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Michael Fabricant and Michelle Fine, *The Changing Politics of Education: Privatization and the Dispossessed Lives Left Behind*
The Changing Politics of Education: Privatization and the Dispossessed Lives Left Behind by Michael Fabricant; Michelle Fine
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Levine's book highlights a key issue that is often not discussed in policy circles. We cannot simply build it and expect that they will come; we must address the issue of trust. Levine is careful to say that we should intervene at the level of institutions. I argue that a focus on individuals is also needed. Our minimal social supports leave many parents to raise their children without the resources, skills, and time they need to nurture a secure attachment, and without this secure attachment, the next generation will often not make choices that are in their best interest and will perpetuate the cycle of poverty and disadvantage. Intervening by changing the incentives of our institutions, as Levine suggests, is an important first step. We must provide families with services that promote healthy infant development, such as home visiting, and we must also provide work-support programs, such as child care and higher wages, which allow families to meet their competing demands of employment and raising their children.

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The Changing Politics of Education: Privatization and the Dispossessed Lives Left Behind. By Michael Fabricant and Michelle Fine. London: Paradigm Publishers, 2013. Pp. 224. $143.00 (cloth); $37.95 (paper).

Education is a social project that prepares the next generation to inherit, accept or transform, and take over society. As such, it is a site of intense struggle over who we are and what kind of world we want to live in and recreate. In a democratic society, we profess belief in education for all. Some might say that everyone has a chance to succeed in the United States and that all parents may expect to see their children rising higher than they did. This rhetoric of meritocracy, however, too often acts as a thin cover for the deeply entrenched reality of a ladder of success for the privileged few and a frustrating lock on the bottom, especially for poor or working-class kids and children of color. In their new book, *The Changing Politics of Education: Privatization and the Dispossessed Lives Left Behind*, Michael Fabricant and Michelle Fine provide a powerful big-picture look at the enduring inequities in education and help us unpack the details of the story.

Fabricant and Fine's book brings up to date research and polemics that African American critics have long leveled at US education. W. E. B. Dubois and Carter G. Woodson explained the deep crisis in schools way back in the

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1930s. They describe how neglect, failure, and marginalization are woven into the very fabric of education. Woodson's *The Miseducation of the Negro* is a classic indictment not only of the inequity in resources but also of the curriculum and the content of education that is dished out to African American youth. Dubois and Woodson point out that, while the system is sold as pure meritocracy, it is actually a system for the reproduction of current social conditions, current racial and class fissures.

Fabricant and Fine amplify the discussion with their use of the term *dispossession*, which they aptly use to describe the massive failure of black and brown youth. The word *dispossession* avoids victim-blaming language and places focus not on the students' apparent failures but on policies of the wealthy foundations and government agencies that detach the poor from public opportunities and institutions. They argue that young black people are dispossessed because, while they participate in designing very few of the social support projects of the government and receive few benefits from them, they are subject to the policies that arise from them. They argue that these policies often result in one of two engagements with the state for these young people: either they are arrested by the police or they are recruited into the military.

Dispossession affects the lives of young people not only through policies themselves but also through the pervasive message that those policies send. Fabricant and Fine describe the message our schools send to poor youth: "We are not here to support you; don't trespass; your teachers are gone; relationships shattered; you are the product of failure; we are starting again; you will be erased" (142). Moreover, they argue that dispossession colonizes even the minds and interior lives of the oppressed, driving people to define themselves as the problem and to blame themselves for their circumstances. The more the policy-driven reforms of dispossession accumulate, the more young people report participating in risky behaviors, unsafe sexual practices, violence, drug and alcohol use, and being in harm's way. Youth in these communities experience much higher rates of depression, insecurities, and trauma. The revolutionary implication of Fabricant and Fine's analysis is that these social problems are not just the result of bad choices but rather come from structural inequalities and social policies.

Fabricant and Fine see the current state of dispossession as a direct result of the actions of the generation of business model reformers who repurposed earlier school reform efforts to increase equity and engagement for all students by announcing a crisis and then proposing a solution that only

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widened the educational gap. These new school reform proponents claim to clean up dilapidated schools and throw the problem students out. In reality, the purpose ultimately is to make education available only to those who are considered more deserving, which intensifies the inequities. Fabricant and Fine argue that one of the most damaging policies to arise from these reforms is the increased focus on standardized testing, which they see as a racialized pseudo-science that traces back to IQ testing and the eugenics movement. They demonstrate how high-stakes testing poses as an objective science but that it ultimately perpetuates dispossession and results in a steady diet of discipline for low-income students. Using persuasive research, Fabricant and Fine demonstrate how the proliferation of testing, along with charter schools, school closings, and Student Growth Percentile teacher evaluations, is leading the way to privatization and the creation of a permanent underclass in schools.

Fabricant and Fine argue that these reforms are driven by the ever-expanding search for profits that is the core imperative of capitalism: "The intention of present corporate reform is to limit investment in public education, to cannibalize present public dollars through profit-making ventures, and to finance this agenda through the professional debasement and economic decline of the teaching profession" (53). In their struggle for dwindling resources in a world that is exhausted from imperial exploitation, corporations have turned to public resources and have sought new sources of profit from the public space. As the possibilities of expansion are drying up with new rivals such as China competing in the global market, they argue, corporations have turned inward to seize public assets, to enclose formerly public space, in order to mine a new generation of profit centers in areas such as health care and education. These efforts do not improve education because of some magical wisdom of the market. In fact, they essentially drain resources into private pockets. For example, Fabricant and Fine cite that about 80 percent of the operating budgets of for-profit colleges come from federal loan programs, from loans the students will never be able to pay back to the government. These ventures thus drain grant money from federal and state governments, and the students who graduate from these for-profit schools have a much lower rate of employment than those who graduate from nonprofit universities.

This part of the argument is compelling, but I believe that Fabricant and Fine's analysis concedes too much to the foundational worldview of the American elite and, as a result, comes up with less than adequate solutions.

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If we are to look at the big picture, I would argue that we have to be willing to see the operation of capital in all its extravagant excess. To do this, we need to go beyond their description of corporations overtaking education domestically. We have to understand these reforms to education policy not simply as the exploitation of public spaces inside the United States but as a desperate attempt to compete with rising challenges from the bourgeoisie and workers in the newly industrialized Third World and from increased competition in the technology sector.

One challenge comes from an increasingly sizable international bourgeois class that has been produced by Third World production. In addition, the increased outsourcing of low-wage work to overseas workers who do not have unions and will work for starvation wages has resulted in a world where the industrial working class is now a global working class. The voracious US consumer economy depends on goods that are produced in Third World countries and that are shipped to the United States and Europe. This means that the proletariat with his or her hands on the means of production is no longer a Detroit auto worker but a Dhaka worker at her sewing machine, a Shenzhen worker making cell phones, or an Ulsan worker building the Hyundai automobile. While these workers are terribly exploited, their societies are accumulating wealth, and bourgeois classes in nations such as China, India, Brazil, and the Congo are beginning to see their own interests as separate from simply being agents for Western extraction. Facing a lack of jobs for unskilled laborers in the United States and in service of the militarized global project, schools often serve the purpose of instilling discipline in the poor to fill the ranks of the military; those deemed too rebellious to fill these roles are channeled to prison.

Another challenge comes from increasing international competition in the field of technology, which not only powers clever consumer products but also drives every aspect of commodity production as well as continued military domination. In service of technological competition, educational planners promote an accelerated math and science curriculum that turns away from exploration of the wonders of the universe and turns toward pragmatic, instrumental, profit-making technology.

I do not think Fabricant and Fine go far enough when they frame the argument about schooling by saying, "the poorest communities of color . . . depend on public education to build the academic capacity and market competitiveness of their children" (23). Helping low-income students compete with and defeat one another is not really a strategy. Rather, I would call

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for a much broader framing of the education struggle that not just focuses on how to help low-income students compete in the market but calls into question the content of the education that our students receive. We cannot simply speak of education as a commodity or debate how to allocate learning. The content of learning and teaching in schools is by no means a given; it is, indeed, deeply contested. Fabricant and Fine's excellent presentation of the struggles in education today demands that we next look at what is taught and how schooling happens. In a period of the decline of empire, it behooves us to envision the fundamental purposes of education and to build a curriculum of questioning, of bold new horizons.

Is an ambitious and reflective educational future feasible? Fabricant and Fine would argue that it is, and I agree. While government, corporations, and foundations control the microphone and constantly seek to define and dominate the terrain of education, social justice work is always a matter of asymmetrical conflict. The few have financial resources, but the many have community, imagination, and audacity. In fact, bold actions, from the Chicago teacher strike to the Seattle test refusal campaign, have begun to move power into the hands of those who are on the ground. We must hold onto this deep and generous view of education in order to guide our strategies in the coming decade. Fabricant and Fine's new volume makes a major contribution to this important struggle.

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