

# Introduction

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LIKE MANY BOOKS ABOUT THE CORPORATE MANIPULATION AND EROSION OF public education—of both the democratic notion of “public” and the public practice of schooling—this volume sprang from concern and indignation. The initial subject of our indignation was the growing influence on the U.S. education milieu Ruby Payne, as the baroness of teacher professional development. Her for-profit company, aha! Process, Inc., makes millions of dollars annually, and her book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, is, perhaps, the single piece of literature most widely read by today’s classroom teachers. Payne has made her millions and grown her empire by selling a theoretical framework, the “culture of poverty,” which, for all intents and purposes, was dispelled, empirically and philosophically, as mythology by the early 1970s, a decade or so after it was introduced by anthropologist Oscar Lewis. In addition, Payne, despite the popularity of asset-based classroom rhetoric (“all children can learn”; “every student is gifted and talented”) has continued to thrive as an unswerving broker of an ideology, often described as “deficit ideology,” which locates societal problems as existing *within* rather than as pressing *upon* disenfranchised communities. Unfortunately, deficit ideology remains a fairly easy sell, supported, as it is, by notions of white supremacy and male privilege,

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English language superiority, hetero-normativity, capitalist hegemony, anti-immigrant nationalism, and Christian dominance. It is precisely these characteristics of Payne's work which have led to a rising tide of scholarship (books, magazine and journal articles, blog entries, conference presentations), discussion, and action responding to what, exactly, she's selling and the implications of her message to students, teachers, and the very notion of the "public good." We, along with several contributors to this book (whose chapters detail these phenomena in more detail than we have space to do in this introduction), have been and continue to be, in our roles as educators, activists, and scholars of educational equity and social justice, waves in that tide.

And yet, as we continued to engage in these analyses and actions we found ourselves, as critical educators tend to do, connecting Payne, the "culture of poverty" paradigm, and her employment of deficit ideology to larger educational, social, and political conditions. When we stepped back and considered her work in light of the growing neoliberal influence on U.S. schooling, as characterized by hyper-accountability, larger patterns of deficit ideology, and the privatization and corporatization of public schools (and again, we have chosen not to expound upon these conditions in detail here—they are explored in detail in the first chapter), we came to see Payne, not as the underlying problem but as a symptom, an illustration, a personification of something significantly bigger. In other words, the question wasn't simply, *How did Ruby Payne manage to assume such an inordinate amount of influence over how educators think about the education of poor and low-income students?* It was, as well, *What are the sociopolitical conditions in which somebody with Payne's ideas could gain this influence, how else are these conditions manifesting in schools and the larger society, and to whose benefit?*

When we began to ask these questions, assuming a broader view, we began to uncover the sorts of ideological interconnections that underlie a rash of socially and politically unjust conditions in the contemporary U.S. and the world. Yes, Payne is a deficit ideologue, but her popularity—the fact that district after district pay her tens of thousands of dollars or more to misinform them—demonstrates the way in which she's also a *product* of deficit ideology, a product of a society already conditioned to buy what she is selling. She's a peddler of hyper-accountability, having written and spoken passionately about why we must embrace No Child Left Behind and high-stakes testing despite living in Texas, where many of the Act's policy precursors, as instituted by then-Governor George W. Bush, proved devastating to the state's low-income

families and families of color. But her reach is also a *product* of hyper-accountability and the desperation it breeds for a quick fix—for practical and immediate, even if misguided and fallacious, strategies for closing “achievement gaps.” Payne, as well, is a facilitator of corporatization, selling her wares through a for-profit company, sometimes receiving hundreds of thousands of dollars from single school districts in exchange for helping them further institutionalize educational inequities. In fact, she even has found opportunities to flex her economic and corporate muscle, threatening lawsuits against individuals who have criticized her work. But she’s also a *product* of corporatization, a star player in a capitalist and consumerist game which was tearing public education apart at its seams long before Payne arrived on the scene.

Certainly, in and of itself, Payne’s influence can be understood quite clearly as an assault on kids—there is no lack of documentation of this. But in order to understand that assault in full, we need to understand it in context. We need not only to ask, *What is problematic about Payne?* but also, *What are the conditions in schools and the larger society that would facilitate the mass acceptance of such devastating ideas? How have we—teachers, school leaders, education and community activists—been conditioned to embrace oppressive ideas and practices, often in the name of “diversity,” “multiculturalism,” “equality,” or “equity”? What explains the mass (although, of course, not universal) acceptance of Payne’s ideas, not by those who mean to be oppressive, purposeful agents of hegemony, but by those who, as the rhetoric goes, want to see all kids succeed?*

And, as we found, even these questions are not quite sufficient, as understanding is only the first step toward change. So we came to ask, as well, *What can we do? How might we resist the corporatization of schools, deficit ideology, and hyper-accountability? How can we organize ourselves and build toward a different, more socially just, educational future?* The result—*An Assault on Kids*—is our attempt to hasten this discourse.

It is our attempt, as well, to create a space for cross-engagement around these concerns. The contributors to this volume include scholars, but they also include, and deliberately so, classroom teachers and educational activists as well as people who identify as combinations of these. Too often, in our experience, conversations about educational and social transformation happen in not-so-mixed-company: at academic conferences, for example, or in books or journals produced and read largely by a particular targeted audience. We acknowledge, of course, the importance of these different literatures, differently contoured urgencies, and varying pragmatics. But we chose, for the purpose of this volume,

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to cross-engage a broader array of perspectives and sight-lines from across the educational landscape—from those whose “data” are collected and analyzed in formal, controlled, ways; from those whose “data” comprise the informal and chaotic day-to-day implications of teaching or organizing under the weight of hyper-accountability and corporatocracy; and from those whose “data” fall somewhere on the continuum between the two. The resulting storylines of this volume, we believe, paint a fuller picture of the contemporary educational assault on kids than they might have if we had drawn on a more narrowly defined sample of voices.

That word—*assault*—and our decision to build this book’s title around it, begs attention, as well. From the Tea Party to the Hoover Institution, Arne Duncan to President Obama, the rhetoric imploring our support for the imposition of the corporatocracy in supposedly public spheres, such as public education, floats to us, it seems, in a never-ending loop. The language itself is insidious, full of hegemonic ideas wrapped in language meant to draw upon people’s deepest socializations as “American” champions of liberty, freedom, democracy, capitalism, and justice: “free market,” “Race to the Top,” “No Child Left Behind,” “school choice,” “merit pay.” We, as educator-activists, are concerned particularly about the ways in which much of the discourse *among advocates for educational equity and social justice* has come to reflect this rhetoric; how the discourse about school reform has become mired more and more in decontextualized test scores, teacher “merit” and accountability, and achievement gaps.

In fact, there are few more poignant examples of deficit ideology’s infestation of public education than this achievement gap discourse, which tends to locate the “problem” of, say, unequal educational outcomes as existing within low-income communities, communities of color, communities who speak languages other than English at home, and other disenfranchised communities. And it does so by drawing upon simplistic mental models, such as the “culture of poverty,” which project stereotyped and, as Gorski details in his chapter on deficit ideology, *inaccurate* perceptions of their parenting, their attitudes about education, and their access to mentors while rendering systemic inequities, such as institutional racism and economic injustice, invisible. One function of this discourse—and, as contributors to this volume will attest, it is a purposeful function—is to train the collective scornful gaze *down* the power hierarchy so that efforts to reform public schooling focus squarely on “fixing” disenfranchised communities rather than the policies and practices which disenfranchise them. Meanwhile, these policies and practices, from closing or under-funding neighborhood schools to redistributing resources *out of* public schools and into semi-

public charter schools, independent schools, and private enterprise, wreak havoc on disenfranchised communities even as unemployment rates continue to soar. But as much as this, they threaten the very existence of the public sphere. And this, we contend, is assault on a massive scale. It is an assault on thought; an assault on opportunity; an assault on the possibility of an equitable and just world. It is an assault on all of us, but it is an assault, most of all, on children who are compelled to participate in it simply by being students in our public schools.

One of the purposes of this book, of this conversation among a diversity of educators, activists, scholars, administrators, and parents, then, is to uncover and document this assault—to trace the educational roots of deficit ideology, hyper-accountability, corporatization, and the Ruby Payne empire, and to detail and counter their consequences. A second, and equally critical, purpose is to invite readers into a process of imagining a different future for public education; to consider ways of resisting the assault and constructing something more equitable and just. In this spirit, every contributor to this book has been asked not only to provide a critical analysis along one or more of these lines but also to imagine a just alternative and to recommend paths of resistance.

Certainly we do not claim that we have covered these complex topics and their many contours exhaustively. In fact, as we prepare this volume for print, we find that, as in any ardent attempt at inquiry, we often have uncovered more questions than answers. Thusly is laid the path toward real change. It is our hope that, with this book, we may nudge ourselves and our readers onto, or a step or two further along, that path.

## Overview of the Book

Although we have organized *Assault on Kids* roughly around its four major themes—hyper-accountability, corporatization, deficit ideology, and Ruby Payne—these are inexact descriptors. Due to the interrelated nature of the topics covered in this book, several chapters address two or more of these themes or focus on points at which they intersect and overlap. For example, in Chapter 4, Brian Lack addresses the corporatizing, militarizing, and deficit implications of KIPP schools.

We begin with Roberta Ahlquist's "The 'Empire' Strikes Back via a

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Neoliberal Agenda,” which provides a brief historical overview of the political forces acting on schools, especially neoliberalism, and sets the context for our four major themes and their relationship to neoliberal hegemony.

Ahlquist’s chapter is followed by a section on hyper-accountability—high stakes tests and common standards—comprised of Chapters 2 and 3. In Chapter 2, “What We Don’t Talk About When We Talk About the ‘Achievement Gap,’” Sue Books examines how the domination of “achievement gap” rhetoric in educational reform discourses evolved. She details, as well, how obsession over the “achievement gap” has drained attention from the need for larger, more systemic, change.

In the second chapter in the Hyper-Accountability section, “Can Standardized Teacher Performance Assessment Identify Highly Qualified Teachers?” (Chapter 3), Ann Berlak, analyzes the implications of the Performance Assessment of California Teachers, an exit exam for teacher credential programs, the likes of which are endorsed enthusiastically by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. Sounding a clear hyper-accountability warning bell for teacher credential programs around the country, Berlak explains the assessment’s impact on teacher credential programs in California’s state universities.

Brian Lack, in Chapter 4, initiates the section on Privatization and Corporatization of Public Schools with his critical analysis of charter schools run by the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP). He particularly hones in on the ways in which the KIPP philosophy embraces hegemonic notions of individual hard work and sacrifice while all but ignoring the systemic conditions which continue to deny students of color and low-income students equitable educational opportunity. His chapter is titled, “Anti-Democratic Militaristic Education: An Overview and Critical Analysis of KIPP Schools.”

In Chapter 5, “Exposing the Myths of the Corporate City: Popular Education and Political Activism in Atlanta,” Richard Lakes, Paul McLennan, Jennifer Sauer, and Mary Anne Smith examine the corporatization of Atlanta’s public schools in light of a larger city-wide context of the privatization of public services. They share, as well, case studies of two local organizations that have played key roles in organizing resistance to these trends. They offer suggestions for teachers who are engaged in similar struggles.

“Ground Zero in A Corporate Classroom” (Chapter 6) is high school teacher Lisa Martin’s personal account of how the educational “marketplace” withers and silences teacher voice, creativity, and power; endangers what ought to be the priorities of public education; and eases the accountability of

the system even as teachers drown in accountability measures. She challenges us to consider a more robust, more just, conceptualization of what it means to be “accountable.”

In the first chapter in the Deficit Ideology section of *An Assault on Kids*, “Why Aren’t We More Enraged?” (Chapter 7), Virginia Lea traces the evolution of deficit discourses, beginning with the so-called “golden age” of U.S. public education, prior to World War II. Equipped with a deeper understanding of these discourses and how they shaped social policy, Lea guides readers, including teacher educators, on an exploration of ways to interrupt deficit ideology.

In Chapter 8, “Unlearning Deficit Ideology and the Scornful Gaze: Thoughts on Authenticating the Class Discourse in Education,” Paul C. Gorski takes on the most current wave of class-based deficit ideology and how, in its insistence on locating the source of social problems in disenfranchised communities rather than in unjust social conditions, has functioned to misguide efforts to redress class inequities in U.S. education.

The final section contains three chapters, each of which offers unique insights into the many problems inherent in Ruby Payne’s work. In the first of these, “A Framework for Maintaining White Privilege” (Chapter 9), Monique Redeaux offers a uniquely blended autobiographical and analytical examination of the fundamental underpinnings of Payne’s framework. Her poignant connection between the “culture of poverty” myth and white privilege, both endemic in Payne’s work, is supported by a systemic analysis of Payne’s book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*.

Theresa Montañó and Rosalinda Quintanar-Sarellana in Chapter 10 (“Undoing Ruby Payne and Other Deficit Views of English Language Learners”) offer what may be the first primarily language-identity analysis of *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. Countering deficit language views and grounding their arguments in the work of California’s bilingual education teachers and other advocates for English Language Learners, they seek both to uncover the linguisticism in Payne’s work and to honor the diversity of languages and voices of California’s students, teachers, and teacher educators.

Finally, Chapter 11, Julie Keown-Bomar and Deborah Pattee’s “What’s Class Got to Do with It?: A Pedagogical Response to a Deficit Perspective,” details the strategies by which two teacher educators in the Midwest U.S. have helped their students think more complexly and critically about class, poverty, and the deficit notions with which many of them enter teaching.

We hope that *Assault on Kids* will inform, engage, and stir you to thought-

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ful action. We hope that it will inform you about and engage you in deeper critical analyses of an educational crisis that is about more—about much more—than test scores and achievement gaps. This is not a how-to or prescriptive guide—there are no quick fixes here. Instead, it is our attempt to encourage a broader exchange of ideas about the present and future of public education and to consider how we can thoughtfully act on these policies and practices, individually and collectively, to ensure an equitable and just future in and out of public schools for *all* of our children.