

# Neoliberalism in the Early Childhood Education Classroom: From Deficit to Empowerment

**Berta M. Carela**

*New Mexico State University, U.S.A.*

## Abstract

This article explores neoliberal early childhood reforms as the current iteration of imperialist agendas aimed at creating subjects and consumers. With a focus on the marginalization of people of color, this article discusses how neoliberalism is presented and embedded under the guise of saving children “at risk” and getting them ready to learn. Neoliberal policies and praxes that disempower educators, de-fund public education, and disregard the diversity of children’s and families’ voices are examined and given herstorical perspectives through a Womanist and Women of Color feminist lens.

**Keywords:** Neoliberalism, Early Childhood, Women of Color

## Introduction: Education and Reform in the Neoliberal Era

Across the United States and increasingly across the world, local, state, and federal governments are implementing education reforms through policy initiatives intended to improve “quality” in education by standardizing teaching and learning practices (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Pérez and Cahill, 2016; Sleeter, 2005; Swadener, 1995). This standardization paradigm endangers education by cloaking “ideological selections of knowledge” (Sleeter, 2005, p. 54) that in fact, once uncloaked, expose a larger neoliberal education agenda, an agenda that is based on capitalizing the market value of human life and of the people’s potential for economic production. As Kincheloe (2010) posits, “market imperatives, not ethical or humane considerations drive social, political, economic, and educational policy in neoliberalism” (p.24). Early childhood education is no exception. As Harvey (2005) explains,

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. The state has to guarantee, for example, the quality and integrity of money. It must also set up those military, defense, police and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets. Furthermore, if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary. (p. 3)

While neoliberal education policies are centered on the successful preparation of the future workforce and future consumers (Brown, Lan, and Jeong, 2015), and enforced through systems of accountability and standardization such as Quality Rating Improvement Systems (QRIS) (Pérez and Cahill, 2016), we may also find Nepantlas (Anzaldúa, 2000; 2012) for transformative spaces where education can flourish and thrive. In such Nepantlas (Anzaldúa, 2000), which are the liminal spaces where creativity and the construction of the self among and with the others reside, we may engage with and enact a Womanist (Maparyan, 2012) conception of “good knowledge...knowledge that helps people and other living beings, promoting both balance and well-being within Creation” (p. 37).

In a neoliberal education paradigm, we teach and learn in the throes of imperialism born from the legacy of European conquests, and we bask in the aftermath of its colonizing and

minoritizing ideologies as carried through neoliberal policies in our classrooms. As I gather strength to summon the voices of those who have and continue to pave the way to resist the exploitation of the human spirit of the neoliberal education agenda, I invoke Maparyan's words and ask the reader to align with me the concept of a "ladder of learning" (Maparyan, 2012, p. 38), the symbolic representation of the transformation which starts with the acquisition of information, then expands and ascends until one reaches wisdom and enlightenment. As Maparyan posits, "education is literally, the process of drawing forth that which already exists internally and immanently, and it is ideally a process of bringing external and internal dimensions of knowledge into full and complete alignment" (2012, p. 38). Thus, in enacting a Womanist education agenda, we resist the disempowerment engendered by the "affective atmosphere of surveillance" (Burman, 2016, p. 18) in which we practice and learn within accountability and standardization praxes.

Imperialism and colonialism have framed our understanding of the world through the imposition and resulting internalization of dominant knowledge systems that originate from Eurocentric, Cartesian, and positivist paradigms - paradigms that aim to disperse the Othered and subalterns' spirit, body, and mind and which create the necessity for the re-conceptualization and decolonization of knowledge (Grosfoguel, 2008; Quijano, 2007). In writing of subaltern and subalternity, I evoke Grosfoguel (2008) who calls for "subalternity as a decolonial critique (which represents a critique of Eurocentrism from subalternized and silenced knowledges)" (parenthesis within the text, p. 2). I am also reminded of Cannella and Viruru (2004) who posit, "Decolonization is about possibilities for liberation from the range of locations that we inhabit, from the unthought of recesses of our beings, and from our collective will to hear, see and respect the multiplicity of lives that inhabit our world" (p. 29). From a critical stance, contextualizing knowledge from embodied experiences and from reverence for each other and for all that makes our world, offers powerful ontological contrasts from Cartesian knowledge paradigms and subalternity. Such a paradigm shift may provide possibilities for critical and indigenous forms of knowledge that cherish human and more than human connections and understanding (Cajete, 2005; Delpit, 1995; Freire, 2005; Kincheloe, 2006; Meyer, 2008).

A decolonizing postcolonial discourse is one in which imperialism that has been internalized and gotten "into our heads" (Smith, 1999, p. 23) and can be shaken out by people's voices, power, agency, and embodied experiences. A decolonizing postcolonial discourse can shatter the shackles of the modern, postcolonial world which insists "in making subjects that are socially located on the oppressed side of the colonial difference think epistemically like the ones in dominant positions" (Grosfoguel, 2008 p. 3). A decolonizing postcolonial discourse is a *Nepantla*, an in-between, liminal space for transformation (Anzaldúa, 2000, 2012), that allows for diverse constructions of knowledge and existence, that shifts us towards worlds which are conducive to self and mutual realization, support, and understanding where the lives and voices of the marginalized are seen and heard (Armstrong-Carela-Martínez-Pérez-Ruiz Guerrero, 2017).

Early childhood education is hailed as the inoculation against society's future demise, and economic formulas that sustain this prediction claim that every dollar spent on early childhood education saves society money that would be spent on future correctional, welfare, and social services. As Brown, Lan, and Jeong (2015) indicate, proponents of early childhood education in the United States claim that, as well as providing a savings to the government on future expenditures on social and educational services, early childhood education is a "startup" for success in the standardized academic world of K-12 public education.

I, myself, am an advocate of early childhood education, and I have selectively chosen a path for early childhood education interventions through my teaching of both children and adults, based on my belief in my own brand of human potential but, also because of my own personal legacy of colonialization. As an offspring of a colonized island, my own personal herhistory has been defined through shifting of my inherited positionality as colonized Other who spoke and enacted the words of the colonizers, to that of a person with agency and voice. As an advocate of early

childhood education, I am enacting my conviction in the need to work “from within” (Nagasawa, Peters & Swadener, 2014, p. 287), as a participant in the systems that attempt to silence and erase those who come from without. Both as an educator and early interventionist, I have vicariously experienced the changes effected in myself and other people’s expected outcomes as a result of early education and other interventions, such as colleagues who proclaim they owe their professional success to their own Head Start experiences. However, through my advocacy of the children, families, and the educators that make the field of early childhood education possible, I am also fraught with dismay and concern for the current state of education and the distortions to human empowerment that result under the neoliberal education agenda. I am also reminded that, as Harvey (2005) posits, the neoliberalization of our social systems has undertaken the “creative destruction” (p. 3) of our institutions and, specifically of education. This calls for new paradigms that can shift us all into positionalities of agency and action.

By journeying through historical antecedents that lead to the “at risk” paradigm of education reforms, I explore the normalization of minoritizing school interventions that embed technologies of surveillance through systems of accountability and standardization. Strengthened by a Womanist (Maparyan, 2012) and Women of Color feminist lens (Anzaldúa, 2000, 2012; Collins, 2009), I problematize the policy constructs that create and define “children at risk” in our schools, and present possibilities for shifting from this normalization of deficits-based teaching and learning interventions. In the following pages, I challenge the status quo of positivist education paradigms by calling on the empowerment of the educators, the children and families, and by calling on the power of decolonizing positionalities such as spirituality and “commonweal” (Maparyan, 2012, p.10). As Maparyan indicates, commonweal encompasses collective and individual well-being, thought and action, and the recognition and actualization of our individual and collective “wholeness... (and) innate Divinity” (p. 11). As I search through the legacy of children at risk in our classrooms, I will also encounter and shine a light on pedagogies of *Nepantlas* (Anzaldúa, 2000, 2012) where possibilities for empowered, reconceptualized education practices lie.

### **Children at Risk and the Creation of a New Market**

If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. (U.S. Department of Education, *The National Commission on Excellence in Education*, 1983, p. 5).

Education reports and data as well as mass- media reporting (Goldstein, Macrine, Chesky, & Perry, 2011) have painted a picture of failing schools that encourages and motivates education reformers to make changes for improvement which, in itself is a requisite of the neoliberal paradigm. In 1983, the United States National Commission on Excellence in Education under President Ronald Reagan published *A Nation at Risk, the Imperative for Education Reform* (U.S. Department of Education, 1983), a review of literature and recommendations for improving the quality of education in this country. Not since Sputnik had the United States addressed the quality of education as an obstacle to the United States’ preeminence in the world. At the root of the reported concerns was that, “business and military leaders...are required to spend millions of dollars on costly remedial education and training programs in such basic skills as reading, writing, spelling, and computation” (U.S. Department of Education, *The National Commission on Excellence in Education*, 1983, p. 9). With this indictment of education and the implication that our students are the nation’s enemies, a wave of education reforms has been put into effect, calling for state and government interventions through reform policies and financial support that continue to shape our education landscape.

The notions of risk to the nation, and of financial risk in general, have been transmuted into a “children at risk” crisis discourse which is embedded in education reforms. Based on deficits models, these reforms generate the curricula and educational interventions which are in place in our classrooms. As Swadener (1995) posits, “There is an ideology of risk, which has embedded

in its interpretations of children's deficiencies or likelihood of failure due to environmental, as well as individual variables" (p. 18). Thomas (2011) theorized this ideology of risk as a "myth that deforms us" (p. 65) while ignoring that "our schools are a reflection of our society" (Thomas, 2011, p. 66). The embedding of these myths into our policies, teaching practices, and subconscious has resulted in the adoption and internalization of a free market construct of education that leads to the creation of an objectified student population which forms the matrices on the spreadsheets of profits and losses for privatized education models and practices, and a hegemonic, neoliberal, education agenda. As Carlson (2011) posits,

Neoliberalism in education may thus be approached and studied as a hegemonic discourse and movement that has its origins among economic and financial elites, both inside and outside the state, but that is 'packaged' in such a way that it also appeals to a broad range of Americans, concerned, for example, about improving the quality of public education and returning discipline and order to urban schools and communities. (p. 289)

### **Is Our Nation at Risk?**

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001), Race to the Top (RTTT, 2009) and Race to the Top- Early Learning Challenge (RTTT-ECL, 2012) competitive federal grants, and the more recent Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) are results of the recommendations set forth by the Commission's report, *A Nation at Risk*. Some common threads among these laws, interstate competition grants, and the policies they put into place, are the shift towards standards-based education, the assessment and profiling of children, educators, and schools (Brown & Weber, 2016; Pérez, 2018), the resulting disaster and failure narratives that are created (Klein, 2007; Pérez & Cannella, 2011; Reich, 2007; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995), and the defunding of public education (Lea, 2011; Pérez & Cannella, 2011).

By packaging these disaster and failure narratives as the result of the lack of quality in education, an opening has been created for government and private industry intervention through standardizing regulatory controls that are meant to affect the efficiency of the services provided while disregarding equity and social justice (Reich, 2007). As Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (2007) problematize, the concept of quality in early childhood education in the United States is a result of the "dominant ideology of private responsibility for children, reliance on free market solutions, (and) high levels of demand and large economic inequalities between families" (p. 4).

Under a narrow definition of "quality," education is enacted as standards and regulatory agendas and practices that are implemented through aligned curricula and high stakes assessments and exams. Thus, quality in education is maintained through regulatory panopticons (Rooney, 2012) that disempower all who are touched by the mandates that silence the voices and agency of the educators, the children, and their families (Brown & Pickard, 2014). Neoliberal education is packaged as the road to success and the panacea for all the ills of society, in particular, the ills emanating from schools and children that are labeled as underperforming, failing, at risk, and in need of reform. When we look beneath the surface, however, neoliberalism in the schools serves to exert control of curricula through monitoring and standardization (Sleeter, 2005), and to remove public funds from public schools and districts that are deemed as underperforming, to fund the private education sector, such as through charter schools and school vouchers (Christianakis & Mora, 2011; Klein, 2007; Pérez & Cannella, 2011; Sleeter, 2011).

Based on tenets of free market capitalism (Klein, 2007; Reich, 2007), neoliberal education is a commodity meant to yield returns that are not necessarily reflective of family and community values about education, but reflective of the financial markets' concepts of risk and return on investment. Consequently, the privatization of education ultimately defunds public education (Christianakis & Mora, 2011; Klein, 2007) and reduces the educators and children to numbers on the spreadsheets of life's successes and achievements. While this appears as an attempt to control the financial stability of the education system, it also results in the objectification of both, children and educators, through systems of accountability that necessitate the intervention

of state-funded or private consultants, and profits-based testing industries. A society that is ruled by the consumerism of capital goods and the ability of the producers of goods and services, whether brick and mortar or virtual and technology based, to get ahead financially, "...couch(es) all aspects of daily life within the language of the market—commercialism, privatization, and deregulation—(and) diminishes citizen participation to little more than being a consumer" (Goldstein, Macrine, Chesky, & Perry, 2011, p.76-77). In such social systems, the significance and integrity of the people as full participants in their lives and destinies can be easily reduced to the value of dollar signs followed by a number. For instance, in an intricate symbiotic dance, children as students become both the consumer and the product of education, an education determined by the need to obtain high test scores and high ranking within a school district in order to be a member of the meritocracy, and to ultimately achieve worker status in the capitalist-based, neoliberal economy (Bialostok & Kimberelis, 2010). From the world of high-tech industry to the world of the infant-toddler classroom, a neoliberal paradigm has become the "defining reality in which people live and work" (Goldstein et al., 2011, p. 76), and discourses of readiness to learn, and student and school success, have become ingrained in our psyches while we take for granted the systems and structures that define these successes by business and marketplace values. One of the challenges faced when confronting these established education discourses and the disempowering practices they foment is that the only tools available are those of the status quo, tools of the hegemony.

### **Defining Education by the Needs of the State Constructions of Childhood and the Normalization of Neoliberal Practices**

Childhood as a separate and unique stage of life is a concept born out of philosophical and epistemic conceptions that originated in the European age of Enlightenment and the Modern era, starting in the second quarter of the seventeenth century. Although the Enlightenment signaled a phase of separation between church and state, a new form of dogma became ensconced in its place in the form of the belief in natural law and "universal rules of nature that were independent of Christian theology and which could be used to govern relations between diverse groups" (Cannella, 2008, p. 21). Best represented by Descartes' (d. 1650) dictum, "I think therefore I am," a belief in the dualism of human nature and essence, as exemplified by the physical body juxtaposed with the mind and thinking, created "a discourse of oppositional dichotomy" (Cannella, 2008, p. 23) and a philosophical basis for the theoretical platform for the separation of church and state. The dualistic conceptualization of the separation of body and mind was the defining template exercised and exported by legions of conquerors and colonizers whose standards reflected that "individualism permeated both religion and science with the focus on the moral and reasoning individual" (Cannella, 2008, p. 23) who was deemed superior to those who were conquered and Othered (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). As the age of the Enlightenment paved the way to the Modern period and the age of the Industrial Revolution, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were eras that experienced further secularization and individualization and people became characterized as rational individuals who universally partake in progress and progressive change. This positivist conception of humanity, based on the "belief in universal truths...that are applicable to all human beings" (Cannella, 2008), has engendered the universalization of constructs that continue to be used to define and describe individuals and entire groups of people, such as children in early childhood education and their families.

Different authors have argued that the goal of education in the United States is to create citizens who can serve and sustain the needs of the capitalist state, including training its future workers (Bialistok & Kamberelis, 2010). To this effect, preschool, the start of the public education pipeline, has become the staging ground for the creation of future citizens who will maintain and improve society as they take on the jobs of the future workforce. In embodying the paradigm of a future workforce, children must start out as productive citizens who have experienced schooling interventions that ensure they leave kindergarten "ready to learn," once they enter first grade. This top down pressure has created extraneous demands on early childhood educators (Brown, Lan, Jeong, 2015), and a shift from earlier western philosophies of education

that centered around the child's own proclivities and nature, as exemplified by early childhood educators John Dewey (1859-1952) and Friedrich Fröebel (1782-1852). Our contemporary, Western-centric, neoliberalized early childhood education models have moved away from child, family and community-centered paradigms of education that are based on relational aspects of learning such as Indigenous (Cajete, 2005 and Delpit, 1995, e.g.) and from other cultures of color, towards business models of profit and loss and returns on financial investment, with the children carrying the burden of that investment.

Historically, Western early childhood educators such as Dewey conceptualized early education as centered around children being and becoming participating citizens in a democratic society (Dewey, 1897; 1944); however, our current education policies are determined by the needs of an education marketplace that requires consumers and workers to sustain it, not by the needs of children as people nor the needs of the society (Goldstein, et al., 2011; Freire, 1993). This model of education has spurred the creation of accountability systems as the litmus test of school reform as school districts, teachers, and children are measured against expected outcomes to determine their success and the teachers' probability for remaining employed (Carr & Porfilio, 2011), as well as measuring the feasibility for schools to remain open. Being prepared for the next phase of life—i.e., the next school year, the job market, and so on—is an educational model that is now the norm in the early childhood sphere and a departure from Dewey's Pedagogic Creed which, notwithstanding Dewey's male-centric languaging, was centered on the child's agency and "...to give him command of himself...to train him that he will have the full and ready use of all his capacities... that his judgment may be capable of grasping the conditions under which it has to work..." (Dewey, 1897, pp. 77-80). Instead of a neoliberalized education paradigm, education could inhabit spaces of hope and resistance to marginalization (Smith, 1999); or disrupt the structure of oppression that transforms the oppressed into "beings for others" (Freire, 1993, p. 55); or be the Luxocracy, the "rule by Light" and the "Innate Divinity" (Maparyan, 2012, p. 3) for all people, to name but a few of the many contrasting perspectives.

### **Classrooms as the Marketplace**

As *A Nation at Risk* (U.S. Department of Education, 1983) was the bugle call for current school reforms, it legitimized the children "at risk" paradigm and the attempts to address these risks through standards-based education reforms that are modeled after neoliberal, marketplace models of profit and loss and return on investment. Consequently, education is now a stage for reaping profits as well as the grounds where the future members of the labor force are created. Guided by educational policy and reinforced by classroom praxis, neoliberal education reform has settled into our classrooms and is slowly making its way to our hearts and our minds, threatening to undermine human agency and the empowerment of teachers and students alike (Brown & Weber, 2016). As Apple (2006) posits, "open season on education continues" (p.1). And, the teachers, children, and curricular content are the bull's-eyes. To further solidify this paradigm, today in the United States, the neoliberal education agenda has been injected into the policies, visions, and mandates represented or voiced by the Secretaries of Education who, both in the previous and in the current administrations, are taking neoliberalism deeper into the schools.

Similar to other capitalist markets, schools are marketed as part of an investment portfolio of services and goods families can choose from, as they exercise their free choice (Klein, 2007; Reich, 2007). Arnie Duncan, for instance, the former Secretary of Education under President Obama, rose to his federal post via the Chicago Public Schools where he had been CEO and a big proponent of school choice. Under his leadership of the Renaissance 2010 initiative, an initiative that opened the way for competition and parental choice in public education and to the defunding of traditional public schools, "Chicago experienced an increase in both public and private charter schools, as well as an increase in the frequency of high-stakes testing" (Christianakis & Mora, 2011, p. 102). Furthermore, in the Renaissance 2010 model, only 50% of the charter school teachers needed to be certified (Brown, 2009), the teachers were not unionized, and they earned less than those who were (Christianakis & Mora, 2011).

Following in her predecessor's footsteps, the current US secretary of education, Betsy DeVos, is also a strong proponent of defunding public education and elevating charter schools. In the beginning of President Trump's administration, DeVos was narrowly confirmed as Secretary of Education with Vice President Mike Pence's tie-breaking, confirmation vote. This first-time tiebreaking move for a vice president is an apt illustration of the continuous progress toward an institutionalized, neoliberal education agenda that is openly supported by the administration. As Huettelman and Alcindor (2017) of the New York Times reported:

the 51-50 vote capped an all-night vigil on the Senate floor, where, one by one, Democrats denounced Ms. DeVos to a mostly empty chamber. But they did not get a third Republican defection that would have stopped Ms. DeVos—a billionaire who has devoted much of her life to promoting charter schools and vouchers—from becoming the steward of the nation's nearly 100,000 public schools. (Huettelman & Alcindor, 17.2.7)

Days after the confirmation, Nikole Hannah-Jones (2017) wrote in an opinion article in the New York Times:

We began moving away from the 'public' in public education a long time ago in fact treating public schools like a business...The for-profit charters DeVos helped expand have not provided an appreciably better education for Detroit's children, yet they've continued to expand because they are profitable — or as Tom Watkins, Michigan's former education superintendent, said, 'In a number of cases, people are making a boatload of money, and the kids aren't getting educated.' (Hannah-Jones, 2017)

In spite of the close senate vote, DeVos' confirmation will ensure that the nation's public schools continue to be defunded and resources diverted to support the private sector that creates and maintains charter schools, faith-based, and other non-public education models that will benefit from the administration's support. In essence, as messages of the public schools' system's demise reaches the public in "at risk" packages, the people also being hand delivered to charter schools and other models of privatized education whose new role is that of saviors of the education system and of the children whose lives are affected, creating new education constructs that blur the public and the private.

Sandvik (2012) posits that, "Freedom of choice connects to the neo-liberal privileging of individual freedom at the expense of more cooperative and collective approaches" (p. 204), which we see reflected in the way schools are now presented to families. As these policies take place in the national and state spheres, new spaces are created for commercialized interventions and for the teachers' transformation into agents of privatized education. A poignant example is taking place outside of Fargo, North Dakota, where Kayla Delzer, a third-grade teacher, is promoting her sponsors' brand in the classroom to her students and, outside the classroom, to teachers and administrators beyond her school base. As Natasha Singer (2017) of the New York Times writes,

Ms. Delzer also has a second calling. She is a schoolteacher with her own brand, Top Dog Teaching. Education start-ups like Seesaw give Ms. Delzer their premium classroom technology as well as swag like T-shirts or freebies for the teachers who attend her workshops. She agrees to use their products in her classroom and give the companies feedback. And she recommends their wares to thousands of teachers who follow her on social media. 'I will embed it in my brand every day,' Ms. Delzer said of Seesaw. 'I get to make it better.' Ms. Delzer is a member of a growing tribe of teacher influencers, many of whom promote classroom technology. They attract notice through their blogs, social media accounts and conference talks. And they are cultivated not only by start-ups like Seesaw, but by giants like Amazon, Apple, Google and Microsoft, to influence which tools are used to teach American schoolchildren...The corporate courtship of these teachers brings with it profound new conflict-of-interest issues for the nation's public schools (Singer, 2017).

Where do we start, then, to separate business enterprise and financial gain from the human endeavors of learning, teaching, self-actualization, and belonging? As children are separated from their ontological roots of family and self while they are boxed into marketplace commodities, education can be either (or both) a burden and a resource in the face of human empowerment.

### **Problematizing the Readiness Construct**

Rather than children changing in some absolute sense, the meaning of readiness is the thing that is changing as people interact (Graue, 1993, pp. 252-253).

As children enter the school system in the preschool and kindergarten years, they enter through the gates of hegemonic power construction where they are classified as ready, or not ready, to learn. This creates a paradigm that exemplifies Cannella's and Viruru's (2004) view of Foucault's analysis of power being "more complex, as produced by human beings, while at the same time producing privilege for particular groups, naming (labeling and limiting) other particular groups, and reproducing itself" (p. 61). Readiness based on empiricist views of childhood relies on concepts of absolutes in the understanding of children and how they learn, and it ignores the view that readiness is a locally generated construct which derives from the beliefs, theories, and practices within social and school communities (Graue, 1993).

The implementation of early childhood entry assessment tools, such as the New Mexico Kindergarten Observation Tool (NM KOT, NM Public Education Department, 2015) and the New Mexico Early Childhood Observation Tool (NM ECOT, NM Public Education Department, 2016), are not only pressuring preschool teachers across the country to graduate children "ready to learn" (Graue, 1993) when they enter kindergarten. The pressure is on also for families to deliver children who are "ready to learn" when they leave the home and enter preschool. In this manner, families are accountable for preparing their children for school, and teachers prove themselves worthy of their profession (Brown & Weber, 2016) in their preparation of their students for the next school grade. As agents of readiness, families and early childhood teachers assist in carrying the state's regulatory power and "more subtle forms of control constructed around the education of children...to determine the appropriateness of kindergarten entrance" (Cannella, 2008, p. 82). Conversely, first grade teachers have become the judges of the efficacy of their preschool counterparts as they assess children's readiness, or lack thereof, for first grade (Graue, 1993). Although the phrase "ready to learn when they enter kindergarten" is an expression often used by politicians, policy makers and, increasingly, by the public at large who advocate for early childhood education, "ready to learn" negates the fact that children are born knowing and learning from their lived experiences. As we examine the current trajectory of education, it appears to represent a map of human territories to be inhabited by renewed iterations of the Othered, subalterns (Grosfoguel, 2008) whom the hegemony deem to be empty vessels (Freire, 1993) that exist in uncharted oceans.

Graue (1993) problematizes the concept of "readiness" as a policy construct that needs examination, thus asking, "is readiness the same for all children" and "is it an identifiable characteristic"? (p. 2). Currently, the four psychology-based concepts that shape the basis for the readiness discourse are: 1) maturation or biological, including social, emotional, motor, and cognitive abilities of a child; 2) environmental, where the teacher is in charge of providing the appropriate experiences for learning; 3) a combination of both, maturation and the experiential environment as integrated by the individual child; and 4) constructivist, which results from the intersection between the individual and the environment (Graue, 1993). Graue studied three, socially distinct schools where she noted that pacing of instruction based on the same curriculum varied in each school setting and demographic composition. For instance, the study of geometric shapes ranged from one day per-shape in an Anglo, middle class school, to one week per-shape in an Anglo, working class school, to a full semester of shape-focused work in a Hispanic, working class school. In problematizing these observations, Graue posits that, "The



interpretation of what kindergarten looked like and the end points to be achieved were locally distinct” (p. 247), and suggests further exploration into what influences teachers’ practices, beyond curricular guidelines and the calls to action as set forth in models of instruction, such as those in the National Association for the Education of Young Children’s (NAEYC’S) (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009) guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice and district-specific curricular guides. Graue (1993) argues that,

What these calls do not address... is the complexity that characterizes how these classroom practices came to be. What teachers do with their students does not spring from their heads to represent their isolated beliefs about how children learn. Instead, their instructional programs are the product of social, political, and cultural forces at work in individual settings (p. 247).

As Graue’s (1993) study and conclusions illustrate, there is great significance in problematizing and critically assessing the neoliberal context where early childhood education is being enacted. For instance, in a study of three PreK teachers in a highly regulated school district, Brown and Pickard (2014) conclude that by framing the readiness demands through an interactionist paradigm, the teachers were able to balance the mandated academic demands with “the individual and community-based goals they had for the children as learners” (p. 425). For these teachers, readiness was a balance between “the needs of the children and their families with the academic requirements of the high-stakes early learning environment” (Brown & Pickard, 2014, p. 420), a balance these teachers were able to create and navigate due to their teaching experience and their beliefs about education as juxtaposed with what their school district expected of them. As I problematize these educators’ conclusions, however, I cannot help but wonder what goals the children and their families would have set for themselves. In other words, as well-intended as individualizing goal setting is, we tend to fall short of including those who are affected most by these goals, that is, the children and their families.

To further challenge the “ready to learn” paradigm, it is necessary to consider the problematic implications that standardization presents as this is based on the epistemological assumption that learning and teaching are static processes that are equally experienced by all. While deconstructing standardization, it is necessary to consider and juxtapose the realities of the world’s innumerable genetic, contextual, and experiential variations that create each child and adult in the classrooms as, in effect, humanity is composed of unique individuals who learn and experience in personalized and diverse modalities within specific contexts. What constitutes knowledge and how it is to be assessed, are fraught with complexities. For instance, intersubjectivity in the production of knowledge, not only intersubjectivity between people but also between people and the environment and all that constitutes the world, is part of the link that connects our individual and collective existence in, and knowledge of the world. As Quijano (2007) indicated when problematizing the production of knowledge, “like every half-truth falsifies the problem by denying intersubjectivity and social totality as the production sites of all knowledge” (p. 172). In Kincheloe’s (2010) problematization of the concepts of absolute, reductionist, standardized knowledge he states that,

The worldview and epistemology that supports standardization reforms assume that absolute forms of measurement can be applied to human endeavors such as education. The teaching and learning processes, advocates of standardization believe, are sufficiently consistent and stable to allow for precise measurability... Therefore, because questions based on students’ acquisition of selected bits of knowledge can be easily devised and we can determine a student’s and a teacher’s competence with little difficulty because such measurements can be easily made, advocates of reductionist standardization see little complexity in the effort to hold teachers accountable (p. 14).

With people as diverse as each grain of sand and as unique as each snowflake off the clouds, we are nevertheless interconnected to each other within social constructs of reality where “there is not much room for an idea of identity as ontologically irreducible originality outside the field

of relations...” relations which are part of “a deeper communication structure in the universe” (Quijano, 2007, p. 172). Yet, the homogenizing of learning and teaching practices through standardized education reforms leaves sparse room for the inclusion of the diversity encompassed in each child’s cultural and familial knowledge and experience. This creates a vacuum that de-centers the child out of her/his locus of learning as it de-legitimizes cultural and familial bases of knowledge (Cohen, 2008; Licona, 2013; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Zipin, Sellar, & Hattam, 2012).

The oversimplification of reductionist education paradigms (Kincheloe, 2010) negates the unique composition of each individual, as people intersect within their socio-political contexts in order to interact with the world and create fractals and universes of perceptions and multitudes of possibilities for action. Instead, the neoliberal educational climate is an attempt to normalize praxis within a reality of multi-verses in order to create a golden age of the new, hegemonic “melting pot”. The deficit-based educational discourses that are the guiding principles of education interventions diminishes children’s epistemologies by discounting or trivializing their families’ cultural knowledge once the child enters care and education school systems, and by labeling those who do not fit or conform to pre-decided concepts of development. As Swadener & Lubeck (1995) confront the at risk model, they note how “this deficit model typically gets framed as private and personal, often taking the form of blaming the victim—particularly in a nation whose dominant culture perpetuates the myth of meritocracy” (p. 2). Hence, the intersectionality of oppressions (Collins, 2009) is ignored as it produces disparities, suffering, and Othering for the poor, the racially and linguistically marginalized, the gendered and Others who are minoritized through hegemonic discourses.

Guided by concepts of shock doctrine and disaster capitalism (Klein, 2007; Lea, 2011) education reformers perpetuate neoliberalism’s laissez-faire orientation while partnering with financing and regulatory agencies in order to carry out “savior” agendas that transform the public sphere into private enterprises (Klein, 2007; Pérez & Cannella, 2011). In education, concepts of a free marketplace coupled with government deregulation, the privatization of the public arena, and the new social re-engineering that results in deep cuts to the social services sector, have led to this privatization and, as Harvey (2005) posits, a “market-based populist culture of differentiated consumerism and individual libertarianism” (Harvey, 2005, p. 42, in Brown, 2009, p. 241). Disasters, natural or fabricated, are the opportunity for intervention and investment and for re-engineering society, such as was enacted in post- hurricane Katrina New Orleans (Klein, 2007; Pérez & Cannella, 2011). As Klein (2007) suggests, disaster capitalism is based on the presence of a crisis, followed by “selling off the pieces of the state to private players while citizens are still reeling from the shock, then making the ‘reforms’ permanent” (p. 7). For education, the example of New Orleans and hurricane Katrina serve to illustrate this point:

In sharp contrast to the glacial pace with which the levees were repaired and the electricity grid was brought back online, the auctioning off of New Orleans’ school system took place with military speed and precision. Within nineteen months, with most of the poor residents still in exile, New Orleans’ public school-system had been almost completely replaced by privately run charter schools (Klein, 2007, p. 6).

To Klein’s point, the disaster of hurricane Katrina in New Orleans provided the perfect storm for the near hostile take-over of the public-school system (Klein, 2007) that followed. Furthermore, this type of crisis intervention has set a template for “the construction and privileged practice of efficiency as necessary for profitability in a neoliberal market [which] further intensifies inequalities (Pérez & Cannella, 2011, p. 51).

### **Technologies of Surveillance**

In the neoliberal-driven classroom, children’s her/histories, life experiences, and social and emotional realities are discounted or minimized as Quality Rating Improvement Systems (QRIS) (Nagasawa, Peters, & Swadener, 2014; Pérez & Cahill, 2016) become the litmus tests

for an education program's funding status and the marketing flag for inter-school competition. In New Mexico, for instance, assessment of an early childhood program's quality is based, in part, on that program's QRIS rating (New Mexico FOCUS: Essential Elements of Quality, 2014), ratings that are based on essentialized knowledge standards, not on the children's individual and familial strengths. QRIS is viewed as a foundation for aspirations of higher quality teaching through professional development and other interventions, along with purported higher parental recognition of specific school sites and higher state reimbursement for childcare. From a critical perspective, however, QRIS are one of the controlling mechanisms for surveillance of the standardized practices that are expected to take place in schools and classrooms.

As Rooney (2012) problematizes, "surveillance technologies...[are] far from neutral...[and reflect] the power dynamics at play in managing and controlling the lives of children, often in the context of wider social and political interests" (p. 331). Viewed through their rating and monitoring functions as aspects of surveillance technologies, QRIS are the neoliberal classrooms' panopticon which transform educators into both the enforcers of their students' accountability, as well as into the subject of enforcement by their schools, districts, and the state. In addition, as children become the objects of control, they are essentialized and bound by universal notions of childhood that ignore the colonization of families and base childhood/s on globalized views of development and learning (Cannella, 2008; Fleer, Hedegaard, & Tudge, 2009; Pérez & Cahill, 2016) while ignoring what Sandvik (2012) calls the assemblage of control.

Burman (2016) theorizes surveillance from both a performative stance, as well as from a textual and semiotics discourse, as she analyzes subject formation through an army recruitment advertisement poster and a face-to-face encounter with an airport immigration agent. Both, the army recruit and the immigration agent are Black men, one British, the other from the U.S., and on the surface, these men may appear to represent a new world order of racial integration since they are both in jobs that White men also hold. By examining the sub textual messages implicit in both encounters, however, Burman notes that the immigration agent carried out his airport surveillance duties while he referenced Foucault, to her surprise. Thus, he simultaneously embodied and enacted a panopticon as the airport agent, while distancing himself from that role as he theorized his embodiment of immigration agent through Foucault's languaging. In the analysis of the textual and semiotic example embodied by the Black army recruit poster, Burman surmised that, while the army recruitment advertisement shows an implicit welcoming of Black subjects as informants of their own radicalized communities, these informants are also knocked down by the implicitness of the message that conveys that any ordinary person can join the British military intelligence. Thus, "the surveilled, reflexive subject is hailed into being, who is simultaneously 'bigged up' but undermined in his (or her) grandiosity" (Burman, 2016, p. 18). In migrating Burman's theories of internalized, enacted, and embodied surveillance to early childhood classrooms, it is alarming to note how educators are, as in Burman's examples of the Black British and U.S. subjects themselves, "both prototypical but also a prime site for double consciousness and pedagogical recruitment into self-surveillance" (ibid. p. 18).

Whether through arguments for safety protection or social documentation, technologies of surveillance are in the hands of individuals, governments, and businesses, and have been blurring the lines between the public and the private (Rooney, 2012). In education, these technologies of surveillance are often implemented through the collection of personal identifying data such as demographics, test scores, and academic ranking. In classrooms, the surveillance of praxes through physical oversight by program monitors and consultants, high stakes testing, and accountability measures such as those advocated through constructs of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009) and Quality Rating Improvement Systems (QRIS), sets the stage for the provision of neoliberal education reforms that, as Sleeter (2005) suggests, "are generally promulgated as consensus documents that represent agreement over what is most worth teaching and knowing within a discipline" (p. 54).

In addition to the disciplinary control that is embedded through policy and praxis based on quality in the schools, discipline is being placed in the hands of the children themselves who are to regulate each other's behavior and become their peers' overseers and embodied panopticons. "Bad," or "poor" behavior has become one of the manifestations of children at risk and has led to the creation of "good" behavior curricula across the world, such as *The Incredible Years* in New Zealand (Arndt, Gibbons, & Fitzsimons, 2015) and the PAX Good Behavior Game in the U. S. and abroad (PAXIS Institute, 2018). Over the past several years, U. S. early childhood classrooms have been faced with a streak of expulsions based on the "unacceptability" of the children's behavior. In the guise of "classroom management" and helping children gain "self-control," school districts and local governments are eager to adopt behavior interventions since, these are aimed at "the prevention, treatment and management of conduct problems in young people...and early onset of conduct problems" (Arndt et al., 2015, p. 282). In these behavior interventions, the children are rewarded for not interrupting during lessons, not fidgeting or getting out of their seats, not speaking out of turn, for example. Of course, it can be unsettling when an educator feels "out of control" in her or his classroom, but why are educators taught and encouraged to be "in control" and to expect children to be automatons who soak in the information that they are given and then spit it out onto test bubbles? In Arndt et al.'s words (2015), this type of behavior curricula ends up "normalizing conditions that constrain children's potential" (285). These conditions can also pave the way to compliance and human exploitation.

### **Children's and Educators' Agency in a World of External and Internalized Controls**

Normalization of behavior is based on conceptualized matrices used to measure and compare one person against another to determine what is typical or "normal" behavior, and what is "atypical," "abnormal," or "at risk" behavior. Normalization paradigms become the baseline that impose binaries based on othering those who are labeled as "atypical" or "abnormal," in relation to those who are presumed "normal" or "typical." As Swadener and Lubeck (1995) explain, from 1989 to the writing of their book, "2,500 articles and conference papers" (p. 1) had focused on the subject of "children and families at risk" (ibid.). These authors set out to problematize and expose the "at risk" construct as "implicitly racist, classist, sexist, and ableist, a 1990s version of the cultural deficit model which locates problems or 'pathologies' in individuals, families, and communities rather than in institutional structures that create and maintain inequality" (ibid. p. 3).

While in education the role of enforcer of typicality or normalized behavior falls upon the educator who is in direct contact with the student, it is necessary to recognize this role of enforcer as a manifestation of the mold that educators themselves must fit into in order to be deemed fit and equipped to perform their job in the classroom. As Brown and Weber (2016) posit, in spite of the knowledge about developmental differences between children in the early childhood years, children in elementary school, and the resulting advocacy for responding to these differences through Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), policy demands for "standardization and improving children's academic achievement" (Brown and Weber, 2016, p. 184) lead teachers to ignore such recommendations. While ignoring the recommendations of early childhood advocates and co-opting "appropriate practice" to fit into the standardizing mold, the layering of requirements needed to perform the job of being a teacher is interpreted through education and workforce development that prepare the educators to fit the role ascribed by the White, gendered hegemony.

Langford (2007), delves into the preeminence of "White university researchers and the marginalization of alternative discourses of education" (p. 334) and considers Meiner's (2002) investigations of student teachers' self-characterization under the shadow of "Lady Bountiful." Based on Meiner's (2002) classification, Langford explains that, "Lady Bountiful" is the epitome of the good teacher who is White, or modeled after notions of Whiteness, "feminine, and middle class and who undertakes, through love, a calling and natural aptitude to save 'at risk' children" (Langford, 2007, p. 334). The at risk children who are labeled as the agents of crisis in childhood are bearing the weight of an "essentialist, reductionist, and dogmatic" (Swadener & Lubeck,

1995, p. 5) construction of childhood, waiting for Lady Bountiful to rescue them. Thus, while the crisis in childhood falls upon the children's shoulders, the intersection of discourses about what is appropriate teaching practice and who is fit to deliver it press educators into molds they must conform into in order to be deemed good enough to teach. Meanwhile, fitness to teach is determined by those who embody the dominant, "cultural pedagogy" (Langford, 2007, p. 334) of the educators' image, such as the "Lady Bountiful" (ibid.). However, when the scenario of compliance does not yield the expected results as set by prescribed standards, the educator is not deemed "Lady Bountiful," but an ineffectual educator whose career may be in jeopardy, engendering fear of failing in one's profession and fear for job security. What standardizing compliance implies in a diverse society begs contextualization, both cultural and political, since it is based on assumptions that disregard the need for cultural relevance and the importance of children's cultural and linguistic backgrounds as the basis for their learning, their understanding and self-expression (Tabachnick & Bloch, 1995).

The subtext that lays the foundation for neoliberal surveillance methodologies is embedded in teaching childcare regulations which create a concept of the child and childhood as based on external loci of control that originate in adult, regulatory power. Rooney (2012) posits that surveillance is "an activity that involves some combination of watching, listening or observing, generally for the purpose of monitoring and control" (p. 333). The surveillance methodologies of typical QRIS are the instruments of such regulatory power. Yet, as Flear, Hedegaard, & Tudge (2009) remind us, current education systems are "the instruments and practices of learning which are located both within and outside families" (p. 12).

In a marked contrast, from a Womanist perspective, education is part of a "ladder of learning" that leads to "LUXOCRACY" (Maparyan, 2012), a state of knowledge and wisdom which leads the individual and the community to "foster, facilitate, nurture, protect, and coordinate the expression of every person's "Innate Divinity" simultaneously" (p. 6-7). Standardized education as measured by QRIS is based on globalized and universal constructs of learning that essentialize childhoods, while failing to take into consideration the local/ized reality of individual families and communities shaping a child's lived context (Flear, et al., 2009). While political campaigns are built upon rhetoric of readiness, universal access to PreK programs, and quality early childhood education for all, the need to fund education through government or private funding sources, places the education system under surveillance requirements of QRIS via testing, observation, and documentation (Pérez & Cahill, 2016) that do not leave much space for the exercise and expression of the individual's knowledge, wisdom, and innate divinity.

### **Problematizing Regimes of Truth in Early Childhood Education and Care**

Unfortunately, positivist thinking has become the dominant epistemic culture within the academic and professional arenas and leads to the systemic marginalization of alternate ways of knowing, learning, and doing (Mehta, Alter, Semali, & Marezki, 2013, p. 83).

Tests and test scores are not new in education and their impact on early childhood education is starting to be felt. New Mexico, for instance, requires that kindergarten teachers administer the kindergarten observation and assessment tool (New Mexico Kindergarten Observation Tool - KOT, 2015) within thirty days of the child's entry into school. This level of measurement at the start of kindergarten is problematic as it relies on essentializing kindergarten standards that may or may not reflect the children in any given classroom. As Rooney (2012) maintains, test scores distance the lived reality of children, while the scores become the representation of their test performance, or a data, virtual double of the embodied child (Rooney, 2012).

In U.S. schools, quality improvement systems are based on essentializing notions of child-centered education, following the child's lead, and teaching to the child's ability such as through pedagogies based on Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), or measurable assessments such as the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS) (Harms, T., Cryer, D., Clifford, R.M., & Yazejian, N., 2017), and the Early Childhood

Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) (Harms, T., Cryer, D., & Clifford, R., 2014), for example. As these products of positivist education paradigms are adopted as teaching and learning tools and methods, they become “pedagogies of control and surveillance” that are internalized and enacted by the children and the educators. This phenomenon is illustrated in Sandvik’s (2012) study with student teachers as she deconstructs the assemblages of control that they experience, as reported by the student teachers themselves. As one student teacher maintained, “We don’t want them to just stand still...I think...for the situation to be positive...they should have been vigorous and active, working with the materials” (p. 205). Sandvik suggests that the student teachers’ positivist pedagogical practice model negates the possibility that the children may want to have their own agency, even in choosing silence over activity, and be something other than reactive creatures. Sandvik (2012) concludes that rethinking these conclusions may create a space where “early childhood educators (practitioners, teachers and caregivers) no longer appear as controlling masters positioned outside or above processes. This is because educators, too, are involved in and are affected by the various assemblages at work” (ibid. p. 207).

In a review of the National Association for the Development of Young Children’s Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), Cohen (2008) postulates that DAP is a dogma, as identified and defined through Foucault’s regime of truth. According to Cohen, Foucault’s regime of truth is generated by an “authoritative consensus” (Cohen, 2008, p. 9) that determines what needs to be done, and how, in any given field. Based on this definition of “regime of truth,” the principles to which developmentally appropriate practice are based on are dominant discourses that are grounded in positivist values which lead to power and domination over self-agency and empowerment of marginalized groups, whether by race, social status, immigration, gender, age, or any other distinguishing human characteristic. Furthermore, in this application of Foucault’s theory, the question of “whose knowledge and interests are represented by DAP and whose interests are served by a curriculum based on such practices” (Cohen, 2008, p. 9) leads to the realization that essentialized childhoods, cloaked in the theories of child-centeredness, are the basis for practices such as DAP. Evoking Alloway (1997), Cohen maintains that, “an exclusively developmental view marginalizes minority sociocultural groups that have different ways of viewing and understanding young children” (Cohen, 2008, p. 11).

In the neoliberal education model, the cultural and familial knowledges that the children enter a classroom with are disregarded, placing students in a vacuum that de-centers them and delegitimizes their families’ wealth of knowledges (Cohen, 2008; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Yosso, 2006; Zipin, Sellar, & Hattam, 2012), while the children themselves are characterized as “children at risk.” Swadener and Lubeck (1995) remind us that, “at risk” discourses have origins both in epidemiology and the insurance industry and, as can be deduced from these origins, children and families at risk present both a health hazard and a financial burden to society and the state.

Educators are scapegoats and easy targets who bear the blame for the mismatch between standardized regulations, students’ realities, and the knowledge that they possess, which may not be the same as what is expected by QRIS and other regulatory measures. In addition, early childhood educators, as do educators in K through 12th grade, live under the threat of regulatory backlash which can result in job loss if they do not meet the requirements set by their state’s early childhood regulatory agencies. The teaching profession is under siege, and classrooms are under siege. Yet, we need to remember that humanity needs teachers as bridges and guides who help us make the connections that lead to knowledge and wisdom, and allow for full, individual and collective participation in the world. As Goldstein et al. (2011) remind us,

while the Obama administration and the media imply that school reform will occur with or without teachers and their advocates’ support, it does not mean that radical educators who envision a more just, equitable, and democratic schooling for all the nation’s children should give up (p. 87-88).

Bialostok and Kamberelis (2010) posit that the new capitalism is an “economic period in which insecurity, flux, and uncertainty exist in the workplace” (p. 299). By not taking into account and acting to adverse and ethical inequalities that plague society, the “ready to learn” and “children at risk” constructs obfuscate the fact that intersectionalities of race, gender, immigration status, and socio-economic status are among the socially constructed axes of oppression that position children in the “at risk” categories. Polakow (2014), for example, in deconstructing these sources of societal exclusion, names schools as “powerful loci for exclusion and ‘othering’ of poor children, children of color, and children with disabilities,” where “children have few rights...are usually constructed as problem kids to be silenced, socialized, and placed under surveillance...” (p. 270). Yet, while access to basic needs such as nutrition, shelter, and care ought to presuppose a child’s ability to succeed in school, children and families who are unable to attain these basic necessities of life are stigmatized, “leading to exclusion, isolation, and a landscape of social toxicity” (ibid. p. 274). Where does readiness reside, then, when the image of the essentialized child does not reflect the lived realities of our school children?

### **Decolonizing Neoliberalism with Pedagogies of Possibilities: From Deficit to Empowerment**

Rationality is not unnecessary. It serves the chaos of knowledge. It serves feeling. It serves to get from this place to that place. But if you don’t honor those places, then the road is meaningless. Too often, that’s what happens with the worship of rationality and that circular, academic, analytic thinking. But ultimately, I don’t see feel/think as a dichotomy. I see them as a choice of ways and combinations (Lorde, 2007, p. 100-101).

I envision ruptures and spaces for possibilities and empowerment within the neoliberal education worldviews where there can be opportunities for reconceptualizing early care and education; the first years of life are such a space. For instance, early care and education continue to be the allure of political candidates, including former President Obama, (Nagasawa, et al. 2014; Carr & Porfilio, 2011) and New York City’s Mayor De Blasio, whose 2013 landslide win was bolstered by campaign promises that included his support of universal PreK. For families who need early care and education, its availability is an invaluable asset. Conversely, as these institutionalized learning spaces are infused with the diverse and critical worldviews embodied in each family and person within the classrooms, we may enact praxes that can re-steer the ship before it goes aground. Such re-conceptualizations may help us shift towards new education paradigms and imaginings: new paradigms of children and families at promise (Swadener, 1995), and new imaginings that foreground the strength, beauty, and brilliance of children of color (Pérez & Saavedra, 2017) and others who are minoritized.

Yosso (2005) recommends applying critical race theory (CRT) as a transdisciplinary “analytical framework” that centers marginalized peoples while confronting dominant ideology and White privilege and linking “theory with practice, scholarship with teaching, and the academy with the community” (p. 74); and as a means to dismantle deficit thinking which is at the root of the neoliberal manifestations on educations, and “one of the most prevalent forms of contemporary racism in the U.S. schools” (ibid., p. 75). Yosso examines cultural capital through a critical race theory lens in which she explores the questions of who has capital, and where does cultural capital reside. Citing the work of Anzaldúa (1990), Ladson-Billings (2000), Delgado Bernal (1998, 2002) and others, Yosso challenges the opposition to “Outsider” knowledges, such as knowledges embodied in Indigenous peoples, Latinx peoples, and other people of color and minoritized cultures. One of CRT’s basic tenets is “the intercentricity of race and racism” (Yosso, 2006, p. 7) with other forms of subordination. Therefore, if race and racism are central to how our social and political world functions, and it is one basis for the assignment of risk to minoritized populations, we must explore ways to dismantle race and racism and clear the way for a just society, thus enacting a decolonizing, anti-neoliberalism positionality.

As a possibility for decolonization of schools, Toso (2011) explores how spirituality is conceptualized in early childhood education programs for Pasifika children in Aotearoa (Maori),

New Zealand, and proposes that spirituality be considered a philosophy of practice that honors children as blessings, as is the Samoan custom. Toso argues that spirituality is a widely held cultural phenomenon and a “source of grounding” for Pasifika people, a “space that creates relatedness,” and “the space which gives meaning to things” (p. 130). Within this spiritual paradigm, mind, body, and intellect are the components that create the totality of human existence and evolution, and which create a foundation for relatedness, and for physical and emotional wellbeing. In this view of spirituality, family members perform the important role of teachers and guides of the Samoan culture and cultural values, gods, and lived experiences that allow for the development of a healthy and strong self-image. As Toso asserts, such cultural values serve as the foundation for a holistic framework that can serve as the basis for education, an education that is based on how children have been socialized. This example of the possibilities brought about by the integration of Pasifika spirituality in the curriculum demonstrates the value of cultural funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and culturally relevant practices (CRP) (Ladson-Billings, 1995) as bases for strengths-based, culturally responsive and significant practices that can help us counter the neoliberalization of early childhood education.

In my own region of Southern New Mexico, Licona’s (2013) two-year ethnographic case study in the Mexican-U.S. borderlands’ colonias—the unregulated settlements composed of informal housing which generally lack physical infrastructures such as drinking water, sewage, and roads— reveals the funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) which are the sources of empowerment and action for the community. Licona (2013) argues that the bases for justifying deficit-based arguments and pedagogy rely on neoliberal, corporatized “single-instrument testing” that do not support the inherent and applied knowledges of the schools’ diverse populations (p. 860). Rather, these tests and assessments follow abstract and non-contextual methods of science education, which are less engaged and not based on local, lived experiences and realities. According to Licona, only 15% of fourth graders and 10% of eight graders score at or above the benchmark for science in those respective grades. He concludes that these low percentages are due to the corporatized, neoliberal approaches to education which negate the epistemologies of diverse peoples: The people who are denied the opportunity to apply their own, every-day, lived knowledges, and are judged and perceived as lacking potential. In response to this ascribed, deficit positionality, Licona highlights several community projects that illustrate the knowledge base in the sophisticated solutions that residents of the colonias engage to solve life’s challenges. For instance, one project was based on the use of recycled grey water to grow medicinal herbs and plants. Another project centered on building waterless, composting toilets, and yet another focused on the activities at community centers where childcare and ideas for creating economically sustainable communities were shared and implemented. Licona demonstrates how educators who “view the everyday construction of knowledge through the interactions of culture, language and action” (p. 868) constitute a counter narrative to the deficit-based epistemologies that are currently guiding our pedagogies and creating “pedagogies of possibility for all” (p. 871).

### **Conclusion**

Our national focus on early childhood education provides opportunities to engage in discourses that can lead to policy changes, changes that address the inequities inherent in our system of education. As most early childhood educators, as well as K-12 teachers, are women who are expected to embody the White, “Lady Bountiful” (Langford, 2007) model of the teacher, women educators of all colors and their allies, are poised to challenge the colonizing effects of essentializing, policy-driven standards. While children and educators are robbed of their own agency through the expectation of normalized behavior, empowerment must be attained to resist the tide of enforced compliance. This is not about anarchy, it is about dignity, agency, equity, and social justice (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Listening to and joining the voices of children and families is a powerful platform as we face and withstand the tide of the at-risk discourse, a discourse that presumes that children are not learning if those who care for them are not part of the cookie-cutter production created by the neoliberalization of education.



Bell hooks (1984) wrote that, “women must begin the work of feminist reorganization with the understanding that we have all (irrespective of our race, sex, or class) acted in complicity with the existing oppressive system” (p. 161), and complicit we all are. I would suggest taking hook’s ideas one step further and propose that we look at education through a Womanist perspective (Maparyan, 2012) and a Women of Color feminist perspective (Anzaldúa, 2000, 2012; Collins, 2009; hooks, 1984, 1994). As Alice Walker (1980) wrote, “a womanist is a feminist, only more common” (p.100), and this may serve as invitation for many to join, echo and live a Womanist positionality. Womanists find possibilities and portals of empowerment by harnessing the strengths of humanity and solidarity based on self, family, cultural history and cultural wealth, knowledge, mutual love and respect. While beyond the scope of this article, I propose that in future challenges to neoliberalism, with mutual love and respect we have counterweights against the continued colonization of children and families as presented under the guise of protecting them from risk, thus we enact Womanism.

In the West, in post WWII Italy, what became the Reggio Emilia approach led by Loris Malaguzzi (1920-1994), was a response to the fascist experience from the war, and a way of ascertaining that children would have a pedagogical foundation conducive to becoming critical, participating citizens in their society. In the Black tradition of the United States, “othermothers” (Collins, 2009, p. 205) take care of other people’s children and other members of the community, using their knowledge and education in socially responsive and responsible ways, supporting those who need support or help, and deepening social justice for the community.

Neoliberalism in education has moved away from the call to democracy, community participation, and thinking critically, towards attempts to normalize deficit-based paradigms and the practices of standardized, monolithic systems of accountability in which children and educators must participate. It is worth noting that, although diversity is a popular concept in U. S. early childhood educational circles in the first part of the twenty first century, diverse knowledges are not included in ways that lead to understanding the world, nor joining in, through the eyes of another. Anzaldúa (2000, 2012), Collins (2009), Delpit (1995), Maparyan (2012), and a catalog of women of color feminist and womanist thinkers call attention to the empowerment inherent in everyone’s lives and existence—knowledges, abilities, and actions that emanate from the lived experiences of people and their interactions with each other and the world. As we contextualize the current neoliberal agenda, I invoke Anzaldúa’s (2000) thoughts on “Quincentennial, from victimhood to active resistance,” in which she calls for challenging colonial disempowerment by engaging in active resistance that is anchored on “conocimiento... [a] theory of consciousness... a theory of composition” (p. 177). Conocimiento to Anzaldúa was a portal to awareness and enlightenment, the interstitial gossamer that connects awareness and action.

As we engage in continuous advocacy and support of each other, the children and families we serve and of those who are the *deslenguados*, those without tongues/voice (Anzaldúa, 2012) to the neoliberal hegemony, we, as educators with *conocimiento* (Anzaldúa, 2000), must clear away the brambles and take away the masters’ whips as together we make our way towards transformation.

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### **Biography**

Berta M. Carela is College Faculty and Lab School Director at New Mexico State University where she is also a doctorate student. She grounds her work on Womanism and Women of Color Feminisms as she explores the theories and praxes that are enacted within neoliberalized early childhood education. Her published article can be found at: Armstrong-Carela-Martínez-Pérez-Ruiz Guerrero, A. B. V. M. M. (2017). Writing the experiences and (corporeal) knowledges of women of color into educational studies: A colloquium. *Pedagogy & (Im)Possibilities across Education Research*, 1(1), 1-14. <http://newprairiepress.org/piper/vol1/iss1/2/>