Neoliberalism and Contemporary Reform Efforts in Mississippi's Public Education System

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Abstract

Mississippi's performance on educational outcomes has consistently ranked among the lowest in the nation. As such, reform efforts have been continuous. However, the condition of Mississippi's public educational system cannot be fully understood without first considering historical factors, such as desegregation and integration, which have shaped contemporary reform efforts. The push for racial equality in Mississippi education faced strict opposition by Whites following the *Brown* (1954) court ruling. Over time, this resistance led to resegregated school systems in which whites fled to private schools and public schools became majority Black. Contemporary reform efforts favor white students while resisting progression towards equity. It is through the neo-conservative movement that neoliberal reforms, such as accountability in schools and performance based funding, emerge and extend their influence to public higher education. A discussion of these neoconservative and neoliberal influences is provided as well as a call for educational reforms grounded in social justice.

Neoliberalism and Contemporary Reform Efforts in Mississippi's Public Education System

Any discussion of public education reform efforts in Mississippi must begin with an acknowledgement of driving factors behind such reforms. Reforms in Mississippi differ from those nationwide due to the racialized history of education in the state and focus on conservative ideals among legislators responsible for education in the past half-century. These factors are both historical and situational with influences from the desegregation and integration eras and resulting neoconservative counter-movement, as well as the perennial reform efforts necessitated in Mississippi by the state's constant underachievement on a number of key indicators. We begin by briefly discussing the status of education, and more broadly of children, in Mississippi. We then discuss the historical context in which contemporary reform efforts in Mississippi's public education system are situated. We then trace the neoliberal influences and narratives that have sprung up within the dominant neoconservative landscape in Mississippi, and finally show how these same narratives have shifted to the public higher education system.

The Status of Mississippi Public Education as a Driver of Reform

There is a rumor that education officials in other low-performing states often remark, "Thank God for Mississippi," when national rankings are released. And little wonder – Mississippi ranks last in the nation for science achievement, reading achievement, and writing achievement, with the second lowest score on math achievement according to the U.S. Department of Education's National Assessment of Educational Progress (2007, 2011, 2013a, 2013b). Overall, Education Week Research Center (2014) ranked Mississippi second to last among all U.S. states for public education systems and outcomes. In addition, Mississippi produces the second lowest high school graduation rate in the nation (Stillwell & Sable, 2013), and ranks second lowest in college preparedness according to ACT, Inc. (2013), with only 12%

of Mississippi high school seniors meeting all four ACT, Inc. college readiness benchmarks. However, Mississippi students do not perform uniformly low: these scores are often divided on racialized lines and influenced by income disparity.

Mississippi has much higher graduation rates for white (68.4%) students than Black (59.3%) students (Stillwell & Sable, 2013). In addition, Mississippi's white students scored higher on standardized math tests by 30 points, standardized reading tests by 27 points, standardized science tests by 47 points, and standardized writing tests by 18 points (U.S. Department of Education, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2007, 2011, 2013a, 2013b). These gaps were all larger than the national achievement gap and highlight the racialized history and nature of education in Mississippi. Even among the Gulf South states, Mississippi stands out, with all other Gulf South states showing improvement in achievement gaps in recent years while the gap has widened in Mississippi (Education Week Research Center, 2014). In terms of college readiness, striking disparities arise. For example, while only 32% of Mississippi's Black students were prepared in English, 71% of its white students were (ACT, Inc., 2013). The educational landscape in Mississippi includes a number of other associated outcomes as well, including poverty and income disparities, poor health outcomes, and high rates of teen pregnancy.

Mississippi had the highest proportion of households below the poverty line as of 2012 in the U.S., with 24.2% of all households living below the federally-defined poverty threshold (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013a). More children in Mississippi live in poverty than in any other state in the nation, with 23% of all children living below the poverty line (Kids Count Data Center, 2013). Mississippi also had the lowest median income as of 2012, with a median income level of \$36,651, compared to the national median of \$51,107 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013c). Poverty

levels vary widely in the state, however, with some counties as low as 10.9% and others as high as 45% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013b). In Mississippi, the relationship between parental income and children's achievement levels was particularly strong, with only three states showing a stronger income-achievement link (Education Week Research Center, 2014).

Mississippi lags behind not only on education outcomes and poverty, but on other related measures. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2013), in 2010 Mississippi ranked the highest for deaths that were caused by heart disease, the second highest for deaths which were caused by cancer, kidney disease, and diabetes, and the third highest for deaths that were caused by stroke. Infant mortality rates are higher in Mississippi than anywhere else in the nation, and Mississippi has the second highest rate of births to teenage mothers.

The persistent problems in Mississippi around educational achievement, graduation, income disparity, and racial disparities in education drive a recurrent, ongoing pattern of reform effort. However, understanding the pattern of reform in Mississippi and reading the neoliberal influences on public education reform in the state requires historical contextualization of education reforms. This is especially true in Mississippi where the history of resistance to federal and judicial mandates for desegregation and integration drove schooling policies for decades and the influence of those policies and mindsets about education continue to influence contemporary discourse around educational reform.

Desegregation and Integration as Historical Context for Contemporary Reforms

In Mississippi, schooling, race, and racism have a long history of collaboration. It would be unreasonable to claim that even before the *Brown* decisions Mississippi had a separate but equal school system, or one that met the “Plessy standard.” Indeed, even into the middle of the 20th century, Mississippi spent more than three times the amount on education of white children

than it did on the education of Black children, per capita (Howard, 1999). Throughout the Jim Crow era and across the South it was common for Black students to attend far inferior schools that were located significant distances from their neighborhoods, while white students attended modern, superior schools located in their neighborhoods. Blacks, however, continued to desire education equal in quality to that provided to whites (Malczewski, 2011)—and remained committed to this goal. Many whites on the other hand, particularly those in Mississippi, simply remained committed to racial discrimination and social inequality, forms of racialized social control.

The *Brown* (1954) decision was supposed to be the equalizer for education, but the case lacked the promised educational equality and integration (Bell 2004; Horsford & McKenzie, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Morris, 2008). Much of the South was slow in adhering to the desegregation of public schools, even more than a decade after the 1954 *Brown* decision (Clotfelter, 2004). The sluggish and resistant move toward desegregation and integration had a clear tie to Jim Crow racism and cultural struggles over power and race. While some whites simply did not want to go to school with Blacks (Eckes, 2005), real threats of the loss of social and economic power also existed for whites if public schools were desegregated and integrated.

The U.S. Supreme Court assisted in the facilitation of this deliberately slow process with a lack of deadlines for compliance with judicial desegregation orders (Irons, 2003). While some schools in the South complied immediately, others, particularly in Mississippi where the educational color line was deep, remained fully segregated. The Court's *Brown II* (1955) directive to move with 'all deliberate speed' to desegregate public schools was often interpreted in the extreme. Public education officials used this order to justify extremely slow, and often nonexistent, movement toward desegregation. Furthermore, in Mississippi 'all deliberate speed'

placed the burden of school desegregation and integration (attempts at equal schooling) on the shoulders of Black students and parents. Violence and intimidation by whites further ensured slow progress and stalled implementation. As a result, “Mississippi managed to maintain total segregation in its elementary and secondary schools for ten years after *Brown*” (Bolton, 2005, p. 94).

Integrated schools caused particular fear for whites in Mississippi, who could not stand the thought of their children being so close—too close—to Black children. Bolton (2005) noted:

For white Mississippians, then, one-race schools represented the very heart of segregation. Losing the battle to preserve segregated schools would make it impossible to prevent social equality and miscegenation and was tantamount to losing the war over the continuation of racial separation. As a result, white Mississippians waged a long battle to preserve the state’s dual system from the attacks of black Mississippians and, by the mid-twentieth century, the federal government. (p. xvii)

Integrating public schools in Mississippi was a dangerous endeavor. Black students attempting to integrate White schools were often threatened, assaulted, and sometimes killed (Williams, 2005). Fear, intimidation, and violence were commonplace, and even those whites not directly participating in such acts often looked away (Bolton, 2005). Not only did the students suffer, but both Blacks and whites who “remained convinced that black education could only be improved if the dual school system was destroyed had to face white Mississippians who used state-sanctioned and private economic intimidation, along with sporadic violent terror, to discourage them” (Bolton, 2005, p. 94)

Regarding state-sanctioned methods to maintain segregated schools, Irons (2003) stated that once the resistant states realized they would not be able to continue to aggressively and

outrightly defy the orders within the *Brown* decisions, they began to gradually resort to subtler, less aggressive tactics designed to accomplish the same end. Zeroing in on the word deliberate (Bolton, 2005) in ‘all deliberate speed,’ southern state officials across the region came up with numerous tactics to evade the Court’s order such as closing schools, creating ‘choice’ plans, and encouraging whites to leave public schools (Irons, 2003).

In Mississippi, to undermine the *Brown* decisions, the state used plans such as equalization within segregation, freedom of choice, and pupil placement (Bolton, 2005; Irons, 2003). These plans were designed to constrict any forward movement with desegregation for as long as possible, and to further disenfranchise students and parents of color (Irons, 2003). Regarding the equalization within segregation plan, Bolton (2005) noted, “Claiming that school segregation had to be preserved, white Mississippians offered as an alternative to *Brown*, a quixotic plan to make separate but truly equal schools a reality” (p. 94). This quixotic scheme to truly equalize would be realized through funding. That is, schools and students still would be separate, but funding for Black schools would be substantially increased such that the quality of the education received at Black schools would be equal to that received at the white schools. Bolton (2005) noted, “although the state poured millions into a school equalization program designed to upgrade black schools, the project never equalized funding between white and black education...” (p. 94).

Another scheme Mississippi used included the freedom of choice plans. Freedom of choice, in theory, allowed any student (Black or white) to go to any school in their district. In practice, however, only white students had any real freedom to choose. Black students who “chose” to attend an all-white school were met with severe resistance from students, teachers,

and sometimes administrators. Furthermore, white parents' choice of schools was not typically based on the quality of the school, but the school's racial segregation (Holmes, 2002).

Pupil placement plans, although short-lived, were also used by the state of Mississippi to keep Black students from attending schools with white students. Under the pupil placement plan, a board of officials—sometimes a school board, and sometimes an ad hoc committee—had the authority to assign students to schools. Unsurprisingly, Black students were rarely assigned to all-white schools.

Eventually, however, these state-sanctioned schemes to keep Black students out of white schools succumbed to federal pressure and were abolished. And eventually, some Black students managed to integrate formerly all-white schools—often with direct assistance and oversight from the federal government. Facing few other options to maintain all-white schools, scores of white Mississippians simply left the public school system. This was a common trend across the South, and numerous private schools opened representing active resistance to the *Brown* decisions by whites (Eckes, 2005). Private schools in Mississippi “represented the only lasting and permanent answer to the threat of [desegregation and integration]” (Bolton, 2005, p. 72). Unsurprisingly, many Mississippi state officials explored ways that public funds could be used to support these private schools for white students. Intermittently, these government bureaucrats were successful in directing public funds to the private schools. Today, Mississippi continues to host a strong private school network with many academies across the state. The vast majority of the students attending these private ‘segregation academies’ are white.

Resegregation, White Flight, and the Rise of Neoconservative Reform Forces

Over time, particularly throughout the 1980s and 1990s, in Mississippi, the former all-white public schools became majority-Black schools because whites refused to attend school

with Blacks. Racist preferences often lead white parents to select schools based on the race or class composition of the student body and not on the academic quality of the school. Neal (2002) explained that the option of school choice through student residency, or students attending private schools has been available to families with higher income for quite some time. Eckes (2005) noted that it is not unusual for whites to abandon public schools in their communities to attend superior public schools in the suburbs or private schools in the same community. This seems particularly true in Mississippi. However, as Fossey (2003) indicated, the white flight that occurred in many schools left them with majority Black student populations, and “inequitable sub-par schooling, and remedies such as forced busing, magnet schools, and race based staffing ratios” (p. 43). Furthermore, “The inequality towards blacks in education became evident through poor facilities, unfair educational policies, and unequal salaries for black teachers...[which] kept Blacks in many public schools in a segregated environment” (Preston-Grimes, 2010, p. 40). Wells (2001) indicated that resegregation has not been beneficial to whites academically because they are deprived of educational and social benefits of interacting with students and adults from different races. However, this is likely not a priority for many who choose private education.

The divergent student outcomes present today in Mississippi are strongly linked to the past. Today, Mississippi arguably again hosts a dual school system (Scruggs, 2010). The public schools predominantly serve Black students, while the private schools predominantly serve white students. De facto segregation never truly left Mississippi, and still exists in force in the state. By fact, Black students are not explicitly denied admission to the private schools or majority-white public schools. However, many Black families cannot afford the tuition and many Black students have not been prepared through the educational pipeline to meet private school admission

requirements. Furthermore, many Black families cannot afford to move to a more affluent area that hosts better public schools. Unsurprisingly, as Stiefel, Schwartz, and Chellman (2008) found, in racially segregated schools the achievement gap is the greatest between white and Black students.

Clearly, making education less accessible for Blacks has a long history in Mississippi. Today, students of color are in schools of larger size, with more students of color, higher student poverty levels, and lower teacher experience than white students (Crosnoe, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2013). Overall, these factors have a significant impact on widening Black–white achievement differentials. Furthermore, many schools, where Black students are the majority (as is the case in most public schools in Mississippi), struggle to provide an adequate education and many cannot afford to recruit and retain sufficient quantity or quality teachers (Weiner, 2012). More often than not, what exists in Mississippi are “high poverty, low quality schools in poor areas, isolated by race” (Wiggins, 2011, p. 40).

As demonstrated previously, race, racism, and schooling, in Mississippi, are historically contingent. Despite this history, and a legacy of legalized oppression and limits on opportunity, students of color in Mississippi are seen as a problem in the state’s public schools. Blacks are blamed for their lower test scores, and ultimately their poorer economic situations (Lipman, 2007). Many educators in Mississippi schools rely on the false and overly simplistic bootstrap rhetoric to explain uneven student outcomes (Duncan-Andrade, 2007). For example, based on anecdotal evidence, Mississippi educators continue to explain student underachievement in terms of family dysfunction, student laziness, and poverty where students ought to adopt ‘middle-class’ norms and values to acculturate and succeed at school. However, persistent low test scores and poor economic conditions, particularly for people of color in Mississippi, can also be interpreted

as euphemisms for racism. Bolton (2005) noted “... the racial considerations that affected the development of public education over the years continues to cast a long shadow over [Mississippi’s] ability to educate its citizens in the twenty-first century” (p. xix). This shadow has tragically affected the futures of the students in the state.

Mississippi is consistently at the bottom of national ratings for education. Students of color in schools in the state continue to experience unequal opportunities to learn, much as they did in the past. It can be argued that the system of schooling in Mississippi is reproducing inequalities based on race, class, and gender. Ross and Gibson (2007) suggested “education is an integral aspect of social (and individual) transformation (processes that are themselves inseparable)” (p. 8). Unless quality of schooling for Black students, and students from other traditionally marginalized groups in Mississippi, improves quickly and dramatically, many students will be unable to realize upward transformation.

An examination of education reform may best be approached through history, economics, and politics. Current reforms espouse equal opportunity, but equal access is not always afforded. Entrenched systemic biases remain. For Mississippi, reform should situate education within the context-specific racialized social and economic order. In Mississippi, in particular, contemporary reform can be understood best as an extension and continuation of racialized politics, privileging of white students, and neoconservative resistance to progressive calls for equity.

Emergence of Neoliberalism in a Neoconservative Reform Landscape

Largely as a result of federal and judicial mandates surrounding desegregation and integration, a growing neoconservative movement took shape in Mississippi from the 1950s to the 1980s with increasing organization and definition (Crespino, 2007). Though originally a reaction to integrationist federal policies, code words such as “states’ rights” eventually came to

define larger issues important within this evolving political movement as it grew into a more robust set of neoconservative ideals and strategies. Of note is the fact that the impetus for the neoconservative resurgence in Mississippi was school segregation/desegregation/integration, and educational reforms became the primary battleground on which this neoconservative movement took shape. Though largely defined in racialized terms, the neoconservative resurgence was also defined (later) by anti-communism, anti-progressivism, and a romanticizing of the past. It is in this environment that wholesale conservative school reforms take root and we seek to trace contemporary neoliberal influences.

Reform efforts, especially those after the desegregation efforts of the 1960s and 1970s, in Mississippi have been characterized as “a resistance against the external regulation” (Shoreman & Haenn, 2009, p. 96) imposed through federal, judicial, and occasionally even state forces. In this context, accountability arose differently than in other locales. Education in integrated schools has been described variously by parents and students in terms of safety concerns and issues with discipline (Eckes, 2005), competition (Misra, Grimes, & Rogers, 2012), and the need for differential academic versus job preparation along racialized boundaries (Howard, 1999). These concerns, driven by segregationist and white supremacist attitudes, are largely neoconservative in nature. However, through the “drive to accountability and standardization” neoliberal narratives seep into the education discourse in Mississippi, and have redefined “education as job preparation, learning as standardized skill and information, educational quality as measurable by test scores, and teaching as the technical delivery of that which is centrally mandated and tested” (Lipman, 2009, p. 373). That is, although the move for greater accountability in schooling was at first driven by the desire to protect white students in integrated

settings and ensure teachers were delivering appropriate material for the races while monitoring for communist propaganda, this move made room for neoliberal discourse to develop.

Accountability – The Shift from Neoconservative to Neoliberal Education

Alongside concerns in Mississippi's public education system about forced desegregation and integration, other related anxieties about issues such as enforcing gender boundaries and traditional sexualized behaviors (Howard, 1999), rooting out communism and quelling activism (Crespino, 2007), and ensuring white supremacist attitudes and discourses continued to prevail in integrated education. The need for this careful policing of education gave way to increased discussions about curricular controls and accountability standards for educators, ranging from textbook committees to hiring practices. In this sharply neoconservative context, built in part by the pseudo-governmental Citizen's Councils and their push for *de jure* segregation alongside the state government's Sovereignty Commission with its efforts to disrupt and stop civil rights activities in the state (including integration efforts), the drive for accountability as a means of state control of classroom-level education arose.

In Mississippi, this drive for policing education as a way of resisting progressive influence actually gave room for neoliberalism to take root, most notably beginning in the early 2000s to present. As McLaren (2007) notes, calls for "accountability schemes," "financial incentives for high performance schools," and "quality control' of teaching" are all hallmarks of neoliberal education (p. 27). The neoliberal discourses, then, "by defining the problem of education as standards and accountability, have made simply irrelevant any talk about humanity, difference, democracy, culture, thinking, personal meaning, ethical deliberation, intellectual rigor, social responsibility, and joy in education" (Lipman, 2009, p. 373).

At present, Mississippi assigns A to F grades to schools based on numerical scores, calculated on 'proficiency' and 'growth.' Proficiency is determined by students meeting/failing to meet a minimum standard set by the state department of education, whereas growth is defined by children increasing in performance level from year-to-year (Mississippi Department of Education, 2013a). Beginning in 2014, Mississippi will transition to Common Core standards for curriculum sequencing and testing (Mississippi Department of Education, 2013b). However, opposition to Common Core in Mississippi underscores important nuances of the political landscape around educational reform in the state. Lawmakers face opposition from self-described tea-party groups and conservative protest groups to full implementation of Common Core standards who hold regular protests at the state capitol (Gates, 2014). They argue that the standards represent federal intrusion, asking too much of children at too early of an age, and require assigning homework at too high of a level. This approach, embedded in the racialized and neoconservative politics of Mississippi, is contrasted with critiques of Common Core as a neoliberal market takeover of education with disproportionate effects on low-income and marginalized students (Tienken, 2013) that have not emerged as significant elements of the discourse in Mississippi.

This raises an important point for consideration: Although Common Core, and other accountability programs, may indeed serve neoliberal ends by their privileging of corporate interests (Emery, 2007) and commodification of knowledge, in Mississippi these programs are not understood in these ways. In fact, they are critiqued for being too hard on students, too acquiescent to federal priorities, or too progressive. All the while, the push for accountability and privatization in Mississippi that is driven by segregationist, preservationist, and isolationist

tendencies creates room and conditions for neoliberal education to exist and thrive in a system that undergoes continual reform due to consistent low performance and student achievement.

Migration of Neoliberal Reforms into Mississippi's Public Higher Education System

“Thank God for Mississippi” is currently used in the pejorative. Current education outcomes for most students in the state are, indeed, abysmal. The neoconservative and neoliberal agendas at work in public K-12 schooling in Mississippi with “...the purported aim of increasing educational opportunity masks the real intent of these so-called education [reforms] to create a privatized system of public education that has a narrow, vocational curriculum enforced through standardized tests” (Weiner, 2012, n.p.). As we have demonstrated, these agendas do little but play to different audiences, and widen the achievement and performance gaps among students and schools. In public higher education in Mississippi, these agendas have migrated into and infiltrated higher education reform as well.

Mississippi's public colleges and universities are governed by the Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL) board of trustees. IHL recently contracted with a private organization, the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), to create performance-based, and production-based funding allocation formulas for the public colleges and universities in the state. Of particular note is that the newly implemented ‘formula’ allocates money to colleges based on credit-hour production, degrees awarded with a premium on STEM, health, and teaching degrees, and faculty productivity (Mississippi Public Universities, 2013). That is, the colleges and universities are viewed as ‘producers’ of student credit hours, or put another way, producers of revenue through selling more of the educational product. The other stated goal of this shift is to “reward contributions to attainment of state, not institutional, goals... one of the primary purposes of outcomes-based funding is to focus institutional attention on key state

priorities” (Jones, 2013, p. 5). These shifts in higher education reflect the same basic moves for accountability and commodification that began in Mississippi in the K-12 environment, and now have gained momentum in the higher education environment. These reforms in higher education produce a tracking system wherein students are placed on vocational, professional, or academic tracks. These tracks are based on prior academic record (which is often influenced by race in a largely segregated schooling system) and socioeconomic background. Lost in this narrative is the idea of higher education as a means of opening possibilities, providing means of growth, and time for development, and in its place is the idea of college as a place for production of revenue in an environment where shortened time to graduation on prioritized career tracks are most important. These discourses must be resisted both in K-12 and higher education as they are destructive for students and educators.

Reimagining Education Reform in Mississippi

We call for an alternative discourse on education reform. This alternative discourse must be rooted in social justice, affirm the state’s dysfunctional education history of racialized oppression and resistance aimed at students from traditionally marginalized groups, and directly address the current and profound inequalities evident in public schools and institutes of higher learning. Concomitantly, we agree with Lipman (2007) who stated,

Just exposing racial disparities may lead to little change unless educators and parents examine together the underlying ideologies, structures, school norms, and practices, and dominant assumptions responsible for the marginalization and low-achievement of students of color, immigrants, and language minority students. (p. 44)

Such a collective examination is long overdue in Mississippi.

The educational reform landscape in Mississippi is not without resistance to the dominant discourse of neoconservative and neoliberal oppression. Southern Echo is a community organizing group for education that takes up issues like charter schools, resisting the idea that charter schools are the answer to a public school system in decline (Southern Echo, 2012). They engage in community activism on school reform, and public education for parents, students, and educators. The Mississippi Center for Justice works through the legal system to represent students with disabilities and to stand up for schools threatened with takeover and closure by the state in unfair circumstances (Mississippi Center for Justice, n.d.). The William Winter Institute at the University of Mississippi includes a number of initiatives like the Mississippi Civil Rights Education Commission, the Summer Youth Institutes, and a number of conferences to address issues of race in education. Recently, the Research Initiative on Social Justice in Education, a collaborative of social-justice oriented scholars at the University of Southern Mississippi has begun offering research opportunities, seminars, and civic engagement events for students and local teachers on issues of social justice in the education system. These and other networks of activists, educators, and researchers in Mississippi offer alternatives to the dominant discourses on reform and means of resisting neoconservative and neoliberal influences in the reform conversation.

Apple (2004) called for ways to “interrupt neo-liberal and neo-conservative tendencies and create a thicker version of democracy in education on the ground” (p. 41). We support such interruptions. Such progressive interruptions will not be easy in the state given its history and overall political climate. Furthermore, while democracy on the ground is an intriguing and exciting possibility for Mississippi schools, we must beware of the all too common, and all too simplistic bootstrap rhetoric and the seductive language of education for all.

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