Critical Geographies of Education: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Schools, colleges, and universities are vibrant human communities, instruments of public policy, and powerful political symbols involving, at one point or another, most members of society (Manzer 1994). They serve as a central mechanism for transmitting cultural knowledge and skill future generations, as key sites of neighbourhood integration, in social capital formation, and in the development of civil society (Basu 2004a). Education is a central institution through which governing rationalities are materialized, creating educational spaces and landscapes of educational disparities observable at various scales within nations, regions, communities, and schools (Apple 2001a; Basu 2004b; Hay 2004). As it is in schools, colleges, and universities that future generations are formed into the citizenry imagined in powerful political and economic ideologies, jurisdictional disputes over who controls education and the function it serves have been central aspects of educational politics (Bale and Knopp 2012). Education remains a key site for ideological contestation and for resistance to regimes of control even, and especially, as neoliberal reforms and the introduction of new technologies are transforming the spaces, subjectivities, and power relations of education (Apple 2001b; Giroux 2001, 2002). For all these reasons, educational spaces are rich subjects of critical geographical analysis (Basu 2010).

In this collection we place particular emphasis on what geographic analysis can contribute to understanding the dynamic of difference in contemporary schools. Geographical analysis necessarily includes critical social analysis: race, class, and gender are not fixed identities but ongoing social productions; the multi-scalar spaces in which such social production takes place are vitally important to understanding how our societies work and, most importantly, how we might improve our social processes, especially for the most marginalized in our society. As critical scholars of education have long argued, schools are sites of cultural and social reproduction that legitimize broader social stratifications. As Marxist critics have suggested, schools discipline students for the workforce and inculcate dominant class structures, norms, and values (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Apple 2004). The streamlining of the production of knowledge into professional, vocational, and technical programs signals the differential subjection of students into deeply spatially structured roles within capitalist regimes, while the spatial segregation and redlining of schools further perpetuates inequalities (Dippo and James 2011; Harris and Mercier 2000; Robinson 2001, 2010). Similarly, the imposition of exclusionary spatial practices of a colonial system of education based on an idealized white norm have contributed to demoralizing and marginalizing Indigenous and racialized communities (Miller 1996; Kelm 1998; Milloy 1999; Lewis 2001; Harris 2002; Schick 2002; McCreary 2011). However, classrooms remain sites of challenge and possibility, where...
multiple identities and agendas are at play. While schools continue to disseminate ideologies of liberty, individualism, and meritocracy, other forms of collective consciousness and political agency can also reshape schools and society (Freire 1981).

This collection seeks to appraise the dynamics of difference in the neoliberal moment. This includes both consideration of how different struggles are shaping neoliberalism and, conversely, how neoliberalism is differentially shaping experiences of education. The processes of neoliberalization refer to a wide family of reforms aimed at expanding markets. Often these processes are normalized through neoliberal discourse and slowly entrenched in the broader educational system (Basu 2004b). The reduction of services, increased competition among schools, marketization of education, and introduction of increasingly politically directive regimes of accountability have resulted in landscapes of disparity and inequity. Educational reforms include: the establishment of quasi-markets where parents and students have greater choice among schools; the installation of new schemes to incentivize school success, through increasing or decreasing schools’ access to public funds in relation to performance on standardized exams; programming reforms that further vocationalize or entrepreneurialize education in service of labour markets; and the charterization of schools to both decrease government funding and increase investment opportunities in education. This family of reforms has been materialized in distinct ways in different policy environments, in part because of the context of local struggles around class, race, and gender. In recent years there has been a vibrant discussion on the geographic variegation of neoliberalization; geographers have shown that the implementation of neoliberal policies has been textured by local political, economic, and cultural institutions and histories of struggle (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Peck 2004; Larner and Le Heron 2005; Brenner et al. 2010; Springer 2010; Hayter and Barnes 2012). Significantly, these studies have shown that neoliberalism is not simply imposed upon pre-existing politics; rather neoliberal policies are emplaced, intertwining with the existing politics and institutions in a geographic space. Neoliberal reforms have often been legitimated by claims to improve opportunities for marginalized communities traditionally ill-served by education. A fusion of neoliberal strategies and the political and institutional assemblage in particular spaces remakes both neoliberalism and the terrain of local politics. While neoliberal reforms promise to reorient schooling to focus on the creation of economic opportunities, these opportunities are not evenly distributed; neoliberalization increasingly knits education into evolving and expanding systems of inequality (Phipps 2000; Mitchell 2001, 2003).

Our aims in exploring the diverse ways in which the dynamic of difference interlaces with the geographies of education in this neoliberal moment are three-fold. First, we want to conduct a strategic assessment, examining how different institutions and actors are advancing proposals to reform education. We are interested particularly in how neoliberal policy formulations manipulate and manage marginalized communities’ pursuit of justice. Examining a number of subaltern struggles in Ontario, Ranu Basu describes how these efforts have not gained sufficient momentum to displace governing political rationalities, “normed” subjectivities, or technologies of power. Rather she suggests neoliberal strategies continue to control subaltern challenges through fragmenting politics into specific issues, exploiting the tensions between dynamics of redistribution and recognition to limit the extent to which subaltern struggles challenge educational governmentality. Anne Godlewska, Laura Schaeffi, and Paul Chaput examine an influential proposal to transfer administration of First Nations education funds from First Nations governments to post-secondary institutions. They regard this neoliberally inspired proposal to refashion First Nations students into entrepreneurial subjects as another in a long series of assimilation strategies rendered politically attractive by the Canadian public’s poor understanding of Aboriginal histories and present realities (Sullivan and Tuana 2007; Godlewska et al. forthcoming). Tyler McCreary uses a study of a vocational training program in northern British Columbia, developed through a partnership between the minerals industry, government, and Aboriginal groups, to examine how new education initiatives are working to reconcile Aboriginal peoples with the industrial development of their traditional
territories. Charting school reform efforts in Seattle, Christopher Lizotte describes how a coalition of business, philanthropic, and citizen groups used moral concerns about schools’ lack of responsiveness to student needs to mobilize market-based reforms. Finally, Suzanna Klaf describes the practice of labelling public schools’ performance as the demonization of marginalized school environments and uses the voices of inner-city educators to illustrate the consequences of these ascribed representations. Although often framed as transformative, most of the neoliberal reforms discussed in these articles reproduce and harden established and exclusionary social regimes.

Second, we examine the landscapes of disparity associated with educational restructuring. A number of articles highlight the unequal distribution of benefits and burdens within prevailing and emerging regimes of education. Focusing on Chicago, Peter Brogan finds educational restructuring guided by the need to resolve the crisis of contemporary capitalism by creating new sites of capital accumulation. Rather than addressing the needs of marginalized communities, these reforms further marginalize working people, particularly teachers’ unions. Alice Huff describes the inequitable effects of the radical school reforms imposed in New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, where the eradication of neighbourhood attendance boundaries and extensive charterization of public schools have displaced and disempowered a significant portion of the African American population. Valerie Ledwith and Kathy Reilly demonstrate a longer lineage of discriminatory education policies in their study of Galway, Ireland. Rather than a neoliberal policy innovation, school choice remains a foundational principle of the religious Irish education system that continues to reproduce structures of socio-economic and ethno-racial privilege and penalty. Finally, Sarah Holloway and Helena Pimlott-Wilson link processes of restructuring to the geographies of families, noting the differentiated impacts and meanings of increased parent involvement within higher-, middle-, and low-income environments.

Third, we study the development of new curricula and educational technologies further transforming the subjectivities, spaces, and power relations of education. While schools and classrooms necessarily remain sites of contestation, resistance, and possibility—where multiple identities and agendas are at play—we are particularly interested in how these new developments normalize a middle-class, white subjectivity that is both imperial and entrepreneurial. Studying a career education program in rural Ontario, Kate Cairns demonstrates the struggle of working-class youth to negotiate between a curricular focus on becoming flexible, mobile economic subjects who relocate for work, and their emotional attachment to their communities and families. Melanie Knight examines the ways post-secondary entrepreneurship programs at two Canadian universities script ways of thinking, speaking, and behaving that normalize a white subject, exclude black experience, and inculcate imperial, expansionist approaches to entrepreneurship. Examining the regimes of experiential learning associated with environmental education programs, Sheelah McLean highlights how the coding of wilderness experience within environmental education continues to erase histories of the colonial dispossession of Indigenous lands, thereby reproducing the normative power of whiteness in encounters with nature. In the recent growth of international development studies programs in Canadian post-secondary institutions, Elsie Lewison discerns an ironic harnessing of the ideals of social responsibility and global citizenship to competitive individualism as a globally marketable set of skills and certifications. Kristin Smith and Donna Jeffery focus on the impact of online delivery on the workplaces of university educators: increasing their exploitation, while simultaneously limiting the possibilities for critical pedagogy and reducing education to tools and skills acquisition. Finally, concluding the collection, Gregory Martin and Tony Brown describe the possibilities of making space for knowledge outside of hegemonic norms through performances and practices of critical pedagogy within spaces of teaching and learning.

These papers were selected from four stimulating sessions on the Critical Geographies of Education at the Annual Association of American Geographers (AAG) in New York City in 2012 and shaped into this collection with the guidance of Nadine Schuurman and her editorial team. The ensuing discussions and debates revealed the commonalities that marginalized groups face.
in Western democracies with respect to the barriers in education; the neoliberalized policies that often exacerbate inequalities; the underlying tensions and spatial manipulations of difference; and most interestingly, the contextual specificity and variegated nature of these processes in different places. The international scope of the papers allowed for dialogue and discovery across scales and jurisdictions. Whether through state-based policies and reduction of services, pedagogic practices and discourses, strategies aimed at disempowering unions, urban planning discourses, or through manipulation of the interests and concerns of parents—new kinds of classed, gendered, racialized and colonialized forms of power are emerging. These changes are entrenching geographies of inequalities that are both new and old, and regularly seem to stifle possibilities for progress and change. As Ronald Manzer (1994) notes, educational institutions are not only objects of domination and products of compromise; they can also be agencies for creating political consensus. But hegemony is never complete, and resistance constantly emerges. As Bertolt Brecht wrote in the prologue to his 1937 Lehrstück (learning-play), The Exception and the Rule, “Let nothing be called natural / In an age of bloody confusion, / Ordered disorder, planned caprice, / And dehumanized humanity, lest all things / Be held unalterable!” (Brecht 1965, 111). Although the forces of neoliberalism and neoliberalized austerity are often hard to combat, through mapping aspects of their trajectory we hope to help build the knowledge necessary to alter their course. Educational institutions play a crucial role in our society and geographical analysis provides crucial insights into the processes and impacts of neoliberalizing education. As the articles in this collection reveal through numerous case studies and theoretical insights: we must take a critical approach to the geographies of education, reveal the complexities of power in our places of work, increase the transparency of the policy making process, and devise solutions that work towards more inclusive and humane structural change.

References


