

# *Obama, Where Art Thou? Hoping for Change in U.S. Education Policy*

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*In this essay, Wayne Au carefully considers the educational stance of Barack Obama by exploring the president's speeches and his personnel and policy choices. Au considers the election of Obama as a moment of possibility for change in American education, but also questions whether Obama's hopeful message about education will be fully realized, given the decisions the administration has made or said it will make. Finally, he calls for individuals to build a movement that demands educational justice in order to achieve the vision of equitable education set forth by Obama.*

“Hope” and “change” were watchwords in the fall of 2008 as the election of Barack Obama as the forty-fourth president left many of us awash with elation and disbelief. Not only was the Bush-Cheney regime thankfully coming to an end, but a black man had been elected president of the United States. Sometimes I have to repeat that last part, in all of its bluntness, because it seems so far-fetched, given the intensely racist history of this country: a black man has been elected president of the United States. Like so many others, I never thought it would happen.

While the Obama election is both historically significant and globally symbolic, when asked to consider what it might mean for public education in the United States, I find myself casting about, trying to figure out if the victory of the reform candidate of 2008 means that the moment of national, progressive educational change—change that would reshape public schools into more equitable, socially just, and culturally responsive institutions for all students—has finally arrived.

Admittedly, it was a relief when Obama aligned himself against some of the most pernicious aspects of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation during the campaign. Despite hailing NCLB for its focus on race-based achievement gaps, accountability, and standards (Obama, 2005, 2007, 2008a, 2008b), Obama also correctly lambasted it for being underfunded, not follow-

ing through with the promise of providing a highly qualified teacher in every classroom, using tests to punish schools instead of supporting them, forcing important but nontested subjects out of the curriculum, and making teachers spend their days teaching students to fill in standardized test bubbles (Obama, 2005, 2007, 2008a).

However, it appears that as Obama negotiates the conservative policy landscape of the United States (Apple, 2006) and attempts to satisfy the wants of multiple and at times competing constituencies, he fails to offer significant reform for educational policy today. This failure results in the continuation of a system of education premised on the basic principles and assumptions associated with capitalist production, competition, and inequality. Thus, while Obama symbolically provides hope that education in the United States may become more fundamentally democratic, the stark reality of his policy language and selection of Arne Duncan as secretary of education belie the promise of progressive educational reform that his election represents. Instead, our real hope for an educational system that meets the social, cultural, economic, and political needs and realities of our children and their communities will require grassroots activism to create sustainable and equitable change in schools.

### The Obama Balancing Act

When it comes to NCLB, Obama tiptoes along a particularly thin policy tight-rope, teetering in a balancing act that makes me, as someone who sees deep-seated, fundamental flaws in the law, very nervous. For instance, Obama's support for the stated principles of NCLB surrounding achievement gaps, accountability, and standards simply echoes what the true believers have been saying from the beginning: NCLB is good, but we just need to iron out the kinks (e.g., The Education Trust, 2003). Similarly, Obama's critiques of NCLB are mostly the easy ones. As soon as popular opposition to NCLB started to gain momentum, mainstream Democrats pointed the finger of blame at President George W. Bush for underfunding it in the first place (Karp, 2004) rather than suggesting that the law itself was problematic. The overarching logic of such opposition was that NCLB wasn't structurally flawed, it just wasn't given the proper funding and conditions to be successful.

Further, even as I agree with him, Obama's critiques of high-stakes tests seem similarly disingenuous because they only pick up on surface issues without fully calling the tests themselves into question—making it feel more like a campaign promise that merely taps into the growing popular discontent with high-stakes testing (Karp, 2006). Instead, his message is that we need to keep the NCLB-styled standards and accountability—what he refers to as the “good elements” of the law (Obama, 2005, para. 24)—and just make sure we design better tests (Obama, 2007, 2008a, 2008b). Thus, despite my personal belief that we do need methodologically sound, process-oriented, performance-based assessments to gauge student learning, and that we need fair

and equitable ways to hold educators accountable for classroom practices and school policies, I worry that Obama's ambiguity about NCLB leaves the policy door open for more high-stakes, standardized tests as part of a ramped-up, even more draconian system of accountability. This is troublesome, because I know from my own research (Au, 2009) as well as from the research of others (e.g., Valenzuela, 2005) that NCLB's inhuman and businesslike definition of accountability and overreliance on high-stakes testing simply cannot measure student diversity with any kind of complexity or nuance.

Obama's balancing act extends into other arenas of education policy as well, most visibly regarding charter schools and teacher performance pay. At times he seems to lean toward conservative neoliberals and evangelical homeschoolers who rail against public education—like when he voices his full support of charter schools while specifically using language of increased *choice* and *competition* (Obama, 2008a). Then, without going too far, he seems to lean toward educational progressives associated with community-based charter schools (Dingerson, Miner, Peterson, & Walters, 2008) by pushing for the proliferation of *public* charter schools (Obama, 2008a, 2009).

When it comes to performance pay for teachers, Obama continues a similar balancing act. He calls for more money for teachers who increase student performance and includes bonuses for schools that increase achievement (Obama, 2005, 2007, 2008b, 2009). In advocating policy that bases teacher pay partly on student performance, Obama begins to lean toward more conservative, corporate-minded school reform advocates. Then again, because his language focuses on increasing pay for increased student performance (as opposed to decreasing pay for decreased student performance or outright challenging the protections provided by teacher tenure), he never quite falls into antiunion territory.

Of particular importance to this discussion is the fact that in making his policy statements, Obama (2005, 2007, 2008b, 2009) has been remarkably vague about how achievement or performance will be measured, never exactly saying if or how high-stakes, standardized tests will be used to make such measurements. Such rhetorical ambiguity once again allows him to split the difference: supporters of our status quo system of high-stakes, standardized test-based accountability can see a commitment to their educational principles in Obama's words, while progressive reformers interested in the development of more authentic assessments of student learning can still see hope that potential changes in testing may still be on the horizon.

Consequently, when we look at Obama's education platform as a whole, it is almost as if he is getting to have his cake and eat it too: he is both for and against NCLB, critical of but not opposed to high-stakes testing, supportive of public charter schools yet not necessarily private ones, and in favor of both performance pay and teacher tenure. He is neither here nor there on any one issue. Or, put conversely, like a master of political quantum physics, Obama is both here *and* there on all of these issues at the same time.

## The Ideology of Obama's Nonideology

One could argue that Obama is just being a pragmatist. He himself has said repeatedly that he does not believe ideology has a place in policy—we just need to do what works. The problem is that nonideological policy simply does not exist. Quite to the contrary, because all policy takes place in a given social and political context, all policy is in fact ideological: it cannot be disentangled from the conditions of its birth or the context-derived meanings we ascribe to it (Smith, 2004). Thus, when Obama uses specific terms like *choice*, *competition*, *performance pay*, *more accountability*, and *higher standards*, he is doing so in a context where the conservative Right has been defining these concepts in hegemonic ways and then using them to attack public education and equity-minded reforms for many years (Apple, 2006; McNeil, 2000; Thompson, 2001). Obama draws on this conservative policy legacy (Taylor, 1997) as an effective rhetorical strategy to pull conservatives in his direction. The question is: despite differing in some important ways, is Obama's overall direction that dissimilar?

Unfortunately, when we look at Obama's broad framing of public education reform, we do not see a significant shift. For instance, according to Obama, the central reason why the U.S. needs to improve education is because we are losing in the economic competition against countries like India and China, whose students are supposedly better educated and better equipped to be successful in the twenty-first-century knowledge economy (Obama, 2005, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2009). Further, he suggests that this is a competition we will continue to lose if our students don't learn teamwork and critical thinking (Obama, 2008a), don't resolve race-based gaps in achievement (Obama, 2007, 2008a, 2008b), and don't have access to affordable higher education in greater numbers (Obama, 2008a).

Again, while I agree with the need for making college more affordable, fixing the achievement gap, and improving students' thinking and teamwork skills, there is a more critical strand to pick up in Obama's framing. By echoing the exact sentiments found in the opening statement of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) and recapitulating arguments about the relationship between education and international capitalist competition that have been made on and off again for over a hundred years (Kliebard, 2004), Obama implicitly wields human capital theory—the theory that increased educational investment in humans results in increased human capital and therefore increased economic advantage. In doing so, not only does he support the argument that test scores and achievement can be meaningfully compared internationally, he also advances the idea that the level of education of a country's populace is causally related to how that country performs economically (Smith, 2004)—all under the assumption that education should be treated as a capitalist enterprise.

Human capital theory is problematic. For instance, despite wild swings in the economies of both the United States and Japan over the last thirty years, research shows that the academic achievement of students in both of those countries has remained relatively stable over the same period of time (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Krueger, 1998; Orlich, 2004). Further, most of the workers employed during the economic boom of the mid-1990s in the United States were in fact those educated during the 1980s—the supposed height of *mediocre* education in this country as claimed by *A Nation at Risk* (Cuban, 2004). To be clear, I am not saying that increased education does not create more potential employment opportunities for individuals and groups (especially at a microeconomic level), nor am I saying that the consistently poor education of working-class students and students of color is somehow justifiable because of the reality of macroeconomic inequality. What I am arguing here is that most evidence indicates increased academic achievement has had little impact on the state of the U.S. economy (Baker, 2007). All of our children have a right to a quality education that meets their social, cultural, and economic needs regardless of their relation to the gross domestic product. Thus, we should be critical of using human capital theory to guide educational policy.

However, we should be less concerned with Obama's use of a flawed theory and more concerned with what it demonstrates about his orientation toward education more generally: he is a part of the long tradition of viewing education in terms of capitalist production. In this view, students are products, teachers are workers, principals are managers, schools are the assembly line, and the "experts" direct teachers, *vis-à-vis* policy mandates, on how to best produce students. Humans, literally as capital, receive their knowledge-as-investment, are trained for the workplace, and are inspected through testing. Meanwhile, the workers/teachers are evaluated by how their products test out (Au, 2009; Callahan, 1964). The obvious problem with this orientation is that students are humans, not widgets to be mechanically produced in standardized models (McNeil, 2000). Similarly, teachers are not robotic automatons mindlessly filling empty student heads with knowledge or skills (Apple, 1986). Further still, schools are living, breathing communities full of culture and energy and emotion and life (Valenzuela, 1999). To think we can treat all of this human complexity like an assembly line and accurately measure it with positivistic and overly simplistic high-stakes assessments not only is methodologically unsound, it also borders on ridiculous (Au, 2009).

Given Obama's broad framing of education, it is important to remember that NCLB and the era of high-stakes test-based accountability have been solidly and consistently a bipartisan effort. The steady trajectory of increases in standards and testing has been supported by liberals and conservatives alike, from the publication of *A Nation at Risk* up to *No Child Left Behind* (Kornhaber & Orfield, 2001). That schools should be run as businesses in a sea of free-market competition, operating on the basic logics of capitalist produc-

tion, is essentially taken as common sense among policymakers, no matter their party affiliation (Apple, 2006; Au, 2009). Obama, despite his education reform platform, fundamentally does not stray from the pack.

### Obama's "Reform" Agenda

It is within this context that we need to look at what Obama means by education "reform." As Kohn (2008) rightly pointed out during the media and pundit discussion leading up to Obama's appointment of Arne Duncan as secretary of education, "reform" nominees for the cabinet post—as defined by conservative editorials and articles in the *Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, *New York Times*, and *New Republic*—were nominees who relied on high-stakes, fill-in-the-bubble, standardized tests; used heavy-handed, top-down mandates to force teachers to comply to their dictates; fought teachers' unions; applied corporate logic to manage schools, teachers, and students; and increased the presence of charter schools, including those operating for profit. It is a definition of education "reform" completely in step with what the Bush administration and NCLB have been promoting for the last eight years (Apple, 2006; Au, 2009; Kohn, 2008).

While one might assume that this construction of what counts as true educational "reform" is coming solely from the conservative Right, that is not the case: Obama himself defines "reform" the very same way. For instance, in one address he states that "liberals" do not "realize how much reform matters" and that they "never ask [teachers] to change" (Obama, 2005, para. 21). Elsewhere Obama has described the debate over educational policy as being "vouchers versus status quo" (Obama, 2007, para. 27; 2008a, para. 15; 2009, para. 13), "more money versus more reform" (Obama, 2008a, para. 15; 2009, para. 13), and "more money versus more accountability" (Obama, 2007, para. 27). Obama thus implies that liberals represent the status quo in education, side against reform, do not ask teachers to change their practices, do not believe in accountability, and are mainly interested in asking for more money. Conversely, Obama's "reformers" want vouchers, do not consider funding to be a factor, push teachers to change, and work for more accountability (Obama, 2005, 2007, 2008a, 2009). Ironically, the conservative argument against the appointment of Linda Darling-Hammond as secretary of education, that she was not a true "reformer" (Kohn, 2008), is actually based on Obama's own position.

Hence, we get Arne Duncan as the new secretary of education. While Obama's choice could have been worse, in that it could have been Michelle Rhee or Joel Klein (teacherken, 2008), Duncan was not a good choice for equitable education reform. Under his tenure as CEO of Chicago Public Schools, there have been increases in the frequency of high-stakes testing, increases in the militarization of public schools, and increases in the growth of public and private charter schools. Meanwhile, there have been decreases in parent

and community control of schools and a move away from the protections provided by teachers' unions. All of this was done with the intent of reforming public education along the guidelines and assumptions of the corporate sector (Brown, Gutstein, & Lipman, 2009; Giroux & Saltman, 2008; Kumashiro, 2009; Sharkey, 2008). This is perhaps the most important thing to recognize when considering what the Obama election might mean for public education in the United States. His vision of education reform—at least communicated by his policy statements thus far and in his selection of Arne Duncan—is safely bounded within mainstream, Center-Right U.S. politics.

Indeed, when we consider Obama's proposed education policies, they align with what some theorists have identified as the new middle class—a class fraction made up of professionals, white-collar workers, and management (Apple, 2006; Ball, 2003; Bernstein, 1996). This influential group generally maintains more liberal social and cultural agendas but also embraces a more conservative stance toward the economy and the political power structure (Apple, 2006; Ball, 2003). In the United States, the new middle class has been a part of the rightward political turn that has taken place over the last thirty or so years and can be associated with educational reforms that push for increased standards, accountability, competition, and school choice, in combination with calls for more educational equality (Apple, 2006; Au, 2008). As a reflection of the educational politics of the new middle class, Obama's education agenda is centrist at best and still a part of an overall trajectory of educational conservatism in the United States.

In aligning Obama with the new middle class, I do not intend to simply de-race him. Instead, I want to recognize that the politics of race potentially add contradiction and complexity to the meanings attached to specific education policies. For instance, some African Americans have made specific use of neoliberal school choice plans in ways that are partly counterhegemonic in terms of race. Rather than being seen as irrational or dangerous (the racist stereotype), the politics of neoliberal school choice positions them as rational economic actors (Apple & Pedroni, 2005; Pedroni, 2007). Further, given the persistent underfunding, lack of resources, and deterioration of urban schools (Anyon, 1997), it should come as no surprise that many black working-class families support school choice and charter schemes as a means for their children to escape crumbling school systems in favor of an education that might actually enable upward mobility (Apple & Pedroni, 2005; Pedroni, 2007)—despite such choices broadly representing attacks on the democratic aspirations of public education generally (Dingerson et al., 2008).

### The Obama Effect?

Clearly, I do not think Obama is more conservative or will be worse for public education than Bush has been—Obama would have to work very hard to make that happen. In fact, I think some positive, concrete changes to pub-

lic education could manifest under an Obama administration. This potential has been illustrated through parts of the economic stimulus package, which includes \$115 billion for pre-K through college education (Klein, 2009b)—a significant number considering that the total 2008 budget for the Department of Education was \$68 billion (Klein, 2009a). Without a doubt, aspects of this stimulus plan must be hailed as progressive: it includes \$53.6 billion in educational aid to help states deal with their collapsing economies; \$15.6 billion in Pell Grants and \$13.9 billion in tax cuts to increase college accessibility; \$13 billion in Title I monies to support the achievement of students traditionally underserved by our schools; \$12.2 billion for special education, \$2.1 billion for Head Start programs to increase school readiness of children; and \$400 million to support teacher-quality programs (Klein, 2009b). In these regards, Obama is not Bush III when it comes to public education policy.

Further, outside of possible policy reform, one has to wonder how Obama's election might impact the self-esteem of youth of color in the United States. I am reminded of a friend who teaches at the K–8 African American Academy in the Seattle Public Schools who shared some pictures of their inauguration day 2009 festivities. In one picture, a young African American girl with braids and beads in her hair stands smiling. The front of her T-shirt reads, "Obama—The First Black President of the United States." More importantly, in the next picture, she is standing with her back to the camera, arms crossed, peeking at us over her left shoulder. There we can see the back of her shirt, which reads, "Say It Loud. I'm Black & I'm Proud." Despite the inherent limits of presidential politics, such an image gives me pause to consider how the educational desires of our youth of color, including their sense of what might be possible through struggle, could be shaped by the election of Obama. Granted, such a consideration is a less tangible, *potential* effect that he may have on education—a potential weakly suggested by initial research on the "Obama Effect" in testing (Dillon, 2009), and it is a consideration based on the inadequate ideal that all we need are iconic, exceptional individuals to make progressive change. Nonetheless, given the state of social and educational inequality in our country today, I still think it is important that at least one young black girl in Seattle, Washington, feels just a little more proud of who she is and what she might be able to do with her life because of Obama's election.

However, even though it seems that the Obama presidency could result in some real gains for kids, teachers, communities, and schools in terms of access to resources as well as potential gains in students' sense of possibility, I remain unconvinced that the day of fundamentally progressive educational reckoning is upon us—especially since Linda Darling-Hammond, whom many hoped might act as a progressive counterbalance to Duncan, has left Washington, DC, has returned to Stanford, and will not be a part of the Obama administration (Russo, 2009). Rather, I suspect there will be an attempt to remedy some of the most problematic aspects of NCLB (e.g., Adequate Yearly Progress has been such an astounding success at creating school failure in both

high- and low-performing schools that it will likely be altered), while maintaining the law's commitment to high-stakes accountability in some form. In this regard, let us hope that Obama means what he says about building more complex assessments of students and moving us away from the rote memorization, curricular narrowing, and low-level thinking demanded by our current high-stakes, standardized tests. Perhaps the Obama administration will at least follow Noguera and Rothstein's (2008) suggestion to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (the previous manifestation of NCLB) under the 1994 version, where states were required to make good-faith efforts at accountability. Then the Obama administration could buy the time it needs to consider and develop more effective assessments and policies, while giving states the freedom to roll back some of the worst of the high-stakes testing.

Whatever happens, the key issue will revolve around two sides of the same accountability coin: how will achievement be measured, and how will failure be defined? But, in answering this question, can Obama give up the tests, the businesslike accountability, and the commitment to school "choice," competition, human capital, and merit pay? If the language in his policy proposals and the appointment of Arne Duncan as secretary of education are any indication, then I think not. After all, that corporate paradigm is the one within which most policymakers and the business elite of this country operate. Then again, a more progressive black candidate working outside of that paradigm probably would not have won the presidential election in the first place.

### Losing Hope, Finding a Movement

Optimistically we might give President Obama the benefit of the doubt and consider the possibility that his Center-Right educational agenda has merely been a means to an end, that it is just a trade-off so that he can get to the other, real, more progressive reforms. Maybe he is just sharing ground with conservatives and is really taking part in a Gramscian (1971) war of position, looking for seams and making headway where he can. It certainly would not be the first time an African American confronted a racist institution by appearing to placate on some level but consciously resisting on others (Kelley, 1993). Given the evidence of Obama's conservative stance toward education policy in the United States, however, such optimistic hope is likely misplaced.

Losing misplaced hope in Obama, however, is not a bad thing: merely hoping that his election would bring substantial, truly equitable educational change to the United States was never going to be enough anyway. Hope alone cannot transform the world (Freire, 1992), and thinking that anyone but our own communities engaged in concerted, organized action could bring about the radical, egalitarian change we need is pure folly. Rather, following Ayers (2009), we do not need to (nor should we) wait for Barack Obama's permission to work for educational and social justice. Between the research of critical scholars (e.g., Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Valenzuela,

1999) and the classroom practice of social justice educators such as those found in the pages of *Rethinking Schools* (e.g., Au, Bigelow, & Karp, 2007; Christensen, 2009), we already know how to effectively teach all children, especially those whom our system of education neglects, marginalizes, and mistreats. So instead of waiting for policymakers to once again force inequitable, top-down reform mandates on us all, we—youth, youth organizers, parent activists, progressives within teachers unions, veterans of the civil rights movement, rank-and-file social justice-minded teachers, and progressive academics—just need to build a national movement for educational justice ourselves (Anyon, 2005). Hopefully that movement is what the Obama election might really mean for public education.

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