

Denisha Jones: Beware the Education “Reformers” Who Co-Opt the Language of the Civil Rights Movement

By dianeravitch

March 6, 2015 //

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Denish Jones is a contributor to EmPower magazine. She holds a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from Indiana University. She has taught kindergarten, preschool, served as a campus based preschool director, and taught college for over 10 years. Currently she is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Early Childhood Education at Howard University.

In this article, Jones warns that so-called “reformers” have stolen the language of the civil rights movement to advance their goals of privatization and deprofessionalization. Their aims actually contradict the aims of the civil rights movement.

She writes:

1. Privatization is inherently unequal.

The corporate reform movement that is waging war against public education has one goal in mind: privatization. Free-market advocates do not believe in a system of public education and are on a mission to see every aspect of a public society privatized from our prisons to our schools. But with privatization comes the loss of public ownership. Public systems are open to inspection by the public. Records are made public and the process is transparent so that community members can understand what is happening and voice their concerns. Privatization removes the ability of the public to know what is happening with their tax dollars. Private companies can use proprietary laws to prevent them from disclosing documents and following laws pertaining to public records....

Without the transparency of how our tax dollars are spent how do we hold private corporations accountable? Some businesses do well but others fail to garner enough capital to stay afloat; that is the nature of capitalism. But when the business model of winners and losers is applied to public education, the losers tend to be children who struggle

academically and families without the social capital needed to advocate for their children. The winners are CEO's and stock holders who earn high salaries with public money but can use their private status to shield themselves from public accountability.

2. School choice is not about parents choosing good schools it's about schools choosing good students.

School choice has been pushed by corporate reformers since the creation of charter schools and vouchers. Using the plight of underfunded poverty ridden urban schools reformers argued that low-income and minority families should be given a choice in where they send their child to school. Choice and competition would force low-performing schools to compete for students or be closed. Why should low-income and minority families have to settle for a failing neighborhood schools when parents with more money could choose better schools? This is how the argument for school choice is often framed as a benefit for certain groups. But the research paints a different picture....

The push for privatization distorts the picture of who really gets to choose under school choice schemes. Reformers would have us believe that parents are doing the choosing but in reality it is the charter schools, many which are for-profit corporations, who get to choose.

3. Underprepared teachers for other people's children.

Privatization of public education cannot be fully implemented unless the system for educating teachers is also privatized. Typically teachers were prepared through colleges and universities where they took a variety of courses and completed a semester long student teaching internship before they could apply for a teaching license through their state. Today fast-track teacher preparation programs like Teach for America (TFA) are turning teacher preparation into a business. Recent college graduates are recruited to spend a few years teaching in inner-city schools with high needs students. Armed with five weeks of training and a desire to give back, these recruits are placed in classrooms and expected to outperform educators with teaching degrees and years of experience. TFA is touted as noble program that will change the teaching profession by removing the union thugs who only care about themselves and replacing them with young idealistic people who have the commitment to do what needs to be done and will not use poverty as an excuse.

Armed with language of from the Civil Rights movement, TFA claims to be champion of low-income and minority children. Statements like this, "Nearly 50 years after landmark civil rights marches throughout the region, deep, entrenched poverty still persists along racial lines" and "From Birmingham to Selma, corps members are helping to prove that all kids can achieve at high levels, even those living in poverty" can be found on their website and are clear examples of how TFA has co-opted the language of the Civil Rights movement. But hidden behind these nice quotes is the assumption that other people's children deserve underprepared "saviors" as their teacher.....What the richest and most educated parent wants for their own child should be what we aspire to give all children.

Denisha Jones concludes:

There is much work to done as we continue to march towards Dr. King's dream. Corporate education reform is not an ally in our fight for educational justice. We must not be fooled by those who seek to use the legacy of our struggle to turn a profit at the expense of our children's education. A strong democratic republic needs high quality public schools that offer a free and appropriate public education to all.

Categories Charter Schools, Common Core, Corporate Reformers, Education Industry, Education Reform, For-Profit, Privatization, Testing

15 Comments

andrewdavidmitchell

March 6, 2015 at 9:20 am

The reformers are reinstating a #separatebutequal system which our nation rejected over 50 years ago. It's sickening.

Reply

Laura H. Chapman

March 6, 2015 at 9:36 am

I have been heartsick and angry at the claims of some champions of civil and human rights that "choice" and testing are needed to ensure equal opportunity.

The achievement gap is a perpetually useful bludgeon to justify the status quo on overt and covert racism. Good to hear this message from someone at Howard.

Reply

retired teacher

March 6, 2015 at 10:15 am

It is equally sad that Gates' money has co-opted the NAACP and some other groups representing minority issues. They have supported more standardized testing, and this will not to improve outcomes for poor, Afro-American children. It is a very short sighted position.

Reply

artseagal

March 6, 2015 at 9:55 am

Thank you Denisha Jones. I sure wish the metro DC area WOULD HEAR YOUR WORDS (and beyond metro DC of course too). It seems as if many school districts which are "back door" to the White House are following the lock-step plans of Arne Duncan and shamelessly bastardizing the words of MLK! In reading this comment you made, "2. School choice is not about parents choosing good schools it's about schools choosing good students..." I found myself nodding... yes, yes! But I would add that even "cherry-picking" these students has not made for a quality learning experience for these selected students at these charters. It has made for "higher test scores" but not quality

learning. When you cherry pick students apt to do well on the high stakes tests to begin with, you get higher test scores. Charters have been gaming an already gamed system – the high stakes testing industry. And REALLY... do these tests gauge anything useful??? NO! Since when is a test so secretive that teachers administering them are not allowed to see them nor are they allowed to review questions with their students to assist in learning in a timely fashion – if at all. THEY ARE NOT FOR OUR CHILDREN'S BENEFIT. They keep students living in poverty DOWN. Nearly across the board, if you come from a rich family you fare much better on these high stakes tests than if you come from a poor family. MLK would approve??? I THINK NOT!

Reply

Linda

March 6, 2015 at 10:14 am

Thanks for the post.

Mr. Warren Buffet could move off the "Richest Men" list, fulfilling his stated desire to give away all of his money, before he dies. He could spend to eradicate poverty and to strengthen public education. His great PR indicates noblesse oblige.

Except, in a high visibility "act of charity", he gave money to Gates philanthropic work. Shortly after, Gates gave money to ALEC, for its education initiatives. It seems unlikely Buffet is one of the 4 donors at cyberworld, Democrats for Public Education, since apparently they can't afford to post more once a month and, they can't afford the space for a desk.

Reply

Chiara

March 6, 2015 at 10:52 am

Ed reformer belatedly realizes he's helped to create a huge, chaotic mess- remains unwilling to challenge his political patrons:

"Lansing — State school Superintendent Mike Flanagan's call Thursday for lawmakers to reinstate a cap on charter schools until financially troubled school districts can "stabilize enrollments" comes as Detroit's fractured public education system is under increased scrutiny.

"It didn't make sense from my point of view to take the cap off charters at the time we did or to run too quickly into online (cyber schools)," Flanagan said."

Oh, well. Too late for regrets on the rush to privatize. That decision has been made, and he'll now be completely ignored because he's no longer useful to The Movement.

We'll have to make sure and remember the names of the "agnostics" who rubber-stamped this every step of the way. Couldn't have happened without the potted plants who wait to object until it's a done deal.

<http://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/michigan/2015/03/05/state-school-chief-reimpose-cap-charter-schools/24442655/>

Reply

Karen Wolfe

March 6, 2015 at 12:50 pm

Good work Denisha Jones. I am so glad to see this truth being told:

"School choice is not about parents choosing good schools it's about schools choosing good students." You should not have to win the lottery to attend a good school.

Reply

artseagal

March 6, 2015 at 1:26 pm

wolfe .. but in the world of "ed reform" schools "choosing good students" does not mean the school (charter) is any good – thus exacerbating the horrific education being shoved down the public school students' throats across the nation whether the students show promise or not.

Reply

artseagal

March 6, 2015 at 1:29 pm

I have read many an article about parents who are poor but have children who excel sending their students off to "selective" charters only to find the students treated militaristically or punished for failing to close a notebook, or berated for inadvertently forgetting to do a one question of twenty on a homework problem set etc... good students suddenly going to shrinks suffering from post traumatic distress syndrome... KIDS!!! Charters are run like the wild west and this article just reveals a few of the more recent cases!

Reply

Linda

March 7, 2015 at 2:45 pm

Gates-funded group's description of schools, "underdeveloped human capital pipelines." Gates-funded, "Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education". Gates funding for ALEC education initiatives. Gates' kids enrolled at schools that reject high-stakes testing.Says it all about reform.

Reply

KrazyTA

March 6, 2015 at 11:20 pm

Let me riff off of one heading in the posting:

"2. School choice is not about parents choosing good schools it's about schools choosing good students."

I remember growing up—and have occasionally seen since—signs in restaurants and fast food joints that read:

"No Shirt No Shoes No Service."

That's a business mind-set. And, in various guises, found in many of the leading charters.

Do we really want to apply that mind-set across the board to the education of children?



Reply

Duane Swacker

March 7, 2015 at 10:26 am

TAGO!, Denisha!

All should read the whole article!

Reply

denishanjones

March 7, 2015 at 10:31 am

Thanks for sharing my article Diane. And thanks everyone for the positive feedback. The reason why the reformers are winning is because they talk a good game. They appeal to the fact that public education has failed to serve poor and black and brown children well. They play on their desire for a public education system that values their child. If we are to fight back we must expose the harmful realities of privatization and continue to fight for a system of public education that works for all children by building alliances with those who have historically been marginalized.

Reply

Linda

March 7, 2015 at 2:53 pm

Thank you for the post. If the fight, to let children learn, in welcoming age and developmentally appropriate environments, without punishments, is not won, American humanity, will suffer one of its greatest defeats.

Reply

Susan Lee Schwartz

March 9, 2015 at 12:41 pm

Her article Published at

http://www.opednews.com/Quicklink/Beware-of-Education-Reform-in-Best_Web_OpEds-Civil-Rights_Corporate_Education_Education-Language-150309-923.html

with an introduction from your site.

Reply

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