

Introduction: The Illinois Problem

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Abstract

*The co-editors of this issue of *Thresholds in Education*, entitled *The Illinois Problem*, trace the reasons why such a discussion as that found in the following pages is appropriate at this juncture of Illinois' history. Additionally, they explain that the title has both a concrete/particular character (Illinois as neoliberalism's research & development laboratory) and a metaphoric/narrative character (*the Illinois Problem writ large*). Finally, the editors preview the other articles in this third issue of the 41st year of the journal.*

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We've been pondering the matters taken up by the authors in this issue of *Thresholds in Education* for some time now—both as residents experiencing the daily particular problems of Illinois itself and as interested voyeurs of the broader “disseminated” versions of “The Problem” in other states, regions, and even countries. And so, what do we mean by *The Illinois Problem*? In brief, we believe the *Illinois Problem* as taken up in the pages that follow, conveys theoretical, practical, and pragmatic concerns for today's socio-political context—concerns that direct us to see, understand, and act in ways that address the problem itself. The theoretical position that the *Illinois Problem* conveys and utilizes for its analysis is that the current conflated political basis for deciding policy discourages a concern for building and maintaining a healthy public within a democracy. Rather, current socio-political understanding “encourages a morality that is economic; a social perspective that is individualist; a politics that is aesthetically patriotic; and, an economic understanding that is merciless” (Heybach & Sheffield, 2014, p. 71). This theoretical lens, we believe (as depressing as it certainly is), allows us to see actual practical policy intent in the face of both neoliberal and neoconservative forces coalescing toward a similar end—an end which leaves little room for widespread human flourishing. In terms of its practical import, this vision allows us to see the actual intent of specific policies and practices explored in this theme issue.

Neoliberal Double-Think: Publicly Broke and Privately Rich

Wendy Brown (2015) in *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* advances the argument that neoliberalism is more than just an immediate material/economic scheme meant to ensure the rich stay rich and the poor stay poor; rather, it is a rationale that subverts that status of the human. Brown's argument, drawing on the work of Foucault, reveals

that the logic driving such a web of scorched earth economic imperatives hinges on an often-concealed flight away from the logic of human rights. Consequently, the status of the human as a subject endowed with inalienable rights and universal value is undermined within neoliberal logic. Brown (2015) explains:

...equality ceases to be an a priori or fundamental of neoliberalized democracy. In legislation, jurisprudence, and the popular imaginary, inequality becomes normal, even normative. A democracy composed of human capital features winners and losers, not equal treatment or equal protection. In this regard, too, the social contract is turning inside out. (p.38)

Such an inequality-as-normal logic has crept across local, state and national politics in remarkable ways that undermine more than just the civility of political discourse, but rather, ushers in unprecedented levels of dehumanization that threaten the very potential for democracy to exist. Brown (2015) continues, “as a normative order of reason developed over three decades into a widely and deeply disseminated governing rationality, neoliberalism transmogrifies every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic” (pp. 9-10). This theoretical understanding of where we are within Illinois and beyond, frames the discussions that follow. Before turning to the bulk of the issues, we open with an example of how neoliberalism incentivizes dehumanization.

In the case of 2012-2013’s historic Chicago school closings, it became clear that neoliberal economic forces were not just at the root of these actions, but explicitly used to incentivize state sponsored instability (Aviles & Heybach, 2017).¹ That is, austerity measures were put in place not simply as a necessary response to economic downturns and budgetary shortfalls blanketing Chicago and Illinois at-large, but because numerous private entities stood to gain significantly by investing in communities historically ignored, economically and otherwise. To comprehend how a major U.S. city comes to close 49 public schools, one must consider these school actions within the larger story of state sponsored instability that had been deliberately orchestrated by powerful forces across the city (Lipman, 2013). Since 2002, when then Chicago Public Schools (CPS) Chief Executive Officer, Arne Duncan, forced the closure of three “low-performing” schools (Vevea, Lutton, & Karp, 2013), mass disruption to educational access and services has impacted 41,096 students, and thousands of teachers, administrators, and support staff. To date, over 127 CPS schools have been subjected to “school actions,” defined as Board initiated closings, consolidations, and mass firings of school staff within buildings that have been deemed “turnaround” schools (Vevea, Lutton, & Karp, 2013).



1. The images included here were taken by the authors in late fall of 2013 and represent a small fraction of CPS schools that were closed in 2012-2013.

Beyond the issue of manufactured instability, the material loss of public assets cannot be underestimated. For example, CPS spent \$30.9 million dollars to board-up schools and move materials out of them—officially termed “mothballing” (CEFTF, 2014). Given the enormous undertaking, The Advisory Committee for School Repurposing and Community Development (ACSRCD) was established at the direction of Mayor Rahm Emanuel “to ensure decisions around these sites [were] made in the best interest of their local communities” (Chicago Public Schools, 2013). The “sites” in question are the closed public schools that sit on public lands—assets that had been paid for by generations of local taxpayers. Public land and goods that might continue to benefit neighborhoods and the city as a whole even if they were/are currently sitting empty.



These decisions were made publicly palatable because CPS and city officials saturated the public psyche with the claim of “under-utilization.” Thus, if these facilities were “under-utilized” it made perfect sense to close the buildings and relocate students. However, the public was rarely afforded the information that explained what was meant by under-utilization or how this phenomenon came to be. In unraveling the policy history that made these decisions possible, some unique and disturbing components can be found in the case of Chicago: 1) the decision to close schools was made pre-emptively to finalizing a long-term facilities master plan; 2) the wholly manufactured nature of this crisis was made possible by years of charter school expansion that drained public schools of students and resources; 3) the utilization formula “exaggerated the extent of ‘under-utilization’ and underestimated the extent of overcrowding” (CEFTF, 2014, p. 16); and, 4) CPS ignored best practices from other urban district utilization formulas across the nation. Regarding the utilization formula, CEFTF (2014) found that:

CPS does not factor into its formula the concerns of parents and educators about optimizing class size, and in some circumstances reducing class size; the current ISBE [Illinois State Board of Education] rules on class size for Special Education; or the class size guidelines in CPS’ collective bargaining agreement with the Chicago Teachers’ Union [CTU]. CPS does not vary its space utilization guidelines and formula based on goals and objectives (or even restrictions) for optimizing class size, or for the varying space needs for different ages and grades of students. (p.18)

Beyond the shock that the utilization formula violates CPS' own class size guidelines ensured through a collective bargaining agreement with CTU, these actions make it difficult to understand why CPS chose to not consider what other districts (notably New York City) consider when constructing space use formulas.



The CEFTF (2014) report exhaustively chronicles the issue of “under-utilization,” and at one point states that “CPS’ own top administrators have publicly acknowledged...CPS’ formula as a ‘blunt instrument’” (p.24). We want to point out that “blunt instrumentation” is notoriously needed in neoliberal societies that do not take account of diverse lived experiences and are emblematic of the mercilessness of neoliberal rationality noted at the outset of this Introduction. CPS’ current Space Utilization Standards policy states:

...Alternate approaches were considered regarding model type...The conclusion was that *wide variability in program type does not make such a model dependable across the entire system* (emphasis added)...CPS finds the classroom-centric methodology [rather than student-centric methodology] on which the Guidelines are based to be significantly more sound and reliable than alternative models. (CPS, 2011)

Here is found, in plain sight, the willful dismissal of context and student needs by CPS, as well as evidence of how notions of equal-ness and same-ness have the consequence of amplifying inequality and injustice. In particular, CEFTF argued that vulnerable populations should be taken into consideration when creating a space-use formula that atoned for different, well documented, needs—needs that are in many cases protected by law (e.g. McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act). Yet, as one legal advocate reminded us, “the CEFTF recommendations were never taken seriously by CPS—our work, the report, was buried” (Interview, April 4, 2016).

In the immediate wake of the school closings, the Advisory Committee for School Repurposing and Community Development created glossy PDF marketing materials describing each school facility, including information as to square footage, zoning details, maintenance costs as a school, carry costs as a vacant building, public art holdings, historic building designations, material grounds issues, and the potential for public park creation. The descriptions also included pictures of the structure and floor plans. All of this seems fairly unimportant, until you get to the section regarding “TIF Information.”

“TIF” stands for tax increment financing and has been used in Illinois since 1987. According to the Illinois Tax Incremental Association, TIFs are a powerful means to help “financially strapped local governments” rebuild their infrastructure. Although TIF advocates claim that the community “improves” through the use of TIF, this route is not without serious controversy in Chicago and around the nation (Tresser, 2014). After a particular area has been deemed a TIF district:

The County Clerk certifies the total equalized assessed valuation of property in the District as of the date the TIF district is created. All property taxes arising from this certified initial valuation, or “base value,” continue to be paid to existing taxing bodies within the TIF District. Any incremental taxes arising from increases in property values after this point are re-allocated and set aside for “public and private redevelopment project costs” in the District. (TIF Illinois)

In short, *public* tax dollars are set aside for projects that will gentrify the local community, while cutting off already in need *public* projects that do not have immediate access to the funds collected by the TIF district (i.e. *public* schools). TIF projects can then be carried out by public and *private* entities, thus providing *public* tax dollars to fund the development and redevelopment of city land parcels by private, potentially corporate, entities. To put this in perspective, The Civic Lab recently completed research that found Chicago’s TIF districts to be sitting on 1.7 billion dollars in TIF funds at the time of the school closings (Tresser, 2014). To date, the largest beneficiaries of Chicago’s TIF dollars have been the Loop, Millennium Park, and the Marriott Corporation. These funds have notoriously *not* been used to stop the unnecessary suffering of the public (i.e. those living in unstable communities and neighborhoods throughout Chicago), but rather to gentrify neighborhoods to the benefit of non-human corporations and private entities. The bolstering of non-human value at the expense of material human suffering is quintessentially neoliberal.



Furthermore, a 2011 PEW study found that by and large the promise of repurposing public schools for community well-being has simply not panned out—in fact, it is difficult to repurpose and sell closed public school building across the country (PEW, 2011). Consequently, the use of TIF funds in Chicago adds a particularly unique brand of incentivizing neoliberal

practices which include the closing of public schools to gain access to TIF funds. It is clear that closing CPS schools is unequivocally wrapped up with economic incentives that funnel *public* tax dollars away from *public* entities that are already starved for funds.

To highlight one school that is especially concerning as it relates to Students in Temporary Living Situations (STLS) and the TIF process, we turn to Attucks Elementary School which was phased out over three years (rather than immediately closed as others were). The student population of Attucks was reported to be 100% African-American, 99.2% low income, and with the following homeless rates: 48.3% in 2013, 54.3% in 2014, and 58.6% in 2015 the year the school closed (Illinois Interactive Report Card, 2016). The school is currently being advertised with a TIF balance of \$4,185,583, and adjacent TIF's valued at \$17,132,219.

These financial realities are difficult to conceive of given the narrative of budget crisis that has enveloped Illinois in recent years and persists to this day. However, worse yet, is the blatant state-sponsored material violence done to this population of students. How is a school building whose students represent such great need (materially and otherwise) allowed to sit on *public* tax dollars in the form of a TIF District while generations of children are subjected to chaotic school policy? This reality challenges the dominant discourses that have surrounded the 2012-13 CPS closings, and should be deeply troubling to any student, parent, concerned citizen, educator, or others interested in the needs of students. Finally, such financial incentives expose not only the overt neoliberal agenda at the very root of these school actions, but that dehumanization and the devaluing of the human will continue to go unmitigated by a public that remains naïve to the financial maneuvers being played in the name of educational “progress.”

Local, State, and National Expressions of the *Illinois Problem*

The articles in this issue of *Thresholds in Education* take up the above general and specific concerns—both in Illinois and more broadly—from a variety of perspectives. The first article, penned by Jameson Brewer, Julian Vaquez Heilig, Michelle Strater Gunderson, and Jitu Brown, focuses on activist reactions to school reform. Noting that the privatizing movement has brought decreased student achievement, increased racial inequality, increased class size, and increased violence, the authors focus on strategies activists are using to push back on the privatization movement. Angela Kraemer-Holland follows that discussion with a theoretical analysis of the state of democracy in Chicago. Utilizing Rancière's theory of politics, Kraemer-Holland argues that education reform in Chicago and elsewhere is a manifestation of anti-democratic practices rampant throughout the US.

Following Kraemer-Holland, Ashley Allen examines the historic tradition of activism in Chicago, noting that that tradition is alive and well. She suggests that Chicago activism and its activists might be inspirational for encouraging peaceful “fighting back” in a variety of ways on a variety of issues and in a variety of places. Chris Higgins moves us out of Chicago proper and onto/into the public universities of Illinois and beyond. Noting that the attack on the public sector has sent Illinois public universities into a death spiral—one that must be stopped if the public is to remain in existence at all, much less as a viable political entity.

Becky Noël Smith's piece on the Opt Out Movement, examines its current “place” in the ongoing resistance to standards-based education and high stakes testing. Smith's historical analysis notes the national flavor of the attack on public institutions and ways the Opt Out movement continues to resist. In our final piece, Nicholas Eastman examines Neoliberalism's

“relationship” with charter schools. Eastman’s analysis pays particular attention to charter schools’ role in “capital accumulation” and the “revitalization” of urban space as well as the exploitation opportunities Charter Schools provide for property owners in St. Louis and across the nation. All of these articles seek to reveal and resist the explicit and implicit tendencies that allow for the exploitation and dehumanization of humans in the enactment of brutalized forms of policies and practices.

Some Final Introductory Remarks

Returning to Wendy Brown’s (2015) argument that “equality ceases to be an a priori or fundamental of neoliberalized democracy” (p. 38), citizens must consider the end game set in motion by the rationale that gives rise to the *Illinois Problem*. Neoliberalism, within the public imaginary rather than the imaginary of academics who invoke its use, holds almost no seat at the table. If you hesitate to believe, we challenge you to ask those sitting around your holiday dinner table what they think of neoliberalism. The unfortunate status of neoliberalism as an organizing concept often cuts off the much-needed understanding that is required to resist such political movements. Instead, we might invoke the historical memory of fascism as a concept more readily knowable to the public. It may seem a point of exaggeration, but consider the similarities of neoliberalism and the rise of fascism in 20th century Europe.

In thinking about the philosophical stance of fascism, and its similarities to neoliberalism, the text *The Origins of Totalitarianism* by Hannah Arendt (1976) stands as a fruitful conduit for such activity. Her writing regarding the right to have rights is timely and necessary to understand contemporary expressions of such rationalities (Bernstein, 2018). Arendt states:

The calamity of the rightless is not that they are deprived of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, or of equality before the law and freedom of opinion—formulas which were designed to solve problems *within* given communities—but that they no longer belong to any community whatsoever. (p.452)

We might add, a state of exile or stateless refugeeism as was the case in what Arendt was theorizing offers a particular embodied physicality, being removed from literal communities, that signals awareness that is not afforded in all neoliberal erosions of human rights.

Arendt (1976) reminds us that there is more at stake than simply the loss of community within totalitarian regimes; rather, she argues that such totalitarianism leads to the fundamental deprivation of the “rights to action ...[and] the right to opinion”:

The fundamental deprivation of human rights is manifested first and above all in the deprivation of a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective...This extremity, and nothing else, is the situation of people deprived of human rights. They are deprived, not of the right of freedom, but of the right to action, not of the right to think whatever they please, but of the right to opinion. (p.296)

Again, Arendt is speaking of a strategic, explicit, physical, rationality that allows for the total domination of the other. Neoliberalism is not nearly as overt as fascism—rather, neoliberalism slowly and covertly creeps and slides over, finally appropriating for its own purposes, otherwise

worthy ideas meant to support equality and progress. The *Illinois Problem* is not as obvious to onlookers as fascism was and is. However, in policy and practices it leaves little in terms of options to confront its nearly-rationalized logic. In closing, we hope that the articles that follow in this issue allow for the explicit rendering of the problem at hand so that we might locate and resist the explicit and implicit tendencies that arise from within the *Illinois Problem*.



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