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Neoliberalism & Critical Adult Literacy Education: Impact and Implications

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### Abstract

Discussions about education tend to revolve around K-12 schooling; adult education is generally not a part of the conversation even though it was an incubator of social change and progress at many points in history. Much has been written about the influence of neoliberal ideology and policies on K-12 education, but how has adult literacy education been impacted by the rise of neoliberalism? In this paper, I explore the role of critical literacy pedagogy and neoliberalism as “public pedagogy” in adult education and consider the interplay of these antithetical pedagogies; I also investigate the implications of this interaction on both adult literacy educators and adult literacy students, as well the role of the urban space. I find that neoliberalism has a pervasive impact in adult literacy education, limiting the practice and access to critical literacy pedagogy and constricting possibilities for adult literacy educators and students, while the context of an urban space adds an additional layer of complexity.

*Keywords:* adult literacy, critical pedagogy, neoliberalism, urban literacy

### Neoliberalism & Critical Adult Literacy Education: Impact and Implications

Discussions about education tend to revolve around K-12 schooling; adult education is generally not a part of the conversation even though it was an incubator of social change and progress at many points in history. (Take, for example, Jane Addams and the Hull House, Paulo Freire and his literacy efforts in Brazil, and the Citizenship Schools that fueled the early Civil Rights Movement.) During my graduate studies, I worked with the Adult Literacy team at the Nashville Public Library, which gave me the opportunity to observe adult education classrooms across Nashville and interact with many adult educators and their students. Having learned about these historical examples and read Freire's work, I wondered why I did not see, in my own estimation, examples that aligned with critical literacy pedagogy during my observations. Instead, it seemed that functional literacy and GED attainment were the primary goals with traditional teaching methods as the means of instruction.

Much has been written about the influence of neoliberal ideology and policies on K-12 education, and the way in which it conceives education's purpose as socialization into the economic order. I began to wonder if neoliberalism had a similar impact on adult literacy education and what barriers it poses for critical literacy education for adults. I was also interested in the impact this had on adult literacy practitioners and adult literacy students. Further, because of my interest in this work as it occurs in urban spaces, I sought to consider the role of urban space in this ideological context for constricting or enhancing the possibilities of critical literacy education.

Giroux characterizes neoliberalism as the dominant public pedagogy, "one that uses the educational force of the culture to negate the basic conditions for critical agency" (2004). In this paper, I contend that neoliberalism is a public pedagogy antithetical to critical literacy pedagogy,

and that it has narrowed the purpose of adult literacy education to economic qualification, or "workforce development," making a critical literacy education for adults more difficult to learn and enact for practitioners and more difficult to access for students. I approach this through a critical lens aligned with critical literacy, which I describe in more detail in the following section. With this pedagogy as my inspiration and grounding, I pay particular attention to the way that power is constructed and the role of context in the interest of uncovering and hopefully removing barriers to humanization and liberation for marginalized groups.

The learners I focus on are both the adult literacy student and the adult literacy educator. I construe the adult educator both as practitioner and learner because through a critical pedagogical lens, they straddle both roles. Critical literacy requires the teacher to engage in the same praxis as their students, thus blurring the dichotomy between teacher and learner. Freire describes this as follow: "Teachers and students, co-intent on reality, are both subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators" (1972.) I also bring in the urban context by considering what role it plays in the interaction between neoliberalism and critical literacy. Finally, diversity is woven throughout as I consider the role of identity and power.

### **Critical Literacy in Adult Education**

In the early 20th century, Italian social theorist Antonio Gramsci conceptualized literacy as a social construct and practice that can be used to liberate or oppress, and he expressed the necessity of literacy being grounded in an effort towards freedom (Giroux, 1987). Critical literacy is a theory and pedagogy that is rooted in this idea. It differs from other conceptualizations of literacy, such as functional literacy and cultural literacy. Functional

literacy generally refers to the skills and ability to read simple texts that allows one to function in everyday life, usually between a 4th grade and 8th grade reading level, while cultural literacy refers to acquisition of the skills of functional literacy along with knowledge and familiarity with a particular cultural canon (McLaren, 1988). Functional literacy narrowly focuses on skills, while cultural literacy often narrowly focuses on a particular cultural tradition.

On the other hand, critical literacy is broad enough to encompass the experience, identity, and power of the learner, as well as the broader political and social context. It has been conceptualized as “a radical construct...rooted in a spirit of critique and project of possibility that enabled people to participate in the understanding and transformation of their society” (Giroux, 1987). Paulo Freire is likely the most well known figure in the theory and practice of critical literacy. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire derides the traditional “banking” method of education, in which students are simply depositories for the teacher’s knowledge. This type of education, he argues, perpetuates the oppression of students and does not equip them with the tools to create their own liberation (Freire, 1972). Freire believed that literacy should be humanizing and liberating, a challenge to systems of oppression.

Critical literacy pedagogy employs problem-posing dialogue and praxis, or critical reflective action, to raise people’s *conscientização*, or critical consciousness in the interest of empowerment and social change. It involves problematizing, moving between abstraction and codification, and identifying generative themes or words that spark learning and action (Freire, 1970). It is a profoundly dynamic pedagogy with the task of “unveiling” reality, knowing it critically, recreating knowledge, and creating change. Learning the skills of reading and writing are not secondary in this process. As Freire emphatically notes, “One must not think, however,

that learning to read and write precedes 'conscientization,' or vice-versa. Conscientization occurs simultaneously with the literacy or post-literacy process. It must be so" (Freire, 1970).

Freire's culture circles in Brazil are the most famous historical example of critical literacy pedagogy in action but others in adult education and beyond have certainly been inspired by this pedagogy and approach to literacy since that time. Culture circles have occurred beyond Freire's involvement in Brazil in more recent times (Souto-Manning, 2010). Further, even though I did not witness, in my own estimation, critical literacy in action during my own observations in Nashville, I came across some accounts of adult literacy practitioners in my research who were attempting this approach to literacy (Macdonald-Fueyo, 1988; Shor, 1992; Nixon-Ponder, 1995; Beck, 2005). However, it seems more common for literacy to be narrowly conceived in adult education as functional literacy. Giroux describes literacy in the United States as being reduced to "either a functional perspective tied to narrowly conceived economic interests or to an ideology designed to initiate the poor, the underprivileged and minorities into the logic of a unitary, dominant cultural tradition" (1987). The ideological and economic interests in this reduction align with the central ideas of neoliberalism, which beg an investigation into the role of neoliberal ideology in adult education and how it is antithetical, perhaps even prohibitive, of critical literacy.

### **Neoliberalism in Adult Education**

Neoliberalism has economic origins, but it has extended into a political ideology with a social dimension. Brown provides a concise, helpful definition: "Neoliberal rationality, while foregrounding the market, is not only or even primarily focused on the economy; it involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action" (2002). In other words, institutions, social actions, and people are measured in worth according to their ability to

participate and contribute in the capitalistic economic order. Thus, measurement becomes supremely important in order to assess profit. Moreover, responsibility and blame for success or failure is solely placed on the individual or institution, cultivating an ideology of personal responsibility and individualism, in which “The individual is conceived as an autonomous entrepreneur who can always take care of his or her own needs...those who do not succeed are held to have made bad choices” (Hursh, 2007). However, this rationality ignores systems and structures that influence power dynamics and inequality of opportunity.

There has been much discussion on the impact neoliberalism has had on K-12 public education. For example, the rise of No Child Left Behind can be considered a reflection of the rise of neoliberal policies in the broader discourse in society (Hursh, 2007). In education, neoliberalism manifests itself in the framing of education as economic preparation and in a culture of measurement and competition. The rationale for the NCLB act in the Bush Era was in part to combat economic decline and drive global competitiveness via the education system with reforms as standardized testing, accountability measures, competition and privatization (Hursh, 2007). Additionally, in *Good Education in the Age of Measurement*, Biesta argues that “the rise of a culture of performativity in education—a culture in which means becomes ends in themselves” has led to valuing what we can measure rather than measuring what we value (2010). In other words, profit and efficiency as measured by our tools becomes the most valued outcomes, which makes imagining the purpose of education outside of these concepts difficult. Indeed, Neoliberalism has a specific purpose for education, which makes challenging it difficult. Giroux (2004) describes the central role education has in perpetuating neoliberal ideology:

Central to the hegemony of neo-liberal ideology is a particular view of education in which market-driven identities and values are both produced and legitimated. Under such

circumstances, pedagogy both within and outside of schools increasingly becomes a powerful force for creating the ideological and affective regimes central to reproducing neo-liberalism.

Given the tremendous reach of neoliberalism as an ideology and its apparent impact on K-12 education, it seems natural that it would also impact the realm of adult literacy education.

Legislation regarding adult education and literacy has become increasingly associated with workforce development, suggesting that adult literacy education has perhaps been impacted by neoliberal ideas and discourse. The first major legislation from the federal government related to specifically to adult education was the Adult Education Act in 1966 (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). This act provided states with funding for literacy programs, with the hope for decreasing unemployment and welfare and with few restrictions as to who could be served and how; however, amendments to the act throughout the subsequent decades into the 1980s provided more specific guidelines and restrictions, reflecting the negative public opinion of poor and immigrant adults in light of economic downturn (Hacker & Yankwitt, 1997). Literacy programs began to be encouraged to take on job-readiness training and define goals in terms of economic participation, such as reduced welfare dependence and increased job attainment.

The National Literacy Act in 1991 was developed with the interests of business and industry in mind and established funding for National Workforce Demonstration programs, which were required to provide literacy services related to skills needed for the workplace (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). It also introduced attempts at standardization and accountability, requiring that state programs develop indicators for program quality related to recruitment, retention, and improvement of students' literacy skills. As a result, states began reporting gains through standardized tests and other measures (U.S. Department of Education,



2013). This mirrors, though to a lesser extent, the attempts at accountability measures similar to the K-12 realm.

Not surprisingly, it seems that individualism and personal responsibility, cornerstones of neoliberalism, have also become a part of the discourse of adult education programs. Researchers have found evidence of this kind of discourse in program language and beliefs, as well as the touted success stories (Alfred, Butterwick, Hansman, & Sandlin, 2007). These ideas are, of course, ingrained in the American consciousness, as exemplified by the narrative of the American Dream, so this may not be attributed solely to the rising discourse of neoliberalism. However, it seems that neoliberalism takes it further: by exchanging democratic values with market values to the extent that the only valid education is that of economic preparation. Those who do not or cannot participate in economic production are seen as personal failures. Welfare reform throughout the 1990s, influenced by neoliberal ideas, is evidence of this; for example, some literacy programs were made mandatory for welfare benefits, making literacy teachers play the role of “welfare cops” while other legislation, such as the Personal Responsibility Act of 1996, actually *limited* welfare recipients to two years of education and training while on welfare, though states were given the leeway to make that shorter (Hacker & Yankwitt, 1997).

The Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act of 2014, the most recent legislation, continues to define adult education and literacy ideally as means to employment:

The term ‘adult education’ means academic instruction and education services below the postsecondary level that increase an individual’s ability to—(A) read, write, and speak in English and perform mathematics or other activities necessary for the attainment of a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent; (B) transition to postsecondary education and training; and (C) obtain employment. (Sec 203)

It is important to note that preparation or support to enter to the workforce is not inherently a “bad” thing, and it is not my intention to construe it so. There is good intention in wanting to help people learn and attain employment. Such a mission makes sense and seems to be in line with our so-called democratic values. However, this may blind us to problematic implications and make the need to critically investigate those implications seem unnecessary. There are indeed problematic implications that must be explored, especially since neoliberalism expertly veils itself as the “rational” worldview—the normal order of things. What are the implications broadly? Where does this leave pedagogy like critical literacy that challenges the order of things, that requires imagination, that attempts to empower people as more than just economic beings?

### **Neoliberalism, Critical Literacy, and the Intersection of Race & Class**

In spite of any good intentions of “workforce development,” the neoliberal ideology underlying reforms and policies in adult literacy and education betray problematic assumptions of marginalized adults and compound the oppression of already marginalized groups. Adult literacy programs overwhelming serve marginalized groups including the poor, people of color, and immigrants. Given their relative social power in society based on their race and class, these adults are subject to structural barriers, discriminatory practices, and prejudice that make access to opportunity extremely difficult. The neoliberal ideology of personal responsibility, individualism, and meritocracy ignores these factors, or sees them as invalid, and cements this oppression under the guise of rationality. Further, the belief that these adults just need some “training” in order to obtain a job that meets their needs also does not acknowledge the complicated factors at play particularly for marginalized adults. Moreover, this belief assumes that they do not want to work or do not already work and allows the persistence of racialized urban myths such as the welfare queen.

In contrast, these adults are often classed into low-wage positions by virtue of their status in society and have even been exploited by policies intended to “help” them such as workfare, in which welfare benefits are traded for labor. For example, in the 1990s, New York made vast cuts to public sector employees and used workfare to fill those roles at much lower wages to save the city money (Hacker & Yankwitt, 1997). Because neoliberalism operates relentlessly to expand capitalism, it is in the interest of a neoliberal society to keep these groups marginalized for the maximization of profit. Implications for adult literacy learners will be more thoroughly explored later, but it is apparent that neoliberalism in adult education has problematic implications and it is capable of expertly veiling them.

The nature of neoliberalism, as a public pedagogy that does not leave room for other possibilities, puts critical education in a state of crisis (Giroux, 2004). Its values and goals are antithetical and perhaps prohibitive to critical literacy. Where as critical literacy champions democratic values, neoliberalism worships market value. Whereas neoliberalism seeks to reproduce itself in the context of education, encouraging a kind of rigid authoritarianism, critical literacy involves a dialogic deconstruction of reality and the freedom of critical analysis. Additionally, neoliberalism construes people in terms of economic value, dehumanizing them as capital (i.e. human capital), and this is, of course, antithetical to critical literacy given its aim of humanization and empowerment. Further, neoliberalism implies a fatalistic sense in its deregulatory attitude to the market, and thus the world; the imbalances and injustices that occur in our society are seen as natural, inevitable, and even acceptable as the price we pay for the freedom of the market (Roberts, 2003). However, this sense of inevitability is in conflict with critical literacy’s dynamic focus on problematizing reality, generating possibilities, and transforming potential. It seems clear that if practicing and accessing critical literacy in a heavily

neoliberal context is not impossible (and I don't think it is), it is surely difficult. While I have explored the bigger picture implications and interplay of critical literacy and neoliberalism in adult education, it is also essential to explore how this manifests for the learners, both adult literacy educators and adult literacy students, and within the urban learning context.

### **Implications for Adult Literacy Educators**

Who are adult literacy educators? Demographic data on a wide scale is difficult to find, but a survey of five states revealed that adult educators range from periodic volunteers to full-time staff, with the majority being volunteers (Belzer, Drennon, & Smith, 2001). More specifically, the survey found that 60-75% of adult educators are actually volunteers, and in most cases, only a small percentage were actually full-time; in Massachusetts, for example, 19% were full-time, but in Ohio, fewer than 5% were full-time. It would appear that adult educators themselves are also marginalized by their low-status or temporary positions, low wages, and lack of benefits (Martin, 2004). This marginalization may be due to the fact that they serve the most marginalized people in society, who are devalued as economic producers. In any case, one must assume that this results in wide variability of motivation, interests, resources, and time for a practice based on critical literacy. It also suggests that the sustainability of doing this work is compromised.

Many adult literacy educators are passionate people who hope to empower their students using critical literacy, and I found examples of practitioners who have done so (Shor, 1992; Nixon-Ponder, 1995; Beck, 2005). However, the narrowing of adult literacy education to workforce development, underwritten by the ideology of neoliberalism, results in an overwhelming push for a more "technical" education, creating tension for those who want to teach in a critical way. As one researcher/practitioner writes, "Those who see part of their job as

helping people to, in Freire's words, read the world as well as the word, or to write for self-expression as well as to fill out an application, feel uncomfortably pushed in the direction of becoming trainers, rather than educators" (D'Amico, 1999). The focus on technical literacy can also create a perception that critical literacy is too impractical and thus not as useful (Degener, 2001). This places critical literacy in the position of a marginal practice, one that is less attractive to adult literacy educators.

Another barrier to practicing critical literacy in a neoliberal context is the limitation of regulation. For example, state-funded programs are sometimes required to use a particular curriculum. This limits the freedom educators have to use their own curriculum and practice critical literacy; I do not believe it would be entirely impossible, but it may be more difficult. Additionally, state-funded programs may also have to report on specific measures, such as improvement on certain standardized tests. This may be discouraging to an educator who feels pressured to perform in a certain way, making it more tempting to teach with a technical focus rather than a critical one.

Further, the opportunity to learn critical literacy pedagogy is likely very limited in a neoliberal context. There is already very limited professional development available for adult educators and access can be difficult given their marginal status as mostly part-time employees or volunteers; most practitioners have very little training and very little time for professional development (Belzer, et al., 2001). While ideally adult literacy educators would be immersed in the community they serve and educated in social inequity and critical pedagogy, the limitations of the field and the focus on workforce development makes this very unlikely.

Even learning through practitioner inquiry, outside of professional development systems, is compromised by the educators' marginal professional status and a pervasive neoliberal

discourse in society. Although these educators are not a monolithic group and some strive to practice critical literacy, the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas means that educators, any of us really, are influenced by them as well. These ideas are likely to be enacted through their teaching. As Freire notes, "All educational practice implies a theoretical stance on the educator's part. This stance in turn implies—sometimes more, sometimes less explicitly—an interpretation of man and the world" (1970). Teaching is not neutral, yet adult educators are limited in time and resources for the kind of exploration and critical reflection this might require. Again, I do not believe it would be impossible, yet the difficulties and dominant ideology of the profession would make it challenging.

Some of the barriers to practicing critical literacy certainly arise from the limitations of the adult education field (lack of funding, resources, time, etc.) yet the focus on workforce development seems to create a more formidable barrier, bolstered by a perpetuating ideology and the value it places on certain forms of practice.

### **Implications for Adult Literacy Students**

As previously mentioned, adult literacy students are often come from the most marginalized groups in our society. The National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) from the National Center for Education Statistics, which surveyed a representative sample of adults in 2003, reveals that people of color, the disabled, and English-language learners are disproportionately represented in the “below basic” literacy level. African-Americans, which represented 12% of people surveyed for NAAL, represented 20% of the below basic level. Hispanics/Latinos, 12% of total NAAL, represented 39%. People with disabilities, 9% of NAAL, represented 21%. The Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, a more recent international assessment from 2012 and 2014, also reveals an overrepresentation of

African-Americans and Hispanics in the lower levels of literacy. It must be noted, however, that these assessments measure literacy as conceptualized by reading and writing, or functional literacy, so it does not and cannot represent the full capacities and potential of the adults surveyed with such a limited perspective. That being said, it does suggest that adult literacy learners are likely from marginalized groups.

The narrowing of literacy and adult literacy education has damaging implications for adult learners. Because of the neoliberal value of economic participation above all else, these marginalized adults often receive “training” rather than “education.” In fact, there is some evidence in a small scale study that welfare recipients are often tracked into short-term job training programs rather than longer-term programs like degree programs (Sparks, 1999). While the sample was small (40), evidence that this occurs is not surprising given prevailing stereotypes about welfare recipients and ideology of personal responsibility, and it may indicate barriers for marginalized adults in accessing programs that might offer a more critical approach.

The emphasis on job training also assumes that marginalized adults simply need enough literacy, or training, in order to get jobs and pull themselves up out of poverty. This assumption, mentioned previously in this paper, ignores the systemic issues and makes problematic assumptions about these adults. On the contrary, many of them have jobs, yet they are stuck in unstable or low-wage positions that cannot meet their needs and limit the ability to access other educational opportunities. The UC Berkeley Labor Center found that at the state and federal level more than half of spending on public assistance program actually goes to working families who use this assistance to try to fill in the gaps (2015).

Additionally, the neoliberal emphasis on workforce development in adult literacy at the expense of a more expansive, holistic approach, is ethically suspect given that there has been

limited evidence that literacy programs focused on workforce development or job training lead to positive results; the barriers imposed by the race, class, and gender of adult students to education and job opportunities must be considered and contended with (D'Amico, 1999). However, ideology is powerful. A 1994 evaluation from the National Center on Adult Literacy found disappointing results for literacy programs' impact on employability or "labor market success," yet inexplicably they still contended the importance of literacy programs for welfare reform and developing the "self-sufficiency" of welfare recipients (Cohen, et al., 1994).

Another possible barrier imposed by neoliberal ideology is its impact on the students themselves. Because of the way that education functions as a means of reproducing and reinforcing "market-identities" (Giroux, 2004), these adults may not be accustomed to critically questioning their experience in the context of an institution, and some adult educators have cited initial student resistance to critical pedagogical methods (Shor, 1992; Beck, 2005; Nixon-Ponder, 1995).

### **The Role of the Urban Landscape**

Because of my own experience observing adult education programs in an urban context, I wanted to investigate the role an urban context might play in the possibilities or limitations of critical literacy education in a neoliberal world. Further, cities are often symbolic of the health of society, and their utopian emancipatory possibilities have been discussed throughout the centuries (Lees, 2004). While it might be easy to assume that urban environments would have more opportunities for adult students to access literacy education, the need still often outstrips the availability, resulting in long wait lists; moreover, urban programs are often plagued by limited resources and in mid-sized cities, inadequate public transit is often a barrier (Sparks,



1999). Inner city programs sometimes lean more on remedial, employment focused programs that belie a deficit-based perspective on marginalized adults (Martin, 2004).

In Nashville, for example, in a 2010 report conducted in part by the Nashville Chamber of Commerce, it was found that although there are numerous service providers in the city, almost all reported limited capacity and waiting lists. Further, many programs were concentrated geographically near the urban core, and Nashville's limited public transit network was a barrier for learner access. The report also revealed a heavy focus on GED and ESL in programs, and not surprisingly, since this report is from the Nashville Chamber of Commerce, success was framed as GED attainment in the interest of entering the workforce to meet industry needs. I did not, however, find evidence of local industry actively recruiting this population.

The urban space no doubt has many limitations in terms of access to adult literacy education in general, but even beyond the trickling down of neoliberal federal policies, one must also acknowledge the way in which urban spaces are constructed with business interests in mind to create an "uneven geography of opportunity." Tate uses this phrase to describe the way that urban planning and industry conspire to create spaces or neighborhoods within urban contexts where opportunities are limited or abundant for certain groups of people (2008). In a neoliberal society that champions a free, unregulated market, industry has more leeway to shape urban spaces (via displacement and gentrification, for example) and create this unevenness of opportunity. Moreover, this constructs urban spaces where marginalized people are not welcomed, even in supposedly public spaces.

As Lees states in the introduction to *The Emancipatory City: Urban (Re)Vision*, "It is in this context that avowedly utopian dreams of an emancipatory city are so vital, if the urban future is to be cast with hope untarnished by fear" (2004). However, in an urban space and in

adult literacy education influenced by neoliberalism, the freedom to engage in utopian hope is limited. Rather than foster the imagination and power of students to create change, the political and social context of these spaces socializes and indoctrinates them into the economic order. The utopian thinking required to realize an emancipatory city is compromised; critical consciousness may be the antidote, but neoliberalism is a powerful force.

### **Overall Implications and Future Considerations**

In this paper, I have explored the qualities of critical literacy and neoliberalism as public pedagogy in adult education. I have also considered the interplay of these antithetical pedagogies and the intersection of race and class. Moreover, I have investigated and theorized the implications of this interaction on learners in this context (both adult literacy educators and adult literacy students), as well the role of the urban space. It seems clear that neoliberalism has had a pervasive impact in adult literacy education, as it has on other institutions and society at large. As a result, the practice and access to critical literacy pedagogy is both complicated and compromised, and the possibilities for educators and students are limited. The context of an urban space adds an additional layer that seems to further complicate and constrict possibilities.

I have focused primarily on limitations rather than possibilities in this paper not in an attempt to paint a bleak picture, but rather to critically investigate the reality of adult literacy education, to question the implications of taking the seemingly rational focus on workforce development for granted, and to assess what this might mean for the practice of critical literacy. I believe that there are possibilities. Because critical literacy pedagogy is antithetical to neoliberalism, it seems that critical literacy could possibly be the best tool to challenge it. It is also important to be aware, however, of the obstacles, the context, and the dynamics of power. That being said, an important direction for future investigation and development is how to

practice and widen access to critical literacy within such a context and what the possibilities are for challenging a limiting neoliberal ideology. This is essential for the field of adult literacy because neoliberalism is likely to be the ideological context that most learners, whether educator or student, will be situated in. Knowing how to challenge it and navigate it tactfully is important.

I also do not intend to simplify by insinuating that neoliberalism operates alone as an ideology to create this reality; the historical and present-day systemic oppression in our country is complicit, along with the accompanying institutions, yet it provides a convenient framework onto which neoliberalism can take root and grow. However, this begs another important, and hefty question: given that neoliberalism and inequity propagates through our institutions (whether education, government, media, etc.), what needs to change in these systems in order to create equitable, emancipatory possibilities? In particular, what needs to change in adult literacy education, federal policy, and urban environments for this to occur? How can that change occur? This is a challenging group of questions to consider given the interconnectedness of these elements, yet it is crucial for identifying the path forward in adult literacy and in our society.

In *We Make the Road by Walking*, Freire and Myles Horton discuss the dilemma of working inside the system when it comes to creating change. Horton believed that you needed to work outside of the system: “We concluded that reform within the system reinforced the system... You have to bootleg education” (1990). Given the systemic nature of the neoliberal influence in adult literacy education and its restriction of emancipatory possibilities and pedagogy, it is natural to consider the extent to which “bootlegging” or working outside any system is possible. An answer is beyond the scope of this paper, but it seems that change will require a challenge to prevailing systems and ideas, a capacity for hope, and a critical awareness.

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