GLOBALIZATION, NEOLIBERALISM, AND TEACHER EDUCATION

 Forty years ago, philosopher Maxine Greene wrote about “mystification” as it relates to teaching and teacher education during “unquiet times.” Emphasizing the ways in which industrial civilization tends to obscure the socially constructed nature of what we experience, including our sense of alienation, malaise, cynicism, and betrayal, she urged teachers to play a vital role with their students in counteracting this mystification. Similarly, teacher educators ought to pursue “an interrogation of surface reality,” a heightened critique of what seems “natural,” and a renewed “wide-awareness” and embrace of “authentic speaking” with their students. They should “work to combat the sense of ineffectuality and powerlessness that comes when persons feel themselves to be the victims of forces wholly beyond their control, in fact beyond any human control.” While Greene believed that the role teachers and teacher educators can play in changing the social order, or “legisl[ing] democracy,” is limited, surely something can be done to empower some teachers-to-be to reflect upon their own life situations, to speak out in their own voices about the lacks that must be repaired, the possibilities to be acted upon in the name of what they deem decent, humane, and just.¹

We have long passed the first and second industrial revolutions, when steam and electricity transformed our lives and the world’s economies, and are well into the third, during which microchips and software have altered our universe. A fourth industrial revolution, involving global connectivity, automation, and artificial intelligence, is rapidly emerging.² The economic stagnation that took place in the 1970s, when Greene wrote her essay, has been followed by several boom-and-bust cycles of capitalist economics, including the upending Recession of 2007–2009. We are still in, as Greene put it, unquiet times. Particularly prominent are the effects of globalization, constantly evolving for several centuries but especially intense during the last half-
a massive restructuring structure, one that restructures commonsense, restructures relationships between humans and other humans, restructures relationships between humans and products, restructures cultural, capital, political flows, and restructures the state and economy in line with individual self-interest and at a cost to commitments to collective well-being.5

The bottom line seems to be literally the bottom line for economic elites. Much of what is now occurring in education, in our country and around the world, can be explained by the prominence of these forces of globalization and neoliberalism in our everyday lives. At the same time, as several scholars suggest, “a remarkable paradox for democratic-minded academics” has occurred. They briefly describe it this way:

1. Never before in human history have human beings possessed so much knowledge that potentially gives them the power to produce truly good lives for all human beings.
2. Never before in human history have so many human beings lived so long and yet experienced so vast an array of disastrous conditions that produce such human misery.6

Following on Greene, “surely something can be done” to prepare teachers to be knowledgeable and reflective about such a paradox and to foster what is “decent, humane and just.”

**What We Are Facing**

Although more than four decades have gone by since Greene’s essay, and times certainly have changed, we would do well to be guided by the same commitment to demystify and interrogate, become wide awake and combat ineffectuality and powerlessness, and identify possibilities and act in defense of robust participatory democracy and social justice. First, of course, is to better understand what we are facing.
The effects of globalization and neoliberalism during the last several decades are taking place everywhere, in ways that can be disruptive, for good and for bad. For example, economies are increasingly interlocked and competitive, and jobs move readily from one country to another because of changes in technology, transportation, and communication and a decline in governmental regulation. At the same time that this helps to control costs and potentially create additional jobs in new places, and enhance profits, it has significant adverse effects on the wages, labor conditions and employment opportunities of millions of workers, including many in the United States. Moreover, negative economic trends in just one major national market can have global effects that result in unfavorable financial developments (including public debt) around the world. In addition, the increasing effects of climate change, such as global warming, are intertwined; natural disasters and environmental crises in one area affect others far away. The immensely destructive earthquake and tsunami in Japan in 2011, for instance, caused not just huge waves there but also many tons of debris, including household items, and low levels of radioactive chemicals (due to the Fukushima nuclear plant meltdown) to arrive on the shores of the United States and Canada in ensuing years. It also led to the destruction of populations of salmon, whales, seals, etc., in the Pacific Ocean. The 2018 fires in California, at the time the most destructive wildfire season on record, were felt across the country, with smoke from the fires spreading 3,000 miles away to New York. A similar phenomenon exists for communicable diseases, which spread rather easily from one part of the planet to another, sometimes due to the spread of air pollution or other environmental contaminants, and other times emanating from the heightened ease with which people with known or unknown infections can travel outside their local communities. At the same time, with the widespread digitization and sharing of health information, we have better ways of tracking communicable diseases—as well as, related to privacy concerns, the people who have them.) At the time of writing, the global reach of the coronavirus that started in China is an unfortunate case in point.

A host of vexing issues worldwide, including infectious disease, widespread inequality and poverty, new and lost job opportunities and need for retraining, renewable and clean energy, global warming and rising sea levels, and national and personal security, demand multidisciplinary approaches to problem solving and challenge the traditional boundaries of academic disciplines. The development of advanced technologies and media has become ubiquitous in many parts of the world, with the Internet becoming “inescapable and increasingly hungry for personal data.” These technological changes have led to increased opportunities for transnational ventures and for bringing peoples of the world closer together, holding out the promise of working collaboratively to address global concerns. At the same time, as noted above, they create significant threats to our private security. We are also witnessing an unprecedented worldwide flow of immigration, to some extent moving in all directions at once. A popular magazine in the United States highlighted this phenomenon and focused on “why the forces of global migration can’t be stopped.” One researcher concludes that, “As these international migrants flee war, poverty, oppression and natural disasters in search of a better life, they are also upending politics and reshaping economies in the countries where they are landing.” In the midst of such
developments, differing cultural practices come into closer contact, through the “tourism” of food, music, clothing, etc., as well as more deeply embedded varied ways of thinking about and explaining the world. While there are expanded opportunities for cultural learning and appreciation, these new, more personal interactions, amidst economic and other changes and anxieties, have led to a rise of intolerant hate speech and other behaviors that target those who are thought of as “Others” or even “invaders.” Democratization and modernization are confronting not only fundamentalism and traditionalism but also a resurgence of authoritarianism, with contentious results in underdeveloped or developing nations as well as developed ones.

In sum, the world now can seem exceedingly volatile, dizzying and destabilized, and even incomprehensible, as if, if we turn away for too long, it could spin out of control. “Breaking news,” at one time alarming in nature, now is announced on our television, computer, and cell phone screens on such a regular and repetitive basis that we become numb to it. More people now get their “news” from Facebook feeds, Twitter posts, and podcasts, sometimes as soundbites, than they do from traditional print, television, and radio outlets. Change is everywhere, which causes some who feel (and are) left out of the limited economic (and political) advantages that accompany these developments to feel a sense of betrayal and resentment and to turn on others who presumably have reaped benefits. Thirty years ago, Ishmael Reed shared the insight that “the United States is unique in the world. The world is here.” That was particularly true in our urban areas then, but now the “here” is increasingly everywhere in our country, including small towns and suburban enclaves. Plus, the United States is no longer so unique. These transformations are occurring in many other countries, including among members of the European Union. Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany was “welcoming a million refugees” in 2015.

What Does This Mean for Teacher Educators?

What seems essential for teacher educators and their students is to become more knowledgeable about these important trends as they reflect on and strategize about school policies and practices now and in the future. More specific questions can be considered as well, for example: How should (and do) these changes affect the role of schools in the United States and the expectations we have for them? To what extent should (and can) educators and their students embrace or adapt to, or question and challenge, the changes taking place? Does it still make sense for schools to focus so much time on the traditional three Rs; to rely on teacher-centered, competitive, and test-driven pedagogies that inhibit active, collaborative engagement with critical social and environmental problems; to ignore the deepening chasm between the rich and the poor and the re-segregation of our communities and schools; to give relatively short shrift to the soft skills that may be needed for changing economies; to embrace narrow, less contextualized, and more constraining and time-consuming accountability and assessment systems; and to establish competitive markets that drain financial and other
support from the public schools, colleges and universities that the vast majority of students attend?

Although it is difficult to predict what the future holds, teacher educators should consider the fundamental changes taking place in the “complex connectivity” that involves the interaction of politics (power), culture (meaning) and economy (resources), and in particular how these changes might inform our avowed purposes for schooling and our preparation of teachers. That globalization is a development that will not go away is pretty well assured; as one journalist concludes, “globalization has become such an elemental feature of life that it is probably irreversible.”

What, then, are the knowledges, skills, and dispositions schools should prioritize to help the next generations live healthy and fulfilling lives, in robust democratic communities, prepared for satisfying careers and avocations, and in a peaceful and sustainable planet? What is most important for teacher educators to encourage among prospective and current teachers? Here are nine related characteristics, briefly identified and listed in alphabetical order, to consider, discuss, and revise:

1. **Caring, empathy, and generosity.** Evidence the understandings, communication skills, and dispositions to develop genuine, caring, and supportive relationships with school colleagues, students, families, and other community members.

2. **Collaboration.** Readily engage with others to address common problems and concerns, within and across disciplinary boundaries, e.g., with teacher colleagues, school administrators, college faculty, parents/caregivers, community members, and students.

3. **Connectedness.** Recognize that, although national, state, and community boundaries will continue to exist in the coming years, we are in fact *Spaceship Earth* and not the separate vehicles of, say, *Apollo* or *Soyuz*, that there are planetary challenges that demand our collective attention on the local, national, and worldwide levels.

4. **Curiosity, courage, and lifelong learning.** Be curious about the world, and be a committed and passionate lifelong learner, seeking not only to delve deeply into the difficult questions of our times but also to pursue answers to them, which includes being a budding scholar of globalization and neoliberalism.

5. **Democracy and fairness.** Understand, value, and advocate for democratic structures and relations, and policies and practices guided by social justice principles, so all have the opportunity to work, learn, and live in supportive and fulfilling environments.

6. **Diversity.** Be knowledgeable about and skilled in ways to enhance learning for all students, from diverse backgrounds and with different abilities and interests, taking into account and affirming the varied histories, traditions, concerns, and experiences that are represented in every school.

7. **Inquiry and creativity.** Be able to address the complex issues and messages that bombard our daily lives with diverse, creative and flexible modes of understanding and expression, as critical thinkers and questioners, problem solvers, and decision makers.
8. **Knowledge.** Have deep (content) knowledge and relevant experiences to make sense of the world, past and present, focusing on our diverse political, economic, social, cultural, spiritual, and scientific perspectives and accomplishments.

9. **Technology.** Have proficiency in and be analytical about the use of advanced technologies, including efforts to enhance communications and foster a sustainable environment.

No doubt these traits can be further clarified and others can be identified. But at least these nine can be used as a starting point for teacher education programs in the 21st century to consider with regard to what they do and what they expect their students to learn.

**Final Thoughts**

In 1990, Vaclav Havel, the celebrated author and playwright, spoke to a joint session of the US Congress. (At the time he was President of Czechoslovakia and then continued as president of the new Czech Republic after the fall of Communism, from 1993–2003.) He put it plainly: “The human face of the world is changing so rapidly that none of the familiar political speedometers are adequate.” The role of the classroom teacher to facilitate learning for the next generations is as crucial as ever, given the complexities, challenges, and competing demands of this century. As such, we need to recruit the best young people and career changers we can to pursue teaching, which will mean providing the financial incentives (salaries, benefits, and classroom resources), supportive work environments (respect, involvement in school decision making, and autonomy in the classroom), and professional development (a sustainable community of inquiry) that exceptional educators deserve and should be able to expect.

At the same time, teacher educators should include a consideration of globalization and neoliberalism in their own teaching and research. As such, they need to be more than experts in the technical skills of teaching; they should also be inquirers, innovators, creators, and collaborators who consider carefully our rapidly changing world and the role of schools in it. This means appraising one’s own involvement in advancing democratic and social justice principles and practices, in ways that do not uncritically embrace neoliberal assumptions. To take one example: The Walton International Scholars Program attracts people from all over Central America and Mexico to its college scholarship program. It can be viewed as demonstrating the “benefits” of globalization. When one looks more closely, however, as Michael Apple has done, the program seems primarily intended to “bring the gospel of Wal-Mart” to other nations, including “a faith in technical skills, a strongly pro-market set of beliefs, and a particularly conservative activist Christian faith.” Is this the form of globalization that we seek to advance? Or do we strive to put more emphasis on critical inquiry and the promotion of a progressive vision of equitable relations and conditions, democratic community, and a peaceful and sustainable planet? Clearly, as mentioned above, teacher educators and their students would do well to become “budding scholars of globalization and neoliberalism.”
In addition, we should reflect on the extent to which we are making efforts to integrate the views, interests, and needs of people from varied communities and countries, in ways that find us listening to and learning from others around the world, a two-way street that embraces a kind of “globalization from below.” For example, when addressing school choice plans, do we ask, as Jonathon Kozol does, “What reason have the black and very poor to lend their credence to a market system that has proved so obdurate and so resistant to their pleas at every turn?” As he goes on to say, pointedly:

Placing the burden on the individual to break down doors in finding better education for a child is attractive to conservatives because it reaffirms their faith in individual ambition and autonomy. But to ask an individual to break down doors that we have chained and bolted in advance of his arrival is unfair.

Moreover, do our programs enroll and are staffed by diverse populations? And to what extent do we embrace global and multicultural perspectives in our curriculum, field experiences, other activities and events, etc.? One college of education, for instance, includes “global perspectives” among its eight value statements:

Education must be viewed as global in nature, grounded in an understanding of teaching and learning as interdependent, tied to issues of human rights and global citizenship, and that works toward creating sustainable processes that govern what we do … Global education is not just about examining people, cultures, and technologies. It is fundamentally about looking inward to study ourselves, our interactions, our systems, and our products. In this way, it allows for deep and broad reflection in intrapersonal and interpersonal ways.

Asking such questions and adopting such a vision statement should be part of the overall effort by teacher educators to model the kind of informed citizens they want their students (and PreK-12 students) to become.

Our goal, ultimately, is to reflect carefully on our aims, policies, and practices in order to foster what is decent, humane, and just, as suggested by Greene 40 years ago. To help our students (so they can help their students) be able to deal knowledgeably and incisively with the changes occurring and with the creation of new “speedometers,” as Havel referred to them. We need to embrace such a purpose as if our democracy and quality of life depend on it. Because in this age of globalization and neoliberalism, they surely do.

Notes


16 Apple, *op. cit.*, 135. See also the program’s website at: http://www.wispweb.org


19 Watson College of Education, University of North Carolina Wilmington website, “Value Statements,” adopted October 24, 2012, https://uncw.edu/ed/mission.html. (The other value statements highlight advocacy, diversity, ethics, innovation, inquiry, nurturing, and reflection.) Another example is the new Global Engagement Office (GEO) in the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, which is intended to connect “faculty, staff, and students with resources, knowledge, and support to engage in and carry out globally focused initiatives.” The office is viewed as “inclusive of work with immigrant, migrant, and refugee communities, as well as tribal nations.” As one faculty member states, “If education isn’t global, it’s not education. If I’m preparing my students to be successful, I have to set them up to think as citizens of the world.” See “Building Global Community,” *Learning Connections*, a publication of the University of Wisconsin–Madison School of Education, Winter 2019–2020, 8, 10, and 13; and the GEO website at https://merit-www.education.wisc.edu/global