Education's Iron Cage

And Its Dismantling In The New Global Order

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Introduction: Education's Iron Cage And Its Dismantling In The New Global Order

GEORGE MARTELL

At the core of this book is an understanding that what we love in the world – what we struggle to achieve in our schools (as in our lives) – comes first, not just as an ethical imperative, but first historically.

This should be an obvious starting point in setting out to understand the global experience of public schooling. But it is not. It is, in fact, a reality we often forget as we react to the inhumanity we experience of the world's educational systems, especially if we are among the world's working peoples/colonized peoples. In the everyday life of our schools, a subordinate-class impetus to build a just and caring educational system often appears more as an impulsive *reaction* to an offensive and overwhelming framework of ruling-class policies and practices; it doesn't seem to have an identity or a life of its own. What we have to keep in mind is that in the bigger pattern of educational change, this subordinate-class impetus, in fact, comes first and the thrust of our ruling class in education comes later. Ruling-class action in public education is primarily a response to an ongoing popular demand for schools that genuinely enhance the lives of their students; it reflects the need of those in power to restrain and reshape a fundamental human desire to build a better future for their children.

This understanding is often implicit rather than explicit in these pages, but it serves as bedrock for any future action we may take in resisting the current neo-liberal assault on our public schools. The iron cage of global capitalism, now pressing heavily on the world's schools, should be

seen as an aggressive ruling-class *reaction* to a continuous subordinate-class insistence on building a world for themselves and on exploring the knowledge necessary for such a task. Feudal peasants, First Nations communities, artisans and small farmers, industrial workers of all countries, and the peasantry of globalized "underdevelopment" have all fought for such a world and have all contributed to the knowledge needed to build it in the future. This struggle, reflected in the articles that follow, continues around the globe, and the knowledge it contains is there for us, however repressive our current circumstances may be.

In the present day, what has developed as the dominant form of global education has emerged out of the growing strength of international capital in suppressing post-war worker militancy and national liberation. The focus of this form of education is on deepening corporate control of the world's working people. At the same time, however, because capital does not command all power, its educational structures still have to take into account the immediate demands of these subordinate classes (for their own world and the knowledge to build it). Capital also has to recognize the prospect that subordinate-class power will eventually grow in opposition once more and that earlier institutional "forms of hope" (in education as elsewhere) will eventually be reconstituted and reshaped in the struggle for a new world. Most of these immediate demands are, of course, actively resisted by those in power. Some are co-opted and some find their way into actually implemented policy. Potential subordinate-class power, on the other hand, finds its way into the policy process through the back door of governing-class prudence. The end product in the real world of our school systems is sometimes called an "education settlement" – a resultant or compromise of forces (primarily class forces) held in place for a significant moment in time, but always (potentially) unstable, as these forces are continually on the move and shifting in relative strength. If the papers in this book are any indication, we may be at the beginning of another shift in these forces and the growth of subordinate-class power in our schools. Or we may not. Anew resistance movement in our schools appears to be in the making, but we have yet no clear grasp on its eventual outcome.

What *is* evident – as our authors attest – is the continuing strength of capitalism's assault on public schooling over the last three decades or so in both its neo-conservative and its neo-liberal variants.

The central purposes of this assault are also clear: First, to increase capitalist profits through financial cutbacks (allowing tax cuts for the rich and the corporations) and through outsourcing school services (expanding the school marketplace for private profit); this process is often called "privatization." The second purpose of this assault is to intensify the production of human capital in the schools, especially low-level human capital among children who are poor, immigrant or migrant, and who come from communities of colour. Capitalism requires increasing numbers of workers, citizens and consumers who willingly do what they are told to do and think what they are told to think. The production of such human capital is the most fundamental role schools play in capitalist society.

But while its strength is obvious and its overall aims are clear, the on-the-ground nature of this assault is still hard to pin down.

Global capitalism has hit schools around the world with such force and speed that those who stand in opposition have yet to recover enough space to really take in what has happened. Furthermore, the assault in still coming in new manipulative language and within ever-changing frameworks of curriculum delivery and bureaucratic and technical control. Simply bringing us up-to-date in a number of key areas takes up a major part of this collection.

THE PRIVATIZATION AGENDA

An equally important reason for our inability to deal with this assault as clearly as we might is the intensity of its privatization thrust. This thrust has been so destructive of public education that it has taken up most of the time and energy of progressive forces in our schools. Our thinking about the larger purposes of schooling has been buried in a struggle in which public education itself seemed to be on the line. As a result, the human capital side of the current corporate agenda in education has yet to be resisted in any substantial way. School-based human capital production has, of course, been widely criticized for its human emptiness and social divisiveness. In particular, the curriculum core of this production – Outcomes (or Expectations) Based Education (OBE) policed by standardized tests – has faced growing opposition, particularly among teachers. This opposition, however, has yet to take on serious

organizational strength. In large part, as the articles in this book make clear, this is because the intensity of the privatization thrust has not diminished.

For all the official corporate humanism that opened the 21st century, with its emphasis on building "social cohesion" in an increasingly unruly world, very little of this emphasis has reached the ground of actual practice – at least in terms of social democratic manoeuvring. New Right conservatism has largely been replaced by New Right liberalism, which has focused on intensifying and rationalizing earlier conservative institutions and reforms. The overall direction of public policy has remained solidly in place over the last three decades. Raw corporate power — and the pressure for immediate profit-making opportunities — is still very much in evidence in government decision-making circles. It continues to trump more long-term capitalist concerns for social cohesion and more humane human capital development.

As a result, the privatization of public schooling in all its forms continues around the globe.

Governments have hung tough on tax relief for the rich and the corporations. They have kept the neo-conservative financial structures in place that demanded extensive social-service cutbacks to ensure this tax relief. This has been especially the case in countries with rising military, police, court and jail costs. Occasionally, in jurisdictions where school funding has become a hot-button political issue, a little more money has gone to education at the expense of other social sectors. But relative to what our school systems need, the new funds are a drop in the bucket; they don't come anywhere close to dealing with such fundamentals as the backlog in school building and repair and the continuing downward pressure on teacher and education-worker salaries. In many countries, there is a continuing decline in real per pupil spending. It is also worth noting that much of the limited new money is disappearing into targeted projects – like implementing and policing the new Outcomes Based Education curriculum and testing policies – that hurt rather than help the public system.

Outsourcing to the private sector is also growing, bringing with it an additional for-profit financial squeeze on the public schools.

More public money continues to flow into private schooling, with elite schools and religious schools taking most of it. With this money –

and in response to the continuing assault on public education – private schooling continues to expand.

In all of the countries we have examined, there is also continuing extension of the private sector within public education.

A growing number of for-profit activities are going on inside our public school systems. They include teacher training, curriculum development (from literacy programs to technical education), lesson plan packaging, consulting on policy development, setting up education business sectors for international competition, school bus programs, cleaning services, repair services, secretarial services, food services, publishing ventures, school management, graphic design, payroll distribution, program sponsorship, voucher development, supplemental tutoring, and last, but not least, the construction and maintenance of public schools to be owned by private companies for various lengths of time and rented back (at a fat profit) to governments and local authorities. We have whole sections of school bureaucracies dedicated to opening up "public-private partnerships."

There is also a growing number of what might be described as non-profit, pro-business activities going on inside the public schools.

There is increasing pressure to make public education function more like a private corporation. School systems are now led by CEOs and hierarchies of "managers" promoting various forms of competition between local authorities, local schools, teachers and students as well as a variety of standardized measurements to determine the winners and the losers in this competition. Increasingly, the task of school authorities is the protection and development of an internal competitive marketplace and the deepening of social class divisions. "Successful" public schools are encouraged to recruit a middle-class clientele while increasing numbers of poor children are obliged to find their way into poor schools and bottom streams, which are stripped of even more resources when they fail to achieve middle-class "standards." Middle-class parents are pressed to help fund what amounts to their own private schools within the public system and to distance themselves from the system's lower-class failures. Teachers of poor children, on the other hand, are pressed to make up the difference for their students out of their own pockets. Vouchers and charter schools are another part of this complex mix. There is also growing pressure to bring competitively minded busi-

ness and religious ideologues directly into school management, with England and America leading the way. As in the capitalist world outside the school, in these new "competitive" structures educational policies and resources are skewed in the direction of the well to do.

THE IRON CAGE

For all the power of its impact – and the growth in profits it entails – the privatization thrust of neo-liberal education contains real dangers for the future of capitalist society. In many respects, it runs against the grain of human capital production, robbing the educational system of the resources necessary to implement an effective human capital policy.

This is a genuine problem for capitalism. The dramatic need for short-term profits appears to be undercutting the requirement for long-term social control as a basis for long-term profit. As a result – as more thoughtful members of capitalism's governing classes have predicted – the "social cohesion" of our societies has become more fragile. In the education sector, working people can now plainly see that their local schools are crumbling, not just in their physical plant and in the resources available to them, but in officials' ability to defend their practices with both students and parents. What has become especially evident is that these local schools are promoting much deeper social divisions. Nowhere is this clearer than in poor immigrant communities of colour.

It may be a moment when the issue of human capital production (particularly its low-level variety) can again come to the surface in our schools. It is no longer hidden as it once was in the efficient functioning of what Loren Lind called "the learning machine."

But those who put this human capital issue forward – who struggle for purpose and meaning in our schools – will still have to contend with what Bouvier and Karlenzig later in this book refer to as the "iron cage [of] functional rationality and instrumentality" that the capitalist order has created over the centuries in its quest for a stable marketplace for goods and labour.

This iron cage is not a "sheath of steel" as Weber originally imagined it before the term was translated for an English-speaking audience. It is more open and more vulnerable to attack. It takes different forms in different institutions and in different societies. It can be sophisticated or

roughly cast. It is, nevertheless, a structure of great power in whatever form it takes.

The term "iron cage" can be applied across whole societies in describing a structure of coercive economic and psychological relationships whose central function is the creation of human capital. This is human capital production broadly understood as the creation of workers and citizens and consumers, who bring together in their own persons that uniquely capitalist fusion of intellectual passivity and energetic action. It is perhaps best understood as a process of standardization, which as much as possible hopes to make people like machines or, at least, effective extensions of machines.

The standardization process itself can be divided into two thoroughly integrated parts. The first part is a two-sided *control thrust*: it moves to cut people off from their human ties and from the natural world (undercutting solidarity, encouraging objectification) while it pressures them, at the same time, to accept their individual place (and sometimes their communal place) within a complex social hierarchy and to take orders from those above them in authority. The second part is the *standardized action* that is to emerge out of this control thrust: action that supports capitalist profit in the workplace, in the marketplace and in the state system. The capacity and willingness to take such action in all these areas is the central meaning of human capital.

The current form of such standardized action emerged with the development of "scientific management" at the end of the nineteenth century and the rise of "industrial psychology," which followed. Together these two developments created a particularly modern combination of economic coercion and psychological manipulation in response to working-class unrest.

We might think of the entire process as an aggressive extension of economic rationality to all social domains.

Such an iron cage increasingly forms the core governance and curriculum structure of our schools. Outcomes Based Education is its most recent expression. It contains and links the *control thrust* for turning students into human capital and the *standardized action* that is the most practical expression of this human capital. OBE separates students and teachers from society and nature, while encouraging acquiescence and obedience to those in authority. At the same time, it directs students and

teachers into learning the increasingly dissociated (and demeaning) hard and soft "skills" that capitalism requires of us.

As our contributors show us, OBE has spread across the world in company with the economic, political and military might of global capitalism and western imperialism. Resistance to OBE will grow as the resistance to global capitalism and western imperialism grows.

DISMANTLING THE IRON CAGE

From capitalism's perspective, the dismantling of public education – particularly its physical and human framework – is thoroughly underway.

It is a process, as I've indicated, that has had unintended consequences.

Public school systems are actually disintegrating. This is what happens to an iron cage – if I can stretch the metaphor – when it's neglected or left out in the rain. It rusts. It falls apart. It loses its authority and its holding power.

The privatization agenda of cutbacks and outsourcing has hammered the material and personnel basis of our public school systems and continues to do so. As a result, their authority and power among working people have been slipping away.

For all the destruction caused by privatization, it creates an opportunity for more deep-rooted political organizing – at the local school level and at all other levels of government that determine education policy.

It is an opportunity that lets us expand the struggle not only for more money in our schools, but also for a much more democratic education and for a challenging curriculum that genuinely opens students and teachers to the physical, social and spiritual world around them.

As this collection shows, there are a number of steps being taken to move us in all three of these directions.

In the process, of course, we are in direct opposition to the neo-liberal thrust of the corporate world. We are engaged in dismantling the iron cage of capitalist control and skill development in education. We are also involved in restoring the resources capitalism has taken from our schools.

What I want to offer here is a rough summary of where global resistance to neo-liberalism (in both its conservative and liberal forms) has

been leading us. It is a set of conclusions that emerge, it seems to me, from the essays that follow.

Wherever we are, it turns out, the big problem is keeping things together: building coalitions and centering them on working-class and peasant organizing in alliance with the work being done by Indigenous communities; keeping the issues of money, power and curriculum interlocked; and linking our demands for what should be abandoned in our school systems with what should be put in its place.

Working together

There is no getting around the need for powerful coalitions in education. Students, teachers, education workers, parents, communities, and the labour movement all have to be together on this front. If they're split – as they are far too often these days – we're doomed. Every sympathetic organization available has to be organized on this front – to establish a common position and fight for it together.

This organizing can't just be reactive to the neo-liberal assault on our schools. Underneath it there has to be a vision of a just and caring society that schooling helps build as well as a grasp of the knowledge and wisdom needed to build it.

Our organizing has to reach out on two fronts simultaneously: It has to impact the political institutions that make overall decisions about public schooling (within national, regional, and local governments) and it has to be rooted in local schools (where core organizing has to take place and where real changes can be made, sometimes in direct opposition to centralized ministries of education). What's required are tough political structures – with forms as various as urban education political parties, regional education networks and sections of national political organizations – that can deliver electoral votes where needed and can also function as an organizing framework and social movement within the public schools. These structures have to provide overall leadership and vision in the struggle for genuine knowledge, which reconnects us to "people and place" and to larger social purposes across our educational systems. At the same time, this leadership must press hard for the democratization of curriculum, pedagogy and governance in neighbourhood schools

The organizing also has to have a working-class and/or a peasant base as well as roots in Indigenous communities. While as many progressive middle-class parents and activists as possible have to be integrated into the organization, if it isn't focused primarily on improving the situation of working-class, peasant and aboriginal children it will die, and public schooling will continue to get beaten up. Public-sector teacher unions especially have to grasp this reality. Workers, peasants and Aboriginal peoples need a public system, and they will defend it – if it answers their needs. The middle class, however, as has been evident over the last couple of decades, can be seduced or pushed out of the public schools; its members increasingly chose private schooling as a solution to public sector woes. Special care therefore has to be taken to ensure that teacher interests and working-class, peasant and Aboriginal peoples interests are solidly linked in certain key demands: smaller classes linked to de-streaming; teacher freedom to do honest work (including the right to run their own profession) that results in a more challenging and meaningful curriculum; parental engagement that makes a difference in discipline and shared purpose; better wages and working conditions for teachers and education workers that not only leads to happier classrooms but also to a broader pattern of upward wage gains for all. Finally, it is worth noting that the building of stronger schools in this fashion will have the effect of drawing back disaffected middle-class parents, who have left for the private sector but still believe in a public system.

Money, power, curriculum

Just as all the progressive players in education have to be brought together in coalitions, the three basic issues of money, power and curriculum (including pedagogy and assessment) have to be brought together into one platform.

It is increasingly important not to focus on one issue to the detriment of the others, as we have done so much of late in privileging the financial problems our school systems face. These three issues have to be integrated in organizing educational reform. When we say we need more money, we also have to say how it will be spent and where it will be spent. When we support a particular approach to curriculum, we also

have to describe how it will be funded and what kind of democracy is involved both in the classroom and in the school as a whole. When we demand a particular form of governance, we have to lay out what that will mean for the ways we make decisions about money or the development and implementation of program.

Keeping these three areas together is not only fundamental to putting forward a vision of an alternative school system, it is also strategically essential, if we are to keep our coalitions intact. We need this complete picture in front of us (supported by all its contributors) if we are, for example, to prevent teachers from walking away from curriculum issues, once their pay and working conditions are settled, or if we are stop parent neglect of teacher and education-worker wages in order to focus on issues of program and parent power. Parents have to hang tough politically on the wages and working conditions front and teachers have to demand curriculum and governance reforms in their contracts.

Democratic process and program priorities are particularly important in working out alternative budgets. We have to put real options for revenue and spending in front of people – options from minimum tax increases on the rich and the corporations to fund current shortfalls to a much more thorough grounding of the public accounts (including those of education) to assure long-term revenue sources and to set out long-term spending priorities.

Saying No and saying Yes

We have to learn to say No to policies and programs we don't want and Yes to those we do want – at the same time.

We have to say No to human capital production in our schools as we say Yes to a program that fits all our students for the task of building a genuine home for themselves in communities and countries they can call their own.

We have to put a stop to the "abstraction" of academic knowledge and work instead to help students put together thought and action in their curriculum (in everything from working to improve neighbourhood life to taking on environmental issues).

We have to stand opposed to all versions of Outcomes Based Education while we build a program that honestly explores and grapples

with the reality in which we are centred. This means unequivocal resistance to an imposed framework of one-dimensional outcomes as well as broad support for open-ended areas of exploration, collectively developed, that permit teachers and students to move into purposeful work together.

This opposition extends to all forms of standardized tests and looks instead to what is often called "authentic assessment," which allows students to show or give expression to what they know and allows teachers to continuously move them forward. It means we reject academic competition while we collectively support the highest quality work from all our students.

We also have to stand against all forms of socially biased labels – class- race- culture- and gender-biased – and insist that all students are treated as full human beings in relationship with one another, with histories and stories yet to be told.

At the same time, we have to reject socially biased forms of streaming or tracking and demand a "comprehensive" de-streamed system that provides the resources to ensure that all students get a "quality" education.

We have to be clear that human capital production in worker training is not acceptable at the same time as we insist on solid technical education that incorporates a strong Arts and Science program – its courses equally sophisticated to those of any university-bound program and recognized as such. We have to resist education's role in craft deskilling while we move technical studies in the direction of science, as all serious craftwork has traditionally moved.

We have to oppose the separation of mental and manual work while we struggle for programs that allow all students to experience both. We have to protest the mindless acceptance of capitalism's mode of production while we support a much deeper understanding of the larger social, economic, and industrial design structures of our students' future workplaces.

We have to say No to under-funding, as we have said for many years now, and Yes to a genuine base for stable and generous school finance.

We have to say No to huge educational institutions and Yes to small local authorities (or boards), small schools and small classes.

We have to challenge a top-down corporate governance structure and demand democratic governance that takes into account the need for

common aims and resource allocation, but at the same time encourages and supports a thorough-going democratization of local schools. We have to stand against the centralized coercion and manipulation that currently oppresses our schools while we support the creation of effective models of school reform – models that may apply to large jurisdictions but which allow local schools to choose what they want and to create what they need.

We have to resist the "teacher-proofing" of our schools (including destructive teacher assessment procedures) while fighting for a structure that lets our teachers teach.

We have to oppose the mindless hierarchy in which school board workers do their jobs and organize for their complete integration into the work of the school and its decision-making process.

Finally, we must say No to a corporate-controlled agenda that denies the character of the child and disrespects community while we say Yes to an extensive mobilization of teacher, student, parent and community knowledge that can genuinely strengthen children's lives.

The contributors to this collection do not imagine this alternative program will find major traction any time soon.

But we know that without such a broad program in front of us – shaped to our particular circumstances and guiding our action – our immediate work for more limited changes in our schools can never come to fruition. What we do now has to link with a clear understanding of what our future school systems can become. Without that direction, our current politics of educational reform will inevitably be co-opted and undercut by those who currently have power in our schools.

As Claudia Korol, an Argentinian journalist, put it recently: "Believe what is necessary is possible. Accomplish what is possible."