to be an effective civic institution and instead becomes what many have called warehouses of the poor. Civil servants like public school teachers cease to be professionals and instead become custodians in these storage containers that are on shifts before their wares are sent to another under-funded public or semi-public institution. This was the way that low-income people began to experience public education as the decline of the American welfare state began.

Yet we see a spike in incidence after 1996 and the violence move into the middle class suburbs in the aftermath of the reelection of Bill Clinton, which validated and reenergized a Presidency that pushed the country to the right in ways Reagan never did while consolidating the hegemony of the neoliberal dominance of the Democratic Party. Between his "tough on crime" policies that militarized the police further and his assault on union jobs through both NAFTA and a lack of support for the Caterpillar strike of 1994-1995, a bitter fight I had the ability to see in the kitchen of my Cat-employed uncle that had more signs of Bubba Gump than President Bubba, we can see the chaos of Common Core stemming back to his Presidency.

How deadly neoliberal education is was made most clear last year in New York and comes from, of all places, the *Post* :

The principal of an innovative West Harlem public school killed herself the day after her students took the state Common Core exams — which were later tossed out because she cheated, The Post has learned. Jeanene Worrell-Breeden, 49, of Teachers College Community School, jumped in front of a B train in the 135th Street station on St. Nicholas Avenue on April 17, police said. She was pulled out from under the train and taken to Harlem Hospital, where she died eight days later. The city Medical Examiner's Office ruled it a suicide... Each morning of the three-part exam — given April 14 to 16 — Worrell-Breeden served the kids breakfast and held a pep rally. "She had them run around the gym cheering to get rid of their nervousness," Tinsley said... Worrell-Breeden, who made \$135,000 a year, was the founding principal of the school, which the DOE opened in 2011 in partnership with Columbia University's Teachers College. It promised access to Columbia facilities, student interns and researchers. While planning to grow, it served only pre-K to grade 3 last school year.

The story does include discussion of personal issues involving a spouse and the death of a mother, but anyone who grasps the politics of public education today can see some of the truth clearly. The woman had been a unionized teacher. She gave up her union protection by becoming a principal at a new school that could be massively beneficial for students, teachers, and the community. But those damned tests were simply impossible to beat because they are designed to be failed. So she did the only sane thing, rather than crush the souls of these students by displaying the final score metrics on a wall of shame, she negated their validity. She got caught and knew, as a woman of color, her life was over. But at least she refused to crush the spirits of her students.

Class warfare in our era is in the classroom. And it is obviously as deadly as Homestead was one hundred and twenty years ago.