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Rethinking the Nature of Inequality and Labor:

An Essay Review of *Affective Equality*

Eleni Schirmer and Michael W. Apple

University of Wisconsin, Madison

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There are times when books that have already appeared need to be once again brought to public attention, *especially* when they offer truly significant challenges to the ways in which many mainstream *and* critical educators construct their agendas. Amongst both mainstream and critical thinkers and educators, inequality has emerged as a defining concept of the current moment. Inequality has motivated a new wave of visibility to political activism, poignantly captured by the

Occupy movement. It has spurred a fury of academic research and public dialogues, evident by the vibrant and widespread interest in Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the 21st Century* (2014). And it at least partially motivates the rhetoric behind a growing body of policy initiatives, such as accountability mandates in educational policy.

Yet, without a clear understanding of the factors that generate inequality, the social movements, academic analyses, and policy initiatives attempting to address such inequalities run the risk of not only falling short of their targets, but also potentially deepening the inequities they aim to transform. Understanding some of the often-unseen components of justice and equality — namely *all* humans fundamental affective need for care — drives the central questions posed by Kathleen Lynch, John Baker, and Maureen Lyons in their book, *Affective Equality: Love, Care and Injustice* (2009). How has failing to center care as a public good, necessary for all to give and receive, perpetuated inequalities and injustice?

Because of both its relevance to the current moment and its theoretical and empirical insights, Lynch, Baker, and Lyons's provocative analysis of *affective equality* is an essential text for those concerned with equality and its requirements. The volume is a significant one and drives a good deal of our own work and interest in education. Indeed, it has provided part of the foundational arguments that underpin Apple's *Can Education Change Society?* (Apple, 2013). One of the aims of this essay review is to bring the book to the attention of a wider audience of critical educational researchers. In order to do this, we need to place the book in the wider context of recent policies that seek to deal with inequalities in education.

Interrupting Current Understandings

Though concern for educational inequality has underpinned the rhetoric and structure of educational reform initiatives for the past several decades, by and large this rhetorical attention has been asymmetrically and not very powerfully matched to the economic, political, and social forces that generate inequality. For example, Lyndon Johnson's 1965 authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Educational Act (ESEA) established equal standards for public education districts and called for the first accountability plans in education as part of his "war on poverty" campaign, largely in response to the social demands for greater equality driven by the Civil Rights Movement. Yet, Johnson's intention to stabilize the social settlement promised by the welfare state through the war on poverty proved an insufficient response to the class origins of poverty. Indeed, the competing distributional demands for both social equality and the continued profit accumulation necessary to sustain the post-WWII economic boom resulted in the economic crisis of the 1970's, and neoliberal economic and ideological forms emerged as the solution (Clarke & Newman, 1997; Streeck, 2011; Wright, 1994). Put briefly, neoliberalism positions the unregulated marketplace as the fundamental arbitrator of individual freedom, converting all social and political concepts into economic ones (Apple, 2006).

More recently, the 2001 re-authorization of the ESEA act — popularly known as No Child Left Behind and presently represented by Obama’s Race To The Top — has again issued rhetorical demands for equality through its prioritization of high-stakes accountability metrics. No Child Left Behind tied federal funding for education to a district’s implementation of high-stakes standardized test regimes, in an effort to attend to unequal educational outcomes. School districts were mandated to disaggregate testing data by students’ demographic status, in order to discern racial discrepancies and other differences in educational performance. This increased data on academic achievement gave statistical texture to a reality already intimately known by many researchers, parents, students, teachers, and community members across the country — public schools in the United States too often exasperate, rather than transform, the persistent racial and class inequalities characteristic of economic and social systems. Indeed, paralleling trends in income distribution, the gaps in educational outcomes of students from low-income families and families of color have dramatically grown over the past thirty years (Duncan & Murnane, 2011).

Nonetheless, No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top are deeply embedded within the neoliberal logics themselves, emphasizing market efficiency over democratic and social needs. High-stakes testing regimes, the predominant means of

detecting educational inequalities, are themselves generated from culturally-biased knowledge forms, thereby building epistemological inequality into the instrument designed to detect inequality (Apple, 2006; Apple, 2014; Au, 2008). Furthermore, schools with flagging test data are deemed failing, and provide rhetorical justification for intensification of the neoliberal demands on schools: more testing, more accountability, more efficiency, more choice. Consider, for example, the ascent of a variety of neoliberal educational reform programs such as school choice plans, voucher and neo-voucher systems (see, e.g. Welner, 2008), alternative teacher preparation programs (i.e. Teach for America) and the growing body of charter management organizations. These reforms frequently use racial and class inequalities in educational achievement as both their rhetorical and empirical justification (Lahann & Reagan, 2011).

Yet little evidence suggests that charter schools serve students of color or students with special needs any better than traditional public schools (Fabricant & Fine, 2012; Lubienski, & Weitzel, 2010). School vouchers have done little to address racial inequalities in schools, much less educational outcomes, and in the process have often worsened segregation (i.e., Miner, 2013). Finally, all of these educational reforms position the solution to education as one embedded within private market forces. Such reform policies see the solutions to the “failure” of public

education as the increased mediation of the private sector to provide, regulate, and govern education, thereby privatizing the social goal of equality itself.

This generates a perplexing dilemma for those who remain committed to the social mission of education to enhance equality. Have the implemented educational reform policies mis-appraised the requirements of equality itself? In their 2004 book, *Equality: From Theory to Action*, John Baker and Kathleen Lynch argue for a re-conceptualization of the mandates of equality. In this work, the authors identify four major social systems that structure both equality and inequality: *economic, political, cultural, and, affective*. Building on the work of both Marxist and feminist scholarship, the authors argue that it is not sufficient to conceptualize equality and inequality in terms of material and economic systems, or even political and cultural systems, as attention to inequality in these domains frequently rests on the assumption that the ideal human is a rational, self-sufficient economic actor. They forcefully argue that a more robust conceptualization of equality must also be driven by the reality of humans' relational dependency on one another. Because human flourishing requires satisfaction of the affective needs to both provide and receive love and care, societies striving for egalitarian justice must center affective needs as public concerns (Sayer, 2011). Failure to do so generates two critical inequalities: "inequality in the degree to which people's needs for love and care

are satisfied, and inequality in the work that goes into satisfying them. These are the core of what the authors call 'affective inequality' (Lynch, Baker, Lyons, 2009, p. 12). While the four social systems are deeply interconnected, the affective system has received the least analysis of its defining properties and mechanisms, particularly as it relates to equality and inequality.

Affective Equality as Process & Goal

In order to address the oft-omitted affective domain, Lynch, Baker and Lyon's book, *Affective Equality: Love, Care and Injustice*, aims to provide theoretical and empirical texture into the complexities of justice's affective requirements. They offer a very thoughtful explanation of the nature of multiple forms of labor, an understanding that has crucial implications for our analyses of class, race, and gender in both the public and private spheres. The book is based on research findings gathered from a series of in-depth interviews with Irish care providers and care recipients (dubbed Care Conversations), presented in Chapters 3-7, as well as three complementary studies conducted by Maeve O'Brien (Chapter 8), Niall Hanlon (Chapter 9), and Maggie Feeley (Chapter 10). Though the book is based on four empirically distinct studies, they unite to offer a robust examination of the contours, dynamics, and possible remedies for affective inequalities.

The first chapters of the book provide an elegant theoretical placement of the affective domain, and its legacy of omission

in dominant academic and policy discourses. Chapter one examines how sociology, legal studies, education, economics, and political theory have all approached affective systems and the inequalities contained therein. The authors show how mainstream approaches in social science fail to critically attend to equality's affective dimensions. They argue that until recent advances of feminist theory, traditional approaches failed to incorporate concepts of care into their respective theories of justice, and the ways that unequal distribution of caring labor contributes to large social inequalities. As the authors argue, this misconceptualization of the affective requirements of justice is based on the belief that both people's need for care and the provision of it are properties of *private* domains, and therefore beyond the purview of public norms, laws, and regulation (see also Fraser, 1989; Fraser, 1997).

In attempt to remedy the limited scholarly attention to the affective domain, the authors present an analysis of the different forms of affective labor and their key analytical properties. In the second chapter of the book, the authors provide a heuristic to differentiate between primary care relations (love labor), secondary care relations (care labor), and tertiary relations (solidarity). As Lynch et al. argue, society cannot mandate or enforce love, but it can establish conditions for the equal distribution of care, love and solidarity labor, and make sure that such work is properly recognized and valued. Of course,

this is no simple charge, given the complex nature of love, care, and solidarity labor. As the authors make clear, many of the fundamental elements of love labor cannot be transferred to another through a labor contract, nor is its value captured on an economic market. Indeed, it is a dangerous category error to try to squeeze all such labor into the domain of the economic market.

Love labor differs from care and solidarity in important ways: love labor requires more emotional intensity and commitment, and operates independent of contractual arrangements. While care and love labor are certainly overlapping, the authors distinguish care labor as generally less emotionally demanding and more temporally bounded. Solidarity labor, the tertiary care sphere, is a collective form of care labor, more public than the primary and secondary spheres, and often operates beyond face-to-face interactions. The authors define two primary forms of solidarity labor: statutory obligation, such as requirements to pay taxes, regulate distribution; and solidarity work, typically volunteer work, undertaken without pay and often in coordination with civil society organizations

The authors distinguish between love, care, and solidarity labor in an attempt to understand which elements of these labors may transfer among providers to recipients, thus captured by market forces and sold in exchange for wages. Though certain forms of care labor can be contracted for pay and

most certainly require emotional labor, paid care labor differs from love labor in that such emotional connections (theoretically) expire upon contract termination. The tension between paid care labor and unpaid care labor is a critical dilemma, particularly within the logics of neoliberalism, which assumes all services and interactions are best provided by the market. The authors succinctly describe the limitations of commodifying care labor, given its resistance to the market principles of exchange:

While paid care is necessary as a support for primary care, it cannot substitute for it. When even a secondary care relationship is set within a system of social relations focused on profit or gain in particular, it is self-evident that the nurturing characteristics of this relationship (such as careful attention to needs, emotional engagement, trust and attentiveness) are likely to be either precluded, subordinated or made highly contingent on the profit-margins expected (p. 49)

The authors go on to highlight the consequences of such unequal distribution of care and love labor, highlighting that those who pursue care and love labor, due to its inalienable and intimate quality, forego opportunities for both wage earnings and leisure time. Furthermore, unequal distribution of care and love labor enables those unencumbered by such responsibilities (largely men) to pursue more publicly recognized activities, such as unburdened leisure and higher paid wage

labor. This generates material and social inequalities, and develops two distinct classes: care-providers and care-commanders.

Consider, for example, work dynamics within academic labor. Those charged with teaching duties (often graduate students or part-time instructors in what has been called the “academic proletariat) engage in more “care” work — meeting with students, answering questions, editing papers, one-on-one tutoring and providing emotional support, all of which takes considerable time and intellectual and emotional energy, yet is hardly captured in the wage payments. Meanwhile, it enables higher status workers, such as full-time faculty and administrators, to engage in work that is often more professionally beneficial and converts more easily into important forms of academic capital (research projects, grant proposals, publishable writing, etc.).

Without adequate means to address the important role of care in pursuit of justice, such dynamics perpetuate affective inequalities. This analysis presented by Lynch *et al.* generates a serious dilemma for social actors and policy makers: how can society increase the material and financial recognition of care work, thereby improving the status and well-being of those who engage in such labor, while still identifying and preserving the elements of love and care labor that are not replaceable, transferable, quantifiable, or otherwise commodified? The analysis they offer here provides important cautions for many

progressive scholars who focus on a politics of redistribution but ignore the politics of recognition. It also offers important clarifications to the politics of redistribution, pointing out the limitations of critical analysis of education and the economy based primarily on masculine models of wage labor.

Care and Love as Forms of Work

In order to clarify the limitations of our current understanding of work, the authors take up key question in chapters three and four: In what ways are care and love forms of work? Why is care labor marginalized? To answer these questions, they examine what constitutes work. In materialist traditions, work is defined as that which is economically productive, and contributes to human “progress.” In phenomenological traditions, work is associated with personal enlightenment and development. Yet neither of these traditions recognizes the work of human care. The authors lean on Hannah Arendt’s 1955 analysis of hierarchical work in *The Human Condition* to make sense of this devaluing of care work. According to Arendt, people engage in three types of work: *humans as thinkers*, *humans as makers*, and *humans as care-givers*. In Arendt’s critique, these domains of work are arranged hierarchically, with humans as thinkers as the most respected, followed by humans as makers, and at the bottom was the least valued, care work. Because the work of care-taking is necessary to reproduce human life, it was considered both base and universal and therefore not valuable. Arendt

writes: “Women and slaves belonged to the same category and were hidden away, not only because they were somebody else’s property but because their life was ‘laborious’, devoted to bodily functions’ (p. 72). In this way, care work is seen as something devoid of intellect, skill, and volition; rather, it occurs naturally and involuntarily, like bodily functions.

In addition to a socialized devaluing of types of work, the authors argue that care work is marginalized because of a general ambivalence about care and love in our society. To the extent that they are recognized, love and care tend to be sentimentalized, trivialized, and sexualized. Particularly as love is sexualized, it revolves around desire and pleasure, in things that are “fleeting, contingent, and ephemeral” (p. 55). None of these conceptions of care and love adequately capture either the work required to generate meaningful and healthy relations of care and love, or the fundamental human need for care and love for adequate human functioning.

Furthermore, care work is marginalized because of traditional values which see care work as the moral obligation and duty of *women*, rather than work to be undertaken by all. This positions care work as private and personal exercises, not a public benefit. Care-work is marginalized because it runs counter to dominant material traditions of generating economic products and value; it challenges the dominant logic of the possessive individual as the arbiter of what is productive. What’s more, its feminization

decreases its valorization: to the extent that care-work is recognized on the market, it is often dirty, low-paying, unregulated, insecure, and exploitative.

As such, in their empirical research, the authors found that the metaphor of “waste” was often applied to care-work. Not only did care-takers refer to their own duties as literally dealing with others’ waste, they often felt like care-recipients themselves were seen as a form of social waste, from young children, to the elderly, to the physically disabled. Furthermore, the minimal social acknowledgement of their care-taking work positioned their own labor as wasteful. This mimics dominant conceptions of teachers’ labor as not productive (as exemplified in the adage, “Those who can, do; those who can’t, teach”), and therefore those who enter that workforce either have no other options available to them or have elected to “waste” their potential and pursue teaching as a career, despite its high opportunity costs.

The authors very clearly articulate the elements of care that constitute it as a form of valued work. First of all, care as work is required for human survival; people could not survive without high levels of dependencies. Care requires skill, competence, and learning to do it well. This takes time and effort, often at an emotional level that is not as intensely required in non-care work. Effective care requires emotional work (such as listening and engaging), mental work (such as intensive planning, how to respond to a variety of immediate

and urgent situations), physical work, and moral commitment (such as being trustworthy and reliable). Ultimately, the authors argue that we need to redefine spheres so that the ethics of caring (relational and interdependent) are fundamentally integrated into the public sphere, rather than viewing them as weak, hyper-feminized and wasteful. In essence, care must be reconceived as a *public good*.

Care work must be socially and materially re-valued as a public good so that those who engage in it, either by choice or necessity, are not relegated to lives of poverty or social exclusion. The state then plays a role in establishing a new social contract that recognizes the socio-economic rights of care-givers, rather than simply allocating them to an invisible and unregulated private sphere. Establishing a new social contract around care work is complicated because it requires recognizing that care is essential to all human relationships, but that it is fundamentally resistant to commodification or legal mandates, traditional tools used by states to establish and regulate domains of work. What this suggests is developing nurturing rationalities alongside economic rationalities. This is particularly important in education. As the authors write,

The focus is on educating the citizen to achieve her or his potential in the public sphere of life, while ignoring the relational caring self (Lynch et al., 2007). Within the neoliberal framework, in particular, the purpose of education is

defined in terms of personalised human capital acquisition, making oneself skilled for the economy: “the individual is expected to develop a productive and entrepreneurial relationship towards oneself” (Masschelein and Simons, 2002: 594). No serious account is taken of the reality of dependency for all human beings, both in childhood and at times of illness and infirmity (Badgett and Folbre, 1999).” (p. 90)

This set of arguments is further developed in chapter five which examines the ways in which care labor interfaces with other dimensions of inequality, specifically gender, class, and family status. The chapter exposes the ways in which care labor is unevenly distributed and experienced by women. Not only do women assume greater responsibility for caring relations than men (typically for no or low wages), but their approach to this work differs from men. For example, while we need to be careful of essentializing these differences, a central theme in the Care Conversations was the way in which women were *expected* to provide care to others out of moral obligation and duty, rather than choosing to do so. Men who engaged in care labor, by contrast, were often valorized or praised as being exceptionally noble by providing care labor. Furthermore, women often resumed the work of not just administering care, but also planning for how to provide dependable and quality care; yet they received little acknowledgement or recognition for the skill and labor that goes

into securing adequate primary and secondary care relations.

Finally, social class and family status impact care labor. The Care Conversations revealed the ways in which the form of care people receive is powerfully impacted by social class. As the authors describe,

[L]ow-income carers are especially vulnerable, being unable to afford many of the care supports they need ... Consequently, they are forced out of employment, often when their children are young, as they cannot afford good quality child care; their unemployment further exacerbates their poverty. Low-income carers of adults often have to wait for extended periods of time to access state care services as they cannot afford to buy readily available private services. ... Moreover, low-income carers who are employed are often working in jobs that lack both the autonomy and flexibility that enables them to manage caring in their own terms (p. 112).

Such vulnerabilities are intensified for a person who is the sole care provider in a family unit, such as a single parent. The uneven burdens of care labor on women, low-income people, and sole care providers are further exasperated by the intense time demands of care labor, as the authors explore in chapter seven. Because care labor is often relentless and unforgiving in its time requirements, those who engage in care-labor have little time for their own self-care.

They can exercise little discretion or autonomy in how they choose to spend their time, and often have to juggle paid labor with their caring responsibilities, applying further pressure on time resources. Competing time demands were more acute for those in lower social classes, for they had less financial resources at their disposal to distribute and manage caring responsibilities.

Yet beyond the unequal time burdens across gender and class, the authors also argue that the time dimension of care labor reveals features of care rationality beyond a simple economic rationality. Though many primary care providers articulate a tension between the leisure and care labor time allocation, this rational economic model does not adequately represent the moral imperative to care, or the relational nature of care itself. This too has significant implications for any substantive critique of neoliberalism as a theory and as a set of social policies, since it directly challenges the adequacy of the basic assumptions underlying what counts as “rationality” and the economic models that have these assumptions at their foundation.

The authors also challenge the dichotomous binary between care recipient and care provider. Drawing upon reflections from *Care Conversations*, Lynch et al. illuminate the ways in which dependent individuals possess varying amounts of power and control in the care relationship. They empirically display the ways in which care labor is fundamentally relational, and

therefore reciprocal and mutual. In the authors’ words, “those who are carers not only invest time, energy and attention in the care of others, they also receive affection, attention and appreciation in return, albeit in highly variable ways and to greatly different degrees” (p. 131). In this way, care recipients are not simply passive objects or burdens in care-providers lives, but rather have their own forms of control and power, and participate in reciprocal and powerful relationships. This restores agency to many of those who are positioned as “Others” in and by this society and in the process provides a space for action and voice.

Going Further

Affective Equality provides a powerful discussion of the political economy of love and care relationships. It also raises important points for future research and policy considerations, and provokes the need for more detailed treatments of at least two key issues: the ways in which racial and ethnic identities interface with care labor, and the role of solidarity in affective equality. For us, this points to spaces where their analysis needs to go further.

First, neither the empirical nor theoretical arguments engage with the ways in which racial and ethnic identities interface with care labor. Though their research context of Ireland may possess less racial and ethnic diversity (but see Devine, 2011), in the U.S. context, race and ethnicity fundamentally structure the economic, political, and cultural axes of justice. As such, they

demand to be treated as core concerns in research such as this.

Secondly, while *Affective Equality* rightly depicts the inequalities embedded within primary and secondary care labors (love and care, respectively), it does not sufficiently address the tertiary care relations of solidarity. The authors' rich attention to the dimensions of care and love labor generates expectations for their analysis of solidarity labor, which the book by and large does not fulfill. This omission generates two weaknesses in the account. First, it fails to provide an understanding of solidarity labor itself (what constitutes it, its logics and its vulnerabilities, particularly in relation to other forms of oppression, such as gender, race, and class domination) As such, readers have little understanding of how de-valued solidarity labor contributes to the social reproduction of inequality. Second, by failing to both define solidarity labor and diagnose its interface with inequality, solidarity work does not center in Lynch et al.'s account as a significant means to transform social inequalities. This not only leaves gaps in the descriptive account of affective inequalities and their role in reproducing social inequalities, but also limits the ways in which we are to understand how social transformation can occur, particularly if we see solidarity labor as a key mechanism of such transformations — something both of us understand as central to the development of interruptive

movements and for the formation of a counter-hegemonic politics.¹

For example, Lynch *et al.* argue that one of the pivotal inequalities suffered by care laborers is the invisibility of their labor, therefore resulting in the misrecognition of the importance of care relations. The authors describe at length how care workers perform their work with minimal or inadequate social supports, without time or the material, emotional, or political resources to contest their working conditions, much less their culturally devalued roles. The authors clearly show how misrecognition of care labor reproduces social inequalities. Yet, the authors do not suggest the ways that this isolation and misrecognition *can* be contested, such as through solidarity labor and collective action (Hobson, 2004). Consider, for example, the burgeoning movements of organized care-workers, such as teachers' unions, nurses, low-wage service employees and others who are actively resisting the imposition of economic rationalities on to their work, from standardized testing regimes to flattened

¹ This understanding of social transformation is articulated by Erik Olin Wright's theory of social transformation, which has four main components: theories of social reproduction, theories of the gaps and contradictions of reproduction, a theory of the trajectories of unintended social change, and theories of transformative strategies. See Wright, 2010, pp. 273-307, for more.

curriculums to undignified treatment of their own labor. If one of the aims of solidarity work is to make what is seen as just and immutable come to be known as unjust and mutable, to paraphrase Piven and Cloward (1979), the struggle for affective equality will require solidarity labor itself, a point only minimally addressed by Lynch et al. If we heed Lynch *et al.*'s account of the harms generated by affective inequalities, the pivotal role of solidarity labor to transform these inequalities suggests a critical need for greater theoretical and empirical investigation of the particular properties of such solidarity labor and its capacities to transform such inequities.

These criticisms do not diminish the important contributions made by Lynch, Baker, and Lyons and by their colleagues at the Centre for Equality Studies at University College Dublin (see also Lynch, Grummel, and Devine, 2012). After all, there is a limit to what one book can deal with. Rather, given our appreciation of where they have taken us, we wish to urge those of us who agree with their basic arguments to extend them into areas that demand our attention. We live not only in a classed and gendered state, but profoundly in a *racial* state (see, e.g., Gillborn, 2008; Mills, 1997). And unless we also ask *who else* is now doing care labor — and who has played a crucial role of doing so much of it historically — and how this is also constructed around the category of racial forms, we cannot truly begin to fully understand the nature of such

labor and its relationship to the politics of both redistribution and recognition.

We have written this essay with a number of goals in mind. First, even though Lynch, Baker, and Lyon's book, *Affective Equality* was published a number of years ago, it needs to once again be brought to the attention of a larger group. While it received a number of very positive reviews in the larger literature in sociology and gender studies, its visibility was not as pronounced in the field of critical educational studies. Yet, it is essential reading for any person who is serious about the sociology of education, critical educational theory, and the work of teachers and other educators. It is also significant for those of us who are justifiably critical of the neoliberal transformation of educational institutions that are having such dangerous effects in so many nations. Finally, the book's arguments show how it possible to place structural understandings side by side with the personal experiences of real actors in real homes, schools, and communities. And it does so in a way that moves us away from reductive and essentializing pictures of labor.

Yes, there are areas in which the book could have gone further. But the voices the authors present, the political, cultural, and economic dynamics of power that are illuminated, and ultimately the spaces that are opened up for a politics of interruption need to be recognized. There is a very large

body of research on critical educational theory, research, policy and practice that has been developed over the years (see, e.g., Apple, Au, and Gandin, 2009; Apple and Au, in press). In this book, Lynch, Baker, and Lyons have reminded us of crucial elements that must form a significant part of it if we are go forward — and if our understanding of the “we” recognizes the realities of what are too often omitted from our critical analyses and critical mobilizations.

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About the Reviewers

Eleni Schirmer is a PhD candidate in the Departments of Curriculum and Instruction and Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. She is a union activist and has written for *The Progressive* and for the Public School Shakedown website.



Michael W. Apple is John Bascom Professor of Curriculum and Instruction and Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Among his most recent books are: *Can Education Change Society?* (2013); *Knowledge, Power, and Education* (2013); and *Official Knowledge*, 3rd ed. (2014).



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Editors

David J. Blacker

blacker@edrev.info

Gustavo Fischman

fischman@edrev.info

Melissa Cast-Brede

cast-brede@edrev.info

Gene V Glass

glass@edrev.info

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