Discerning the Democratic Element Within Neoliberal Education Discourse

Kelly M.S. Swope
Miami University

In the article, "Discourses in School Readiness: A Foucauldian Genealogical Analysis of Head Start Policy, 1964-2020," Kristen Cameron analyzes decades of public policy on early childhood education and care (ECEC), focusing on Head Start, the federal government's public preschool program for low-income children. Regarding that program, Cameron concludes:

> Head Start policy is no longer deployed as a weapon in the War on Poverty, nor out of a bleeding-heart sentimentality that centers a paternalistic attitude towards poverty that results in a deficit model orientation towards ECEC and perpetuates a disadvantaged child discourse. The disadvantaged child discourse in federal ECEC policy has given way to school readiness discourse, predicated on a belief that ECEC is an investment that embraces meritocracy and the pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps imagery that neoliberalism consistently directs towards the poor.[1]

For Cameron, Head Start's transformation from being primarily a welfare benefit for disadvantaged children to a public investment in human capital has at least three troubling implications. The first is that "school-readiness" discourse places the onus of being ready for school, and the blame for not being ready, on the individual child, as if it were reasonable to expect preschool-aged children to act as self-interested meritocrats. The second is that Head Start favors early academicization over play-based activity, ignoring the scholarly consensus that play is far more beneficial to children's learning. The third is that "school-readiness" discourse singles out poor children for a form of disciplinary socialization from which their more advantaged peers, presumed by virtue of their class positions to be always already "school-ready," are exempt.

I share Cameron's concerns about Head Start's neoliberal propensities, and I admire the author's conviction that the U.S. education system owes children, and especially poor children, more than a mere fighting chance to capitalize their labor-power for future sale. That said, I am unpersuaded by Cameron's claim that something called "neoliberal ideology" is the predominant force shaping Head Start policy, and I worry that, in focusing entirely on neoliberalism, we are overlooking the democratic purport of the U.S.'s ongoing attempt to provide public education for all children. My own view is that Head Start's neoliberal turn in the last half-century is yet another attempt to manage K-12 public education's fraught relationship to the U.S. welfare state. In what follows, I will discuss the longstanding American pattern of overleveraging educational services as social-welfare services and how this has led to the neoliberalization of Head Start. This pattern, which antedates Head Start by at least a half-century, explains how and why this under-supported federal program remains durable despite the structural flaws that Cameron rightly highlights. I close with a few thoughts about Head Start's democratic purport within the U.S. public-education system.

Head Start policy documents strongly support Cameron's conclusion that the program has pivoted from a "disadvantaged-child" discourse to a neoliberal "school-readiness" discourse over the past half-century. However, I am not yet persuaded by Cameron's claim that a Foucault-style "genealogical method" can explain this neoliberal turn in federal ECEC policy better than a straightforward historical analysis can. Following Foucault, Cameron asserts that "There is no straight path running through history, traceable from beginning to end via singular events that emerge like towns along a highway." To be sure, we did not get Head Start's "school-readiness" discourse out of an unbroken lineage of coherent education policies; from preschool to university, U.S. public education was born in fits and starts. Nevertheless, at crucial moments in its development, U.S. public education has followed a definitive pattern of overleveraging school-based services as social-welfare services. Although a latecomer to the scene, Head Start fits squarely into this pattern, linking benefit eligibility to educational requirements. A glance back in time at the completion of the state-managed

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K-12 public systems during the Progressive Era provides additional context for understanding *how* – and just as crucially, *why* – the federal government's Head Start program came to adopt its current neoliberal constraints.

In *School, Society and State,* historian Tracy Steffes describes public education as the "hidden behemoth of the U.S. welfare state."[2] During the Progressive Era, institution-builders at the state and local levels began to realize that public schools were well-positioned, not just for classroom-based instruction, but also for delivering services such as daytime childcare, nutrition support, immunization, social work, and career counseling. In urban areas, for example, where new immigrants sought English-language training and white-collar job skills, public schools provided a place for parents to send their children for formative instruction and socialization. In rural areas, too, where direct points of contact between local and state governments were few, public-school districts offered economic and administrative development to communities that sorely needed them. Notice how children and adults *alike* can be beneficiaries of school-based services. The catch, of course, is that state education policies tie those provisions to compulsory school attendance, an arrangement which, in Steffes's words, "bolster[s] individualism instead of socializing risk."[3] This puts individuals in the position of having to capitalize on their educational requirements in order to actualize them as genuine benefits. After the New Deal modestly expanded government welfare programs into new areas of life, the U.S. continued to rely upon K-12 public schools to supplement the government's overall austerity in providing welfare. Because public schools have become integrated into the political economy of almost every American locale, most Americans support their *local* school districts (even if their views of the system *as a whole* have soured).[4] The reason for this is simple: public schools make private life possible for the vast majority of working families in the United States.

Head Start, a policy byproduct of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, uses public preschool programs to integrate ECEC into the established K-12 public system. Means-tested from the beginning toward low-income families, the program first targeted "disadvantaged" children toward the purported democratic ends of equalizing the academic playing field and promoting broader welfare

for impoverished families.[5] For the child, Head Start imitates K-12 schooling inasmuch as it delivers basic academics and welfare at the same point of access. For parents, meanwhile, Head Start provides needed childcare and nutrition subsidies as well as accessible career-training options.[6] The "school-readiness" discourse that Cameron critiques emerged out of this crowded nexus of policy goals. The neoliberal theory of education as human capitalization, made explicit in every renewal of Head Start's funding since the 1970s, confirms that public education's role – from P to 12, from child to parent – is to supplement an austere welfare landscape that proffers nothing, even schooling itself, *by right*. "School readiness" is the utilitarian justification we give for spending public monies on ECEC; it is akin to a work requirement that preschoolers must fulfill in order to earn their free benefit. Cameron is right to point out that neoliberalism injects a new intensity into the individual's traditional educational struggle. Yet educational history tells us that this is but the latest redux of the "overleveraging" problem in which schools have had to correct for our government's miserliness in almost all domains except national defense.

And yet, despite its flaws, Head Start, like the local school district, is difficult to eliminate. Cameron notes how the Reagan administration faced "public outrage" when it tried to slash Head Start funding in the 1980s. The same political difficulty persists today. Take the state of Texas as an example. Per a recent Center for American Progress report, 62 percent of rural Texans (a large majority of whom vote Republican) reside in childcare deserts.[7] In rural Texas, Head Start is often the most viable option that working parents have for daytime childcare. The situation is much the same with public schools in Texas. In the fall, the Texas legislature failed to pass a comprehensive voucher bill that would have overhauled the funding mechanism for the extant schooling system. Among the politicians stymying the bill were rural-district GOP representatives who wanted to guard fiscal resources for the public-school districts upon which their communities rely disproportionately for civic life and social welfare.[8] In other words, for many American locales, the democratic goods provided by Head Start and K-12 publics are just as noteworthy as their neoliberal flaws.

I am not suggesting that Head Start or K-12 publics are politically

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invincible, nor that we can view their current neoliberal constraints through rose-colored glasses. My point is that, as we critique their capitulation to the neoliberal ideal of human capitalization, we must not forget the democratic basis of their broad appeal. We cannot really understand public education's neoliberal practices in separation from its democratic ones. My hope is that our critical conversations about public schooling can keep all of its important aspects in view.

REFERENCES

1 Kristen Cameron, "Discourses in School Readiness: A Foucauldian Genealogical Analysis of Head Start Policy, 1964-2020" *Philosophy of Education* 80, no. 3 (same issue) https://doi.org/10.47925/80.3.226

2 See chapter 1 in Tracy Steffes, *School, Society and State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

3 Steffes, *School, Society, and State.*

4 Anya Kamenetz, "Americans Like Their Schools Just Fine - But Not Yours," *NPR* (23 August 2016), https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2016/08/23/490380129/americans-like-their-schools-just-fine-but-not-yours.

5 The perennially under-financed Head Start program does not appear to accomplish either of these transformative aims. A robust analysis of LBJ-era education policies can be found in Jon Shelton, *The Education Myth: How Human Capital Trumped Social Democracy* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2023).

6 It is worth noting that, sixty years since its creation, only 40% of eligible poor families enroll their kids in Head Start. See: National Institute for Early Education Research, *Head Start 2023 Annual Report*, Executive Summary, https://nieer.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/hs_fullreport.pdf.

7 Center for American Progress, "A Compass for Families: Head Start in Rural America," 10 April 2018, https://www.americanprogress.org/arti-

cle/a-compass-for-families/.

8 A journalism podcast called *The Voucher Scam* followed these developments in real time in the fall of 2023.

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