

RESISTING EDUCATIONAL PRIVATISATION ON SCREEN: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF TWO ACTIVIST DOCUMENTARIES FROM INDIA AND THE USA

Nisha Thapliyal

University of Newcastle, Australia

ABSTRACT The assault on public education in India and the USA has been facilitated by a powerful assemblage of pro-privatisation corporate media. Representations of education in news and popular culture media tend to harp on two themes – a public education system in crisis, and, relatedly, the private or corporate business sector as the only viable savior. Two recent activist documentary films present a counter-narrative to this discourse – ‘We shall Fight, We shall Win’ (India) and ‘An Inconvenient Truth Behind Waiting for Superman’ (USA). This paper analyses the situated ways in which education activists use the medium of documentary film to contest dominant media representations of the benefits of educational privatisation. These activist narratives in defense of public education provide insights into how progressive education struggles are essentially cultural struggles.

Introduction

In the last 15 years, there has been an explosion of high-profile documentary films attacking public education in the USA. Critical analysis of these documentaries such as *Two Million Minutes* (Linder, 2011), *The First Year* (Trier, 2014), *Waiting for Superman* (Swalwell and Apple, 2011; Dumas, 2013), and *Won't Back Down* (Mitchell and Lizotte, 2016) have highlighted a consistent message that cuts across these documentaries. The message is that the US public education system is in perpetual crisis and that only market-based reforms are capable of solving the crisis. The production and dissemination of these mediatized messages is enabled through a sophisticated corporate media apparatus funded by a powerful pro-market lobby which includes venture capitalists, philanthrocapitalists, media-savvy conservative thinktanks and corporate media (see e.g. Saltman, 2016)

Similar themes of a public education system in crisis and private education saviours dominate Indian, particularly English-language, news and entertainment media. Although research on the influence of media on education discourse is in its nascent stages, critical scholars have highlighted the symbiotic relationship between corporate media and transnational pro-privatisation advocacy networks and individual policy entrepreneurs (Nambissan and Ball, 2010). Vidya and Sarangapani (2012) analysed the classed nature of English-language print news by showing how national dailies only cover educational topics which reflect the interests and concerns of the middle-class such as private school fees, coaching classes, and college admissions (Vidya and Sarangapani, 2012). Thapliyal (2015) found a similar bias in English-language TV news channel reporting on national education policy noting a distinct private preference for expert commentators located in the pro-market private sector such as principals of elite private schools, representatives from corporate-funded nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and for-profit education entrepreneurs.

On a more hopeful note, critical scholars have begun to document media produced by progressive education activists to challenge, interrupt and transform dominant pro-privatisation education discourse (Thapliyal, 2017). As discussed in the Introduction to this Special Issue, critical, feminist, anti-racist and Indigenous scholars have documented diverse forms of activist media located in and produced by sites of collective struggle such as teachers and teachers unions (e.g. Oaxaca, Michigan and Chicago teacher strikes), school and university students (e.g. Black, Latino and immigrant student mobilisations in the USA, Quebec, United Kingdom, South Africa), parents (e.g. New York Coalition for Education Justice), indigenous peoples (e.g. the Zapatistas) and landless workers (Landless Workers Movement Brazil).

Advances in digital information and communication technologies have recently allowed education activists to expand their communications strategic repertoire to produce and disseminate their own films. However, the genre of activist documentary films about education remains largely unexplored in the social movement media literature. In part, this is because of historical blindspots in the scholarship about education mobilisations (other than campus-based activism); and in part

due to a preference for particular kinds of activist media (e.g. social media)(MacSheoin, 2010). The aim of this article is to address this gap in the literature by making a critical analysis of two recent activist documentary films about education in India and the USA.

Activist Media Theorising and Methods

The medium of film has long served activist purposes – to raise awareness, inform, and even transform the ways in which people see themselves and respond to their realities. Along with other forms of visual culture, films have been used with great effect for all kinds of mass communication including entertainment, adult education, and propaganda (Giroux, 1994; Bhattacharya, 2012). Documentary films, in particular, are a favored medium for telling stories that would otherwise remain unseen and unheard.

At the same time, critical media literacy scholars have provided us with a wide range of tools to critically analyse and subvert the role of visual cultures in socialization and identity construction. Film and documentary are particularly influential forms of public pedagogy because of their power to construct and reproduce dominant and oppressive cultural narratives and identity representations (Sandlin, O'Malley, Burdick, 2011).

This critical analysis begins with the premise that media, as a form of cultural practice, is neither neutral nor apolitical (Giroux, 1994, 2015). In contrast to positivist notions of objectivity and neutrality, all forms of media are situated in and produced by the knowledge-power struggles that constitute all social relations and structures. From this critical perspective, all media technologies are essentially cultural and therefore essentially pedagogical and political. This means that the ways in which activists make meaning about the policy-, media-and protest-scapes in which they function shape the ways in which they understand and use information and communication technologies (Rodriguez, Ferron and Shamas, 2014). This conceptual framework is helpful to analyzing these two documentary films which were produced by grassroots education activists in India and the USA.

These films were selected because they represent a rare exception to current media trends (in Hollywood and Bollywood)

which produce unidimensional and deficit representations of public education. These two films stand out as activist media because they document situated forms of resistance to the privatisation of schooling. They are also exceptional because these films were produced by activists situated in grassroots mobilisations for social justice which span several decades (see e.g. Orr and Rogers, 2011; Kumar, 2014).

This analysis recognises that these two films are set in two different socio-historical and cultural contexts particularly in relation to the historical development of the nation-state and mass, public education. The postcolonial journey of the United States as a democratic society exceeds that of India by almost two centuries¹.

The size of the private schooling sector in both countries is not comparable due to the difference in population size², however some comparisons can be made in relation to the influence of private schooling on the segregation and stratification that is seen in the social fabric of both countries. Historically, private schools were established primarily to serve the children of the elite (see e.g. Kumar, 1991; Spring, 1994). Today, the private schooling sector in both countries involves a diverse range of providers including these historically elite fee-charging private schools as well as not-for-profit, religious, and secular educational providers. Since the nineteen eighties, there has been an intensification in the assault on public education in India and the USA with the state acting systematically to advance the interests of those who seek to profit from education. Financial analysts estimate the value of the K-12 education sector in both countries in the billions of dollars.

Educational privatisation has taken multiple forms in both countries with some similarities as well as differences. Similarities include direct forms of privatisation such as establishment of profit-seeking private schools, closures of

1 Interestingly, the first free and in this sense public and modern schools were introduced in both countries in the 1820s - in Boston, USA and the then princely state of Travancore, India.

2 Approximately 40% of K-12 students in India are enrolled in private school compared to 12 % in the USA. It is also important to note here that millions of Indian children do not complete five years of primary education – private or public.

public schools, and attacks on public school teachers and their unions, and competitive processes for distributing resources between schools. However, privatisation also involves less visible processes of transfer of public resources to the private sector through for example land and monetary grants. In the U.S., the flow of public dollars to education businesses also occurs through the outsourcing of services such as testing, security, and school meals (see e.g. Scott and DiMartino, 2009). Multiple forms of transfer of public funds to the private sector can also be found in India which also includes a significant number of not-for-profit NGOs which provide nonformal education to so-called hard to reach children (see e.g. Kamat, 2002). Recently, education policymaking arenas in both countries have been transformed by the insertion of pro-privatisation policy advisors affiliated with international financial institutions such as the World Bank and International Finance Corporation, multinational corporations and corporate philanthropies.

Thus, the cultural politics of private schooling in both nations implicates its key role in reproducing and legitimising educational and social inequality. The cumulative effect of these different kinds of market reforms is not only to commercialise public education but to shrink the public sphere, particularly existing processes for direct citizen participation and democratic policy-making. The objective here is not a direct comparison but to approach these films as complementary sources of grassroots activist knowledge which can deepen our understanding of the phenomenon of educational privatisation and relatedly, social mobilisations to defend public education. As such, both films offer insights for postcolonial educators striving for decolonization of education systems inherited from colonialism.

The analysis in this article focuses primarily on how the films represent and critique the economic, cultural and political dimensions of educational privatisation. Each film draws on situated and multiple forms of activist knowledge to contest dominant media representations of the benefits of educational privatisation. They construct alternative narratives in defense of public education which provide insights into how progressive education struggles are essentially cultural struggles.

I transcribed and viewed both films on multiple occasions. I made notes about the organization of the narrative, the

orientation of the camera, and verbal, visual and audio representational techniques. I analysed each documentary separately in this way and then generated cross-cutting themes concerning representations of private and public schooling for this paper. In addition to the films, this analysis also draws on additional textual resources including organisational websites, interviews with and articles by activists and online and print publications about the films. In the next section, I provide a brief overview of the films, activist filmmakers and the process of making the films.

The Films

An Inconvenient Truth Behind Waiting for Superman (USA)

This 67 minute film was released in May 2011 by a New York City coalition of education organizers called Grassroots Education Movement (GEM). It focused on presenting a rebuttal to the commercially successful pro-charter school³ documentary *Waiting for Superman* which grossed \$6.3 million in U.S. theaters.

The sociohistorical context for the film is the introduction of mayoral control for public education during the administration of billionaire owner of the Bloomberg media empire, Mayor Michael Bloomberg (2002-2012). On assuming office, Bloomberg appointed corporate lawyer Joel Klein to run his Department of Education and oversee the privatisation of NYC public schools. Reforms included the forced closure of so-called failing public schools, rapid expansion of for-profit charter schools, the corporatisation of Department of Education personnel and services, value-added measures for teacher performativity, and of course high stakes standardized testing (see e.g. Scott and DiMartino, 2009; Weiner, 2013).

The film focused on two of these reforms in particular – Bloomberg’s support for for-profit charter schools and relatedly, his attempts to undermine the professional status and legitimacy of public school teachers and teacher unions.

³ According to the NY state Charter Act of 1998 a charter school is an education corporation that is exempt from many state and local law, rules, regulations or policies governing public and private schools (AIT, 2011). There are public and private charter schools. The latter are profit-seeking and also known as education management organisations.

More broadly, the film represents advocacy that school reforms based on market-style competition is the only way to improve public schools and close the growing gap between affluent, White and working-class and poor Black, Latino and immigrant students.

GEM activists decided to construct the film narrative around three inconvenient truths that were conveniently omitted from *Waiting for Superman*. The film begins with the truth that corporate reform will not improve education for all children. Second, it focuses on the promotion of charter schools that have been portrayed as the silver bullet solution to the problems faced by public education. The third truth in the film is that teachers and union protections benefit children as well as teachers. The film concludes by advocating for what it calls Real Reforms – policies that have been shown to make public schools more equitable and responsive to the needs of diverse students, particularly those who experience poverty and racism. These reforms include small class size, equity in funding, antiracist education policies, culturally relevant curriculum, more teaching by qualified educators and less testing, parent empowerment and leadership, prekindergarten and early intervention programmes for all children, and democratic and social justice unionism. The film ends with a call to action – for viewers to get involved in the struggle to protect public education.

The filmmaking team decided to challenge market-oriented reforms for public education through the voices and lived experiences of students, parents and teachers. The film is narrated by two teachers with a combined experience of twenty years in the public education system. The inconvenient truths are then delivered by students, parents and teachers affiliated with GEM. These were the perspectives that were systematically ignored or dismissed by the Bloomberg administration which dismissed thirty-two democratically-elected school boards. Under mayoral control, these mechanisms for democratic decision-making were replaced by a Panel for Education Policy (PEP) whose unelected members provided a token stamp of approval for market reforms. Consequently, during Bloomberg's tenure, PEP meetings became a key site for collective protest and voicing demands for democratic consultation – and a valuable source of film footage for the filmmakers (Bruhn, 2014).

The American documentary was made by a core team of six members of the Grassroots Education Movement and funded by approximately US\$21,000 in donations (Bruhn, 2014). The team included three current public school teachers, one retired public school teacher, one public school social worker and one parent activist who formed Real Reform Studios Production (RRSP) (Bruhn, 2014). None of the team members had previous experience with filmmaking and taught themselves to use iMovie – the free filmmaking application that comes with Apple devices. The team were able to draw on several years of archival footage of NYC education organizing by students, parents and teachers to resist Bloomberg policies. The film was made over a period of nine months of intensive work which included multiple screenings for GEM members to provide feedback on early drafts (see also Bruhn, 2014). In order to reach as large an audience as possible, the team also decided to give away the film – through free DVDS and the free online video sharing site Vimeo⁴.

We shall Fight, We shall Win (India)

This 56-minute documentary was made by a coalition of progressive education activists known as the All India Forum for the Right to Education (AIFRTE). The AIFRTE⁵ was established formally in 2009 to oppose the ongoing commercialisation and commodification of public education. Their campaign for educational equality is centered on the vision of a public - fully-free and state-funded - Common School System based on Constitutional values of democracy, egalitarianism, socialism, and secularism (Thapliyal, 2014).

The film documents the history of popular struggles for public education. The narrative of the film is organised around a chronological and critical history of social mobilisations for universal education. It begins with the contributions of precolonial and colonial social reform movements and ends with the passage of the 2009 Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act (hereafter referred to as the RTE Act). The film documents the establishment of universal and free education in various

4 <https://vimeo.com/41994760>

5 It currently includes 45 member organisations and social movements located in 20 out of 29 states in the country with decades of experience in collective struggles for economic, social and environmental justice (see also Author, 2014).

regions of pre-Independence India. Drawing on national heroes such as Jyotirao and Jyotiba Phule, Babasaheb Ambedkar and Bhagat Singh, it places a progressive vision of public education at the heart of the anti-colonial struggle. It then recounts the persistent failure of the leaders of independent India to observe a Constitutional mandate to promote educational and social equality through the expansion of a free, secular and democratic public education system.

In this context, the RTE Act is presented as a severe dilution of both the Constitutional mandate and human rights as understood in the international framework. The weakness of this legislation is attributed to the growing influence of right-wing economic and cultural forces in the country. These include global and local market reformers as well as the ultra-nationalist *Hindutva* movement which claims that India is and should be a Hindu state. This historical movement adopted the saffron colour for their clothing and therefore the *Hindutva* movement is also often referred to as the *saffronisation* movement by critics on the Left of the political spectrum.

The film also documents one of the largest political actions organised by the AIFRTE coalition known as the 2014 National March for the Struggle for Education (*Shiksha Sangarsh Yatra*). During this March, two thousand activists travelled from all over India to meet on December 4 in the central Indian city of Bhopal. The goal of the March was to raise awareness and mobilise communities against the right-wing assault on public education. Bhopal was selected as the destination city to show solidarity with the thirty-year struggle for justice for the victims of the Union Carbide chemical plant gas leak. The March also demonstrated solidarity with civil rights struggles in North-Eastern India.

The film has three main narrators along with AIFRTE activists from socially marginalised groups from all over India. In doing so, it celebrates the linguistic and cultural diversity that is currently being undermined by the *Hindutva* movement. In addition to testimonies of educational discrimination and exclusion, these activist voices showcase a vast multilingual repository of protest poetry, song, and theater known as *jangeet* (people's music).

The Indian documentary was made by a committee comprising three members of the AIFRTE Secretariat and one representative from Avakash Nirmitti, a not-for-profit group of independent documentary film makers. AIFRTE representatives included two university professors (one retired, one current) and a journalist. None of the committee members had prior experience with making a documentary film about education although everyone had extensive experience speaking and writing about educational and social inequality. The footage for the film was drawn from a range of sources including archival pictures of anti-colonial protests, AIFRTE posters and pamphlets, videos taken during the National March to Bhopal, and video footage of cultural performances during the three-day meeting in Bhopal. The film cost AIFRTE Rs. 3 lakh (approximately AUS\$6000) with most of the funds going towards the cost of renting high quality camera equipment and technical services. Dissemination of the film began in early 2016. It is currently available in two versions – English and English with Hindi subtitles and is being circulated through DVDs, community screenings and the AIFRTE Youtube channel⁶. In the next section, I analyse key messages in the films about the local and global actors and processes that promote privatization in India and the USA. In addition, both films argue that privatized schooling perpetuates educational and social inequality and discrimination. I also identify the different kinds of communication strategies and technologies used to construct and convey these messages through film.

Activist Media Representations of Privatisation

All India for the Right to Education, India

The central narrative in the Indian film centres on the failure of the Indian government to realise its promise to deliver universal, free education. For poor children as well as those from historically excluded social groups (again based on caste, gender, ability etc.), access to quality formal education has remained a distant dream sixty years after Independence.

Privatisation Actors and Processes: The film names local and global proponents of privatization who enjoy disproportionate influence with India policymakers. In particular, the film highlights the dominance of the World Bank in national

⁶ https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCOvWr8YflJPAmPR1umak_zA

policymaking after the introduction of structural adjustment programmes in the eighties (Sadgopal, 2009; Kumar, 2014). These programmes deployed the rhetoric of economic efficiency and cost savings to justify the decision to systematically slash funding on public education.

For instance, the AIFRTE in Figure 1 likens the adoption of pro-market policies advocated by international financial institutions and corporations to the colonization of India by the first multinational corporation in the modern world – the East India Company. The poster depicts the arrival of World Bank and World Trade Organization officials, accompanied by wealthy foreign investors to a red carpet welcome from Parliamentary politicians. The red carpet as well as the placards list all the economic conditionalities that accompany foreign aid and investment beginning with the downsizing of the public sector. Instead of social welfare, market reforms or liberalization require the state to protect and advance the interests of international capital

FIGURE 1– Welcome Back toWTO-GATS



Figure 1 Welcome back WTO-GATS

This poster highlights the decision of the Indian government to implement WB prescriptions to establish a nationwide low-cost nonformal primary education programme for out-of-school children. Known as *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA, Education for All), it delivered low-quality education through multigrade teaching and parateachers and allowed the government to claim that it had achieved universal primary education. Introduced without public debate, these reforms further neglected struggling government schools and eventually created the ideal conditions for the entry of for-profit education providers who had previously restricted themselves to the big cities (Sadgopal, 2009; Kumar, 2014).

Through this narrative, the film represents the RTE Act as an initiative that has coopted the language of rights to further privatise schooling (see also Thapliyal, 2012). It contravenes the Constitutional mandate to universalize basic education for all children because it excludes children aged between 0 to 6 years and above 14 years. It fails to expand public schooling and instead requires all private schools to maintain 25 per cent reservations in Class One for children living in proximity to the school. These seats are paid for by with public funding and have therefore been likened to voucher reforms in the USA which also facilitated the transfer of public monies to the private sector under the rhetoric of choice and competition (Klees, 2008). Through this narrative, the film highlights the undemocratic processes through which the RTE legislation was influenced by multinational Indian corporations such as the Birlas and the Ambanis who stand to profit from the expansion of private education (see e.g. Sadgopal, 2009; Nambissan and Ball, 2010).

The distorted conception of rights that informs the RTE Act is conveyed through a poster (see Figure 2) entitled - The injustice of the RTE Act. It depicts an unbalanced weighing scale to convey the multiple forms of inequality exacerbated by the RTE Act. The text at the bottom on the poster states - RTE denies equality promised by Constitution!

FIGURE 2 – The Injustice of RTE Act



Figure 2 AIFRTE poster

Educational and social inequality: The lived experience of the neglect of public education and the expansion of privatisation are communicated through the experiences of social groups that have historically faced discrimination and exclusion including students, parents and educators from Adivasi (indigenous), Dalit, and impoverished backgrounds. Through interviews and various forms of political art such as poetry, songs and skits, the film presents testimonies from parents and students who have experienced unequally education. One of the most powerful testimonies in the Indian film comes from Nasribai, an Adivasi activist and mother from the impoverished central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh:

“We have no facilities of health and education at our homes. We do not have money. The government does not care... they are just selling health and education. We have schools but they do not have teachers. When

teachers come, they only come for one hour. Children do not get midday meals. They do not have exams from class one to class eight. They just roam around the jungle. The government is snatching our right to water-forest-land . They build dams on our lands but there is no compensation. They produce electricity from the dams. But we do not get it.”

Multiple voices from university-based student movements across India are also privileged because higher education is a key site of struggle for educational access and equity for groups like Dalits and Adivasis. Unregulated privatisation since the 1980s has ensured that access to tertiary education continues to be determined by caste as well as purchasing power (see e.g. Kamat, 2011). In addition to campus-based struggles for access and equity, many progressive student groups have also supported larger popular struggles for economic, cultural, political and environmental justice. In the last four years particularly, university students have placed themselves at the frontline of the resistance against the Hindutva movement, particularly efforts to *saffronise* Indian education and culture (AICSS, 2017).

Grassroots Education Movement, USA

The American film rejects discourses which promote a business or market-driven approach to education reform. As previously discussed, the film critiques the specific kinds of privatization enacted on NYC public schools by the administration of Mayor Bloomberg including the promotion of charter schools, high stakes standardized testing, and attacks on teachers unions. It documents educational and social inequalities exacerbated by these reforms and highlights the lack of democratic participation in policy-making and governance. These narratives are framed and situated in relation to historical and contemporary social justice struggles including the Civil Rights movement and the activism of the Chicago Teachers Union respectively (see e.g. Gutstein and Lipman, 2013).

Privatisation actors and processes: The film highlights Bloomberg’s close ties to corporate reformers particularly high-profile supporters of charter schools who featured prominently in *Waiting for Superman* such as Success Academy CEO Eva Moskowitz, Harlem Children Zone CEO and founder Geoffrey

Canada, and former Washington D.C. Superintendent Michelle Rhee.

The film narrates how these corporate reformers are part of a powerful and wealthy network backed by corporate philanthropists such as Bill Gates and Eli Broad and hedge fund investors pushing market reforms on urban poor and working class communities across the nation including in Chicago and New Orleans. The film also underlines the ways in which President Obama and his Secretary of Education Arne Duncan have supported the expansion of charter schools and other corporate reforms through federal legislation such as Race to the Top. Through posters with messages such as -- Banks got bailed out, schools got sold out (see Figure 3) viewers are reminded about the government response to the Global Financial Crisis where banks with irresponsible lending practices were rescued by the government despite the tremendous cost to the public exchequer.

FIGURE 3 – Banks got bailed out



Charter schools are presented as particularly undemocratic institutions with parent activists speaking to the absence of transparency and accountability in charter school governance. Twenty minutes into the film, the screen is filled with the following text: “Funded with public tax dollars charter schools are managed by private boards and corporations with minimal oversight”. Parent Nahisa McCoy paints an evocative picture when she states:

“This is supposed to be a democracy. It is not supposed to be some tyrant and his cronies running around dictating what we should teach our kids when the reality is they don’t even visit our communities, or any other communities like us. This is not Staten Island or Bayridge ... and the truth of the matter is that we won’t catch them on a 61 bus coming to see us.”

Educational and social inequality: The narrative about the experience of privatisation is told through the experiences of NYC parents, high school students, and public school teachers. The film emphasizes the multiple forms of inequality perpetuated by the introduction of charter schools. Testimonies from students and teachers reveal the extreme disparities in the facilities and resources afforded to two schools housed in the same building. Known as colocation, this policy forced public schools to give up their space – rentfree - to for-profit charter schools. To underline the impact of this initiative on public schools, the film cites the statistic that 2 out of 3 charter schools in NYC are collocated in public school buildings. A Jamaica High School student speaking at rally states:

“We don’t have music but there is a new piano upstairs. But it doesn’t belong to JH, it belongs to the new school upstairs. Wait a minute, we did get something new - we got metal detectors”.

Other high school students speak about the devastating impact of cutbacks and school closures on their lives and communities. One Robeson High student states that ‘cutting programs puts students back on the streets’; another likens closing schools to ‘taking our life support’. A teacher from PS241 tells the story of how primary school children were compelled to move to makeshift classrooms in the cold basement of their school building to make place for the Harlem Success Academy Charter School. In a street rally, NY Senator Bill Perkins reminds the crows: “colocation is eviction. Remember that ... it doesn’t mean sharing, it means displacement”.

Teachers voices: The film foregrounds the realities of NYC public school teachers whose voices and experiences were omitted from *Waiting for Superman* and more broadly, from dominant education discourse (Weiner, 2013). These teachers

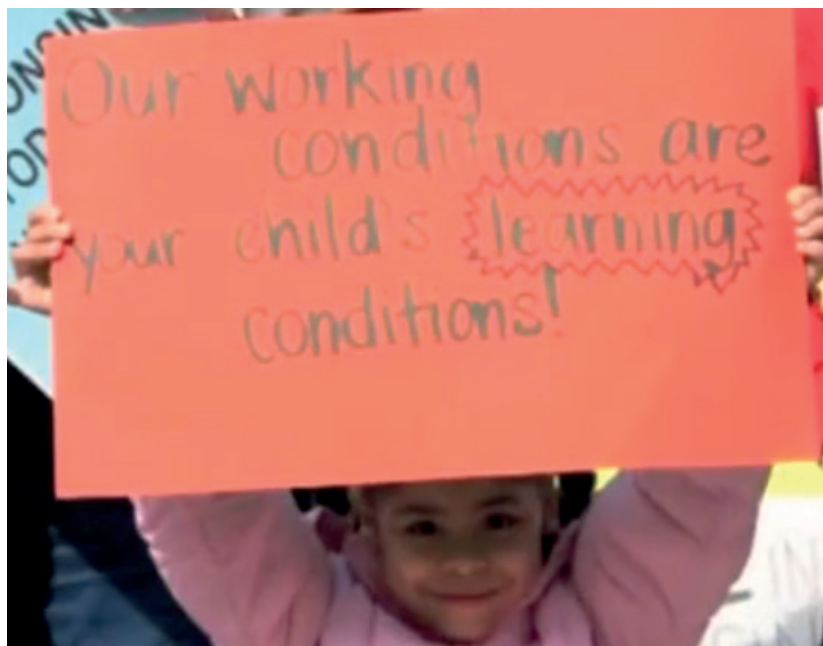
talk about why they defend public education. One of the filmmakers and Brooklyn teacher Mollie Bruhn states:

“Everyone is guaranteed – regardless of race, socioeconomic status, family situation, neighbourhood, everyone is guaranteed a free and quality public education.”

Teachers also critique simplistic comparisons between the USA and Finland which performs well on international standardized tests. Narrator Brian Jones reminds viewers that teachers in Finland enjoy better working conditions because the unions are strong and they work to keep class sizes low and prevent high stakes testing from driving teaching. He also cites statistics which show that Finland has significantly lower levels of child poverty compared the USA. Teacher Sam Coleman explains the detrimental impacts of high stakes standardised testing on children and asks bureaucrats: “Why aren’t your tests responsive to what real educators know is good for our children?”.

These voices are complemented with images of posters used during protests with messages such as - Our working conditions are your learning conditions’ (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 4 – Our working conditions



In summary, the Indian film presents a broad critique of educational privatisation while the American film critiques the processes of privatisation related to charter schools. The Indian film draws on historical anti-colonial educational discourses as well as the language of human rights to frame their vision for public education and document the historical betrayal of citizens by their state. The U.S. film warns against silver bullet solutions for public education reform and calls for the democratization of education reform. Teacher and narrator Brian Jones highlights the distance between teachers and policymakers when he likens Bloomberg's policies to bombs –

“The powers that be in education really don't seem to care about the actual experience of teaching – policy making is like launching missiles -they sit far away in some kind of control tower and they make decisions about what will be – it's like they push a button and launch a policy missile.”

An understanding of public education, and more broadly, knowledge as contested domain is clearly manifest in both films. In the next section, I focus on how activists deconstruct a key cultural logic used to justify and legitimise educational privatization, namely the logic of choice. Each film contests the dominant logic that competition between public and private schools benefits parents and students by offering them choice. In recent years, the private school lobby has targeted this message to students and parents from historically excluded groups based on race, caste, indigeneity, as well as class. These films show that in reality access to private schooling for children from these backgrounds is more about chance than choice. At the same time, edubusinesses that seek to profit from these communities have shown a marked lack of responsiveness to these forms of cultural and social difference.

Choice, Chance and (Cultural) Difference

The logic of school choice has been deployed by market reformers to normalize unequal education and perpetuate the narrative that private is always better than public. In the USA, low-income families have been provided with choice through initiatives such as charter schools and vouchers. In India, educational entrepreneurs have invested heavily in the concept of low- fee or budget private schools for the poor.

The logic of competition-choice sacrifices equitable access in favour of market-style competition among schools as the best way to make schools more innovative, equitable and efficient (Klees, 2008). Choice is accompanied and supported by another cultural logic that legitimizes unequal provision of education – merit. The logic of merit helps to make invisible historical and current institutionalized inequalities in educational access and experience shaped by social locations of race/ethnicity/indigeneity, class, gender, ability, and so forth.

From this perspective, the persistent failure of students from these social groups can be explained by limitations or deficits (of talent, work ethic, values and so forth) in these individual students as a consequence of their socio-cultural location (Oakes, Rogers, and Lipton, 2006). These two cultural logics ensure that a third logic underlying capitalism remains unquestioned – scarcity. This logic claims that there are simply not enough resources available to states to support public services, and therefore that the market is better positioned to provide all goods and services including basic services such as education and healthcare (Klees, 2008). As human rights advocates have pointed out, to privilege *access* rather than the *right* to education, reveals that market reformers do not recognize education as a human right (Klees and Thapliyal, 2007).

Chance not choice

Both films reveal that neoliberal logics of choice actually function as logics of chance where access to apparently higher quality private education schools is reduced to a matter of luck or to use language from the films – a matter of lottery. In the American film a Black male adult addressing a community meeting about charter schools raises the following question: “Why do our kids have to win a lottery ticket [to charter schools] to get a bonafide education? We are American citizens.”

In the Indian film, activists sing:
“How many children will go to ‘big’ schools by lottery?
How will the rest of the children eat?
What kind of law divides and discriminates?
How can you call it a good law?
Some children will study till Class 8 – how will they go
to class 9, 10, 11, 12 and college?”

If it puts ‘breaks’ on education, how can you call it a good law?
Think about it my brother, try to understand my brother.”⁷

The song reminds listeners that the failure on the part of the government to expand free, public secondary education through the 2009 Right to Education Act creates ideal conditions for educational privatisation. Even states with historically strong public education systems have chosen to neglect these schools (Kumar, 2014).

Faced with underresourced public schools, poor parents presented with a choice-less choice between dysfunctional government schools and budget or low-fee private schools for the poor which have mushroomed with little regulation all over rural and semi-urban India (see e.g. the scholarship of Prachi Srivastava). Poor parents also face the difficult choice of determining which child has demonstrated sufficient academic promise to receive the private schooling. In the film, teenage student activists perform a skit to challenge the pervasive cultural belief that private is always better by showing how these schools too fail poor rural children. The skit shows how low-fee private schools exploit the desperation of poor parents to access English language education in the hope that it will raise their family out of poverty. The reality is that these fee-charging schools offer an environment of rote-learning and punitive discipline in which few children succeed.

No place for difference

The logic of choice argues that competition compels schools to become more innovative and responsive to diverse learner needs. The well-documented reality of course is that for-profit education entrepreneurs ‘skim’ for high achieving children and weed out children who cost more to educate because of their learning needs (Klees, 2008). Both films highlight the inability or unwillingness of for-profit education providers to respond to learner and cultural diversity through curricula, pedagogy or school organisation.

In NYC, Black and Latino mothers of children with autism and other forms of special needs share their experiences of

⁷ Unattributed. Translated from Hindi by author, no subtitles provided.

discrimination in charter schools. Black mother Lydia Bellahcene states “children like mine are not welcome ...they are treated like garbage”. Jessica Santos and Jess Smalley had their children directly turned away by high-profile charters such as Harlem Academy (of Geoffrey Canada fame) on the grounds that the schools did not have the facilities to support special needs learners. Leslie Ann Byfield’s son received no support an entire year. Instead he was subject to rigid and humiliating disciplinary procedures such as being told to sit on the floor outside the classroom until he had ‘earned the right to enter the classroom’. These testimonies are supported by findings from a Stanford University evaluation study which shows that charter schools have disproportionately low numbers of special needs students, and English Language Learners (ELL), and learners living below the poverty line.

In the USA, the neoliberal discourse of choice has merged with the neoconservative discourse of returning to a romanticised past to reinforced social hierarchies and exacerbated social disadvantage (Apple, 2004). In India, neoconservative discourse has gone much further in its efforts to saffronise Indian education (see also Bénéï, 2008). As readers may know, the Hindutva movement seeks to promote uppercaste and upperclass Hindu male worldviews and values over all others - through all means available to them, including a sophisticated media apparatus and physical violence. In education, these reforms have included the rewriting of school and higher education curriculum to delete any favourable references to Muslim history and culture, appoint Hindutva ideologues to key administrative positions and severely constrain academic freedom.

These reforms have been put into process with little debate and even less critique from the mainstream news media. The film however refuses to stay silent about these systematic efforts to remake history and national identity. The process of saffronisation is described by former Professor Madhu Prasad in the following terms:

“What they mean by Indianising education is to introduce a process of Sanskritisation which lionises uppercaste thinking – and to develop the idea that all other religions that are part of the history of this subcontinent are somehow foreign and not part of our ... national life”.

In these efforts, the Hindutva movement seeks to undermine the work done by progressive anti-colonial activists to delegitimise modes of oppression around caste, gender, and religion and lay the foundations of a secular and egalitarian nation-state. These discourses of cultural supremacy are also effective in masking elite capture of politics and economy and extreme social inequality (Hasan, 2016).

Concluding thoughts

At the time of writing this article, a disturbing alliance between neoliberals and neoconservatives dominates education politics in both India and the USA. The new Right turn in the 21st century in both these countries means that the struggle for public education and indeed the ideal of the public or the commons is only likely to deepen in the near future.

Michael Apple (2009: 240) writes that “Conservative modernisation has radically reshaped the common-sense of society. It has worked in every sphere - the economic, the political, and the cultural - to alter the basic categories we use to evaluate our institutions and our public and private lives... It shows how important cultural struggles are.” The activist documentary films discussed in this article are exemplars of the kinds of cultural struggles that are being waged in defense of the public in all its manifestations. Activists draw on diverse forms of knowledge including experiential or lived experience, academic research, and political art to construct their narratives about private and public education.

These media can be viewed as activist because they present counternarratives to disrupt framings of education problems and solutions which commercialise and commodify education. In particular, the choice to foreground narrators from subaltern social locations represents a powerful way for activists to contest deficit discourses about historically excluded groups and reposition them as legitimate actors in ongoing policy debates about school reform. They counter dominant representations of a public education system in perpetual crisis by documenting the failures of school privatisation. They deconstruct underlying logics of privatisation to show how market-based reform contributes to the construction and reproduction of educational and social inequality in historically unequal societies. Last but not the least, these films offer

alternative discourses of public education centered on values of equity, diversity, and democracy.

To conclude, these films provide insights into the knowledge struggles that underly ongoing debates about the problems and possibilities for public education. To paraphrase Michael Apple (2009), both films compel viewers to reflect on questions such as: why education? Why public education? And whose knowledge counts? These are questions that are intrinsic to decolonising maps of reality and imagining more relational and cooperative (as opposed to individualistic and competitive) forms of democracy and development.

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