TEACHING-LEARNING-RESEARCH: DESIGN AND ENVIRONMENTS

• Paper / Proposal Title: The Primordial Substitute Teacher and the Ideology of Students First

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• Abstract:
Slavoj Zizek explained in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* the presence of a statement that nearly everyone agrees with offers an excellent site to examine ideology at work. Campbell Jones applied this logic to recycling in his article “The Subject Supposed to Recycle.” In the article, Campbell argued the seemingly innocuous statement “everyone should recycle” is actually imbued with neoliberal power dynamics. Borrowing from Zizek and Campbell, the same analysis applies to the nearly universal “value” in education: “students first.” This article will examine the ideology of students first using Denver Public Schools as a case study; although, any large urban school system or charter network could be substituted for DPS.
Since the beginning of the pandemic, scrutinizing the students first ideology has taken on a new significance. Beyond its normal function of maintaining a neoliberal power structure and inspiring guilt in public school teachers, the pandemic now makes the weaponization of students first a life or death matter. Here is where Zizek’s interpretation of Lacan’s primordial substitute is useful. Teachers are the primordial substitute for care, emotional support, and socialization in a neoliberal society since, as Mark Fisher argued in *Capitalist Realism*, neoliberalism destroyed, or rendered impotent, many other avenues where children would typically receive those supports. The school becomes a panacea for the dissolving social supports under neoliberalism, and students first makes any objections to the over-burdening of teachers and schools nearly impossible. The ideology
of students first allows, borrowing again from the psychoanalysis of Lacan, a transference of responsibility and guilt from those with actual reform power (bloated central offices of urban districts, local and state governments, and for-profit education companies) to teachers. This mirrors the way corporations use guilt in recycling to hoist environmental responsibility onto consumers. Weaponizing students first against teachers is not new, although under theorized, but now the stakes are literally life and death due to pandemic. This article calls for examining the use of students first as a site of neoliberal ideology and power dynamics, rather than a value which all educators agree with.

- **Author(s) Biography (200 words each):**
  I have a MA in history from James Madison University, and I am currently a PhD candidate at the university of Denver. My focus is on neoliberal reforms in education and the impact of Covid. I also taught in Title-I public schools for 8 years, and I am a former Teach For America Corp member.