Essay Book Review


School Reform in the United States: Frames, Representations, and Language Matter

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Abstract

This essay reviews six competing positions on US school reform: a speech from Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan; Diane Ravitch’s The Death and Life of the Great American School System; Frederick Hess’s The Same Thing Over and Over; Charles Payne’s So Much Reform, So Little Change; Anthony Byrk and others’ Organizing School for Improvement; and Valerie Kinloch’s Harlem On Our Minds. Read
separately, each invites readers to join a social consensus in order to become competent citizens eager to redesign American schools to realize a desired future. Read together, they provide a primer on how our sociological imaginations might help us to recognize the value of dissensus in school reform within a pluralistic democracy.

Consider US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan’s comments on school reform, delivered the day I stopped reading these books and started writing this essay. At Princeton University, Duncan (2011) represented the need for public education reform as “real and desperately urgent.” Seeking to position the entire audience as his allies, Duncan drew three frames around his remarks. “Whether you look at it as a civil rights issue, as an economic imperative, or as a matter of national security, we have to get better faster than ever before at education.” These borders enabled him to sort educational ideas and practices. He placed the agrarian calendar, collective bargaining, and small class sizes outside these boundaries because they hinder desired changes, and he promoted healthy competition, “game changer” technology, and common standards and assessments because they are “a radical investment, not in the status quo, but in transformation.” The federal government’s Race to the Top provides government funding as incentives for state governments to choose that transformation.

Duncan offered his remarks as if a consensus had been reached on reform and what “real and desperately urgent” could mean. Apparently, he had not looked at any of the books reviewed for this essay, each of which examined the same public
school system and read it quite differently. Treating the public school system as a
text, Duncan and these authors choose different sets of symbols, different
relationships among those symbols, and different narrative arcs in order to explain
what public schooling means currently and what it could mean in a future America.
Through their choices, each tries to position readers, teaching us what we should
know, who we should be, and what we should value in debates over, reforms of, and
daily operations within public schooling. Each author expects us not only to
consume his or her brand of analysis and ideas, but to act accordingly as well. And
like Duncan, all assume a consensus based on their terms.

To be good citizens, we engage texts on school reform in order to become
aware of the possible meanings of “real and desperately urgent” in our everyday and
working lives. Such reading will make us more socially competent as taxpayers,
parents, teachers, and researchers (Lemert, 2008). However, each version of school
reform promises a particular future America and assigns us places within that
future. Debates on school reform, then, tie us to other political, social, and economic
debates and agendas across time, place, and people. Using our sociological
imaginations (Mills, 1959), we can read those ties, asking why those futures and
assignments are offered as consensus positions, while others are not. By pushing
our reading past competence to imagination, we transform our reading from
consumption of what others offer us to the production of ourselves as citizen
readers, demonstrating that we are ready and able to make decisions about our
lives. Foucault’s words can help us understand how consumption can become
production.
My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy, but to hyper and pessimistic activism. I think that the ethico-political choice we have to make every day is to determine which is the main danger. (1983, 231-232)

In what follows, I honor the frames, representations, and language of each author in short separate reviews, engaging the author’s choice of the main danger surrounding public schools. Because each author offers a compelling argument for her or his future, I then, present comparisons and contrasts among the positions that touch upon ontological, epistemological, and teleological questions (What is a school? What is evidence? Why educate?). These efforts enable us to identify the authors’ strategies for separating “acceptable” from “unacceptable” ideas, evidence, and solutions, placing the works in traditional, modern, and postmodern epistemes and contemporary conservative, liberal, and critical political categories. None are bad; all are dangerous.

The Death and Life

A former Assistant Secretary of Education, a Research Professor, and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institute, Diane Ravitch is among the best-known education intellectuals in America. With this book and her public statements that surround it,
she became a hero among public school advocates and critics of the current \textit{iteration of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act}, No Child Left Behind. As always, she writes with candor and style.

NCLB was a punitive law based on erroneous assumptions about how to improve schools. It assumed that reporting test scores to the public would be an effective lever for school reform. It assumed that changes in governance would lead to school improvement. It assumed that shaming schools that were unable to lift test scores every year – and the people who work in them – would lead to higher scores. It assumed that low scores are caused by lazy teachers and lazy principals, who need to be threatened with the loss of their jobs. Perhaps most naively, it assumed that higher test scores on standardized tests of basic skills are synonymous with good education. Its assumptions were wrong. (110-111)

These are startling pronouncements from one of NCLB’s staunchest supporters, and although Ravitch chose to write this statement \textit{impersonally}, she admits across her eleven chapters to being party to each of these assumptions in the design, implementation, and then, defense of the federal policy she now criticizes. She wants to set the record straight, however, and to “describe the evidence that changed [her] views about reforms that once seemed promising” (14). She ends the first chapter with a different take on the reality and urgency of school reform than
Arne Duncan: “In view of the money and power now arrayed on behalf of the ideas and programs I will criticize, I hope it is not too late.” (14)

Ravitch delivers her argument in three parts. Only the first part is new to her discursive repertoire, and she uses her admiration for the 1983 A Nation At Risk report (ANAR as she labels it) as a tool to stitch these parts together. For her, ANAR articulated clearly the problems of America’s schools. Despite its sensationalist rhetoric about schools’ relationship with the nation’s economic, political, and cultural future, she argues, ANAR authors called for high standards for high school graduation, an appropriate curriculum to enable all students opportunities to reach those standards, and support for teachers to deliver that curriculum in order that students reach those goals. According to Ravitch, the report’s strength was that it did not “offer simple solutions to complex problems or demand the impossible.” (p. 28) Its authors’ naivete concerning the difficulty of brokering national standards and their neglect of elementary schooling invited politicians, business leaders, and philanthropists to propose alternative solutions to the crisis in education ANAR identified. As she explained in some detail, each of their proposals – testing, corporate administrative structures, merit pay, accountability systems, threats, and choice through charters and vouchers – has done more harm than good when proposed and implemented as national solutions through federal educational policies - America 2000, Educate America, NCLB, and now, Race to the Top – and then, filtered through state programs to school districts.

Ravitch’s previous certainties about school reform began to unravel when she attended a conference at the conservative American Enterprise Institute and
heard evidence that didn’t support advocates’ claims. Prior to November 30, 2006 (her dating of her epiphany), she rejected similar criticisms from critical progressives because of their social and political goals and their “freewheeling” experimental approaches to schooling. This should be familiar ground to Ravitch’s readers, stemming from her rigorous attack on radicals in The Revisionists Revised (1978) and progressives in Left Back (2000). In Death and Life, her concerns with progressive experimentalism materializes in two chapters devoted to a close reading of the claims of success for Balanced Literacy and constructivist mathematics in large urban districts - Manhattan’s District 2 and the San Diego Unified schools. Although couched in her criticism of business leadership styles in schools, Ravitch couldn’t help herself from commenting on these progressive programs, attributing any effects documented in District 2 to gentrification and noting that the subsequent increases in test scores in San Diego were as large, but not as rapid as those achieved in other school districts. These programs devoted too much attention to the teaching of reading, she maintains, and not enough attention to what should be read.

Across the book, Ravitch repeats her career-long assertion that inattention to what students should learn is the main danger facing America. Although she cites national and international test score data (SAT and TIMSS) to support her claim, Ravitch stakes her case largely on a story about her favorite teacher, who in the 1950s taught her to love English literature and to write clearly, while she “did nothing for our self-esteem. She challenged us to meet her exacting standards. I think she imagined herself bringing enlightenment to barbarians (that was us)."
In her book, Ravitch expresses optimism that “voluntary” common core standards in literacy and mathematics curriculum under development at that time (www.corestandards.org) would trigger the realization of ANAR recommendations for all subjects, if new standards stay free of the hubris of business tactics, accountability schemes, and choice options.

In the end, Ravitch implies that she no longer trusts the intentions of school reformers who continue to push discredited solutions that limit the possibilities of American public schools meeting their original mission to increase human capital for all citizens, initiating them into the discourses of the Western Enlightenment, and therefore, preparing them to participate actively and ably in a democracy. Ravitch’s tone of disbelief and even anger suggests that she only recently discovered how power works within various levels of education policies. Although she enjoyed the benefits of such power for at least three decades, she finds herself outside the moneyed groups for the first time. And this scares her because she senses that her rational arguments and personal stories are little defense against their private desires and public power. This fear leads her to reach out in new ways to educators as potential allies to reform public schools toward her imagined traditions and the social cohesion of her youth.

The Same Thing

Frederick M. Hess is resident scholar and director of Education Policy Initiatives at the American Enterprise Institute, executive editor of the conservative magazine Education Next, and a columnist for Education Week (Straight Up).
Although he nods toward Duncan’s frames for school reform, he finds Duncan lacking vision. Hess is a lively, extremely confident writer.

I generally favor structural reforms such as merit pay, school vouchers, charter schooling, alternative teacher licensure, and educational accountability. I endorse these ideas not because there is anything magical about the measures or because they are ‘proven’ to work, but because it makes good sense to pay good employees more than mediocre ones, to allow a variety of schools to serve children, to tap a larger pool of instructional talent, and to emphasize results rather than paperwork. (2)

Beyond the particulars of this statement, Hess declares his rules of evidence and positions himself as a voice of reason within the school reform debates. He will not promote any single fix. He does not privilege empirical evidence, but he can be persuaded to act by what he considers to be a good argument. And across eight chapters he constructs his argument for a market based (not data driven) design for American schooling with only a modest oversight role for government.

Hess explains that the current American school system is the wrong tool to “win the future” within a global economy. That system was designed to meet the demands of an industrial world in which stable communities produced goods and services for regional, state, and national markets. Schools educated workers with the dispositions and skill sets to meet those demands. Since the Second World War, however, markets and the companies that compete in those markets have become
global and rapidly changing, requiring workers with new flexible dispositions and the capacity to continuously update their human capital. Despite constant attention from sincere American school reformers, Hess maintains that old industrial design has not and cannot meet 21st century demands. We need, he concludes, a new system based on the spirit of the flat earth. Despite the rhetoric of school reform reports over the past 30 years, Hess argues that the main danger is that Americans have not demonstrated sufficient courage to let go of the past.

Our timidity, he claims, stems from three faulty assumptions. First, we assume that schooling should bring uniform outcomes because we believe that everyone can and should reach the same standards. Hess notes that this assumption has driven school reform from the common school movement through the civil rights movements of the 20th century and into the 2014 universal proficiency goal required in NCLB. He argues, however, that the desire for uniform outcomes is a relatively recent invention, which is absent from European traditions and even from the original intentions of those founding fathers who favored public schools.

Second, we assume that there could be “one best system” for schooling that would meet the needs of all Americans in all circumstances. Hess attributes this assumption to progressives’ attempts to bring scientific rationality to bear on schooling, resulting in norms for school organization, procedure, and assessment that are to direct the actions of state bureaucrats, school administrators, teachers, and students. Hess laments that most past and present school reforms were and are futile attempts to force the diversity of American society to fit those scientific norms.
Third, we assume that public education must be government run and that all workers are government employees following scientific management rules in order to ensure that all students receive the same opportunities to learn. This process of standardization, he concludes, overrides the needs of diverse individuals, and ultimately leads to a public institution that is overly expensive, rigid, and ineffective. He reminds readers that other public services have already recognized these problems and designed systems that blend public and private agencies to deliver public services. He is blunt, “Why imagine that state-run bureaucracies should have a monopoly on running our schools?” (38)

Hess’s recommendation to develop a 21st century educational system is a two-step process. First, “instead of expending more and more time seeking the one best way to educate all children, the path out of this tangled thicket lies in defining the essential minimalist body of skills and knowledge for all students, and then, taking care to avoid prescriptions about methods or content beyond that floor.” (129) Hess recognizes the difficult task of determining essential educational needs of people across a lifetime. Rather than fixed content beyond universal literacy, numeracy, and basic skills for work or post-secondary study, Hess argues for a flexible curriculum in which students learn to use the discourses of different disciplines in order to fit the future needs of society.

His second step is to move to a voucher system in which governments provide set stipends to individual students, allowing families to spend them as they choose. This move would provide competition for the current system, inviting innovation and entrepreneurship, leading to the “creative destruction” of all
ineffective and inefficient competitors, and providing the maximum freedom for individuals to choose their futures. He touts Michael Goldstein’s Starbucks Schools for urban youth.

For the same $20,000 or more that a city like Boston spends annually on a typical at-risk high school student, it could create a class of eight students, buy each a laptop and a bus pass (and maybe a Starbucks card), secure them a block of online tutoring time from a provider like Smarthinking.com or Tutor.com, and pay a top-shelf teacher $110,000 plus benefits to meet them each day at Starbucks or a YMCA. Perhaps $16,000, 10 percent of the total per student outlay, would flow back to the central district for fixed costs, oversight, assessments, and such. Hours could be designed flexibly, at the teacher’s discretion, and instruction would be organized around student need. Students need not progress at the conventional, stately, age-graded pace. They could move more slowly or more rapidly, depending upon the subject and their performance. (181-182)

Hess offers his two set solution as the realist position for the 21st century. The nation, he argues, is too complex, too diverse, and too mercurial for a single system of education, and now flexibility and speed are the key instructional attributes. He acknowledges some potential problems - “the invisible hand” of markets will distribute educational benefits unequally and some consumers will not be willing or able to choose rationally among alternatives. Staying in character, he addresses
these problems as new market opportunities just waiting for entrepreneurs to engage. Overall, he showcases a business position on school reform cloaked in pragmatism.

So Much Reform

Charles M. Payne is the Frank P. Hixon Professor in the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago and an affiliate of its Urban Education Institute. Although he admires much about American schools, he focuses his consideration of school reform within the lowest tier of urban high schools. He does not mince words about the current state of that subject.

We have said that the problems of urban schools are multidimensional, intertwined, irrational, and overdetermined. The worst schools suffer from deeply rooted cultures of failure and distrust; are politically conflicted, personality driven, and racially tense; have difficulty learning from their own experience or that of others; have difficulty communicating internally; have difficulty following through even when they achieve consensus about what to do; tend to retreat from success even when it is within reach; have shallow pools of relevant professional skills, weak professional cultures, unstable staffs; and exist in a larger institutional environment that is itself unstable and unhelpful, at best, and ordinarily, dysfunctional and corrupt. (153-154)
Despite these observations, Payne advocates for these schools and the communities they serve, explaining the beginnings of solutions must be and can be found in the accurate assessment of their conditions. A masterful storyteller, he grounds his conclusions in decades of research on urban communities and urban schools, connecting current problems to both subjective and objective factors documented clearly since the 1960s. Citing examples from several cities, he returns often to Chicago in order to make most of his points. Duncan appears in his comments: “To almost everyone’s surprise, the mayor appointed 36-year-old Arne Duncan to run the system, which seemed like throwing a choirboy into the whorehouse.” (13) Payne describes Duncan as strategic, but impatient, during his tenure as CEO of Chicago Public Schools (2001-2008).

Payne wants us to understand connections between the recent histories of American cities and the apparent irrationalities of urban schooling. The out-migration of white families, middle class black families, tax dollars, and employment opportunities, he maintains, have demoralized those left in urban neighborhoods, leading to breakdowns in the social capital needed to sustained communities. To improve, he argues, reformers must attend simultaneously to community infrastructure, institutions and social cohesion. Payne implies that the main danger is that school reformers will seek quick fixes to historically and socially constructed problems, frustrating community members and school personnel, who will continue to reject these solutions out of hand. Payne describes this apparent dysfunction as organic responses to continuous meddling of poorly designed or overly optimistic urban and school reformers who appear one year and are gone the next – only to be
followed by the next external solution. And he is equally critical of both liberal and conservative reformers. Liberals, he characterizes, downplay the subjective elements of community problems, confuse authority with authoritarian, and dismiss measurement, while conservatives pretend that change could be easy and cheap, if school management would adopt business assumptions and conduct schools according to corporate designs. For their myopia and wasteful bickering, Payne places “a curse on both their houses.” (191)

Across his seven chapters, he presents a complicated, yet hopeful, commentary on race in and around urban schools. Although Payne states directly that systemic racism has positioned the members of urban school communities as broken, lazy, even menacing he also sees community members as culpable as well in perpetuating their situations because they have abandoned the traditional means with which minorities built sustainable communities in the past. From his experience and previous research, he recalls strong church leadership, community networks of commerce, and a commitment to extended families, and argues that with such wealth in social capital, urban communities would be ready to take advantage of reasonable school reforms by insisting on more equitable distribution of resources, teachers who support and challenge their children academically and socially, administrators committed to good teaching and community involvement, and a coordinated municipal effort to return the school to the center of urban communities. He ends with a thoughtful call to arms.
I don’t see it as our job as scholars, educators, and advocates for children to pretend that the negative isn’t there. It is our job to not let public discussions reduce people to their negatives, to insist always on seeing the larger context, to continue looking to augment strengths and possibilities that low-income parents and their children bring with them. (205)

Organizing Schools

The Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) was formed in 1990 to study the decentralization of Chicago Public Schools and its long-term effects. The five authors were members of the CCSR, serving as founders, directors, and statisticians. (Anthony Bryk is currently the president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and John Easton is the director of the Institute of Education Studies, U.S. Department of Education.) This volume presents the detailed study of the seven-year natural experiment from the Chicago School Reform Act of 1988 until the mayoral takeover of schools in 1995, when the 477 elementary schools were granted community-level control and additional funding in order to improve student learning. The book is a model of clarity, written for multiple audiences, but with one functionalist purpose.

We strive to understand the internal workings and external conditions that distinguish improving elementary schools from those that fail to do so. In so doing, we aim to establish a comprehensive empirically grounded theory of practice – in this instance, the practice of organizing schools for
improvement – that teachers, parents, principals, superintendents, and civic leaders can draw on as they work to improve children’s learning in thousands of other schools all across this land. (11)

In order to examine the reform’s impacts on attendance, reading, and writing, the authors constructed two measures - the “adjusted attendance trends” that controlled for change over time in the composition of student bodies and “academic productivity profiles” which captured a school’s contribution to student learning as measured on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. These metrics were placed in the service of identifying and testing elements that facilitate or hinder success, illuminating the classroom black box. Based on years of experience in these schools, the authors hypothesized four “essential supports” for change: professional capacity (teacher’s knowledge and skills, professional development, and professional community), school learning climate (teacher’s expectations, order and safety, and peer relationships), parent, school, and community ties (community social services, parental support for schools, school’s efforts to engage parents), and instructional guidelines (curricular alignment and support for curricular decisions). As a driving force of these four elements, the authors included leadership as a fifth essential support for their model.

The book’s middle chapters are devoted to the detailed unfolding of the authors’ multi-step analytic plan to test the empirical importance of the five essential supports, to determine their interdependence, and to investigate specific connections between and among the variables arranged within the essential
supports. In order to make the comparison, Chicago schools were categorized as either strong or weak on the essential supports, and analyses were conducted on those in the top or bottom quartiles. In chapter 3, the authors demonstrate through elaborate statistics, inventive charts, and careful prose that the five hypothesized elements were indeed supports, essential, and connected with each other in a framework. “Schools strong in most supports were at least ten times more likely than schools weak in supports to show substantial gains in both reading and mathematics.” (93) Chapter 4 presents the dynamic nature of connections among the essential supports, showing how factors interact across categories. For example:

Improving student achievement uses quality professional development as a key instrument for change. Maximum leverage is achieved when these opportunities for teacher learning occur within a supportive professional work environment where teaching is grounded with a common, coherent, and aligned instructional system. Finally, undergirding all of this is a solid base of parent and community ties with the school and its professional staff.

(125)

The authors are careful throughout the book to acknowledge fundamental human dimensions of working toward change. In the analyses chapters, they stop to comment on the negative effects of overemphasizing the drilling of basic skills. “We know that children are more engaged in schooling when they feel in control of their
own learning, are actively participating in the learning process, are interested in the
topic being studied, and are able to respond to the challenge before them.” (104)
The fifth chapter is devoted to the importance of relational trust (social respect,
personal regard, recognition of role competence, and personal integrity) among
school personnel and between schools and communities at the macro and micro
levels of school reform. Although the authors found relational trust has few direct
effects on student learning, they note trust as the foundation for school personnel,
parents and community leaders to initiate and sustain essential supports for
improvement. “The design of an effective system of schools must aim to nurture in
every school community, and in each of the school professionals who work there,
the responsibility to educate every child well and to support their parents well.”
(221)

Late in their analyses, the authors noted that positive results of decentralized
community centered control were inequitably distributed across the entire city.
Improvements took hold rarely in schools that served the truly disadvantaged,
“where palpable human needs walk through the doors virtually every day.” (196)
They conclude that the five essential supports are not enough in these communities.
Rather, they suspect that to educate these students (40,000 children in Chicago, they
estimate) would require concerted efforts to bring food, shelter, health care, income,
and physical security to their lives before school reforms could help them to learn
school subjects. In order to test models that bring these potential “essential
supports” in to play in these communities, they call for strong, independent
empirical social inquiry similar to the type detailed in their book. According to the
the main danger is to neglect this research, and therefore, to deny a public education of value for all.

Harlem

An associate professor of education at Ohio State University and a recipient of the 2010 Scholars of Color Early Career Award from the American Educational Research Association, Valerie Kinloch offers three separate beginnings to her book. In the first, she introduces herself through a 1996 trip to Harlem, New York City with a group of young black Southerners and compares it with her more recent visits in Harlem as a representative of Columbia University. Her second introduction describes how she and her parents use literacies, new and old, in order to define themselves and to make sense of their place in the world. In a third opening, Kinloch maps the narrative arc of her study of two high school students’ literate inquiries concerning gentrification in their community. The three beginnings demonstrate Kinloch’s assumptions that the relationships among community, literacies, and youth are complex, enabling, and contingent. She explains how the three beginnings fuse.

Together, these experiences – the train ride that exposed a message of “Stop Columbia,” the voices of youth who questioned “the answer for Harlem’s gentrification?”, my parents’ literacy practices, and my own conflicts over safeguarding Black communities – fuel the direction of this book. They speak to a need to account for the intersection of place, race, literacies, and
community activism. They also speak to the ways in which I define literacy, which has moved from a quite narrow to a much more expansive conception: as acts of, practices in, and activities around reading, writing, and speaking in multiple media. (8)

To describe that knotty intersection, Kinloch invites others to speak across her text. After each chapter, a participant in the study—the two high school students, their English teacher, a research assistant, a community organizer, and a teacher education candidate at Teachers College—elaborates in his or her words on the complicated understandings of gentrification, its effects on the community, and the roles of literacy in personal and social coming to understand. These voices harmonize at times, but are discordant at others, demonstrating how biography, history, and social structures combine in intricate and shifting ways as topic and literacy contribute to each individual’s sense of becoming. In the end, Kinloch offers glimpses into the funds of knowledge in urban communities, the capacities of urban adolescence, a critique of urban schooling, and a messy example of a possible direction for school reform.

Kinloch’s study began in Latoya Hartman’s English mixed level class (some had already passed the state Regents exam required for graduation) in which students read Assata Shakur, June Jordan, Elie Wiesel, and Frederick Douglas, and then, were asked, “How would you respond to the dilemma raised in the book?” (26) within your local community. This question prompted Phillip and Khaleeq to address the issue of gentrification and its physical, social, and psychological effects
on their community. They stretched their academic literacies in order to tackle historical and contemporary representations of gentrification, encountering multiple points of view about their neighborhood and its residents. To demonstrate their learning and to inventory past and present community resources, they employed multimodal literacies of word, image, sound and even movement. Philip and Khaleeq engaged their control of community literacies to account for the physical, economic, and cultural impact on owners, workers, and residents of Harlem. Kinloch participated in the students’ inquiry, probing their certainties and offering them multiple opportunities to represent their progress and tentative conclusions for different audiences. The two are startlingly articulate, if not always correct, in their statements. For example, on literacy:

You gotta read and write. This ain’t just about gentrification; it’s about reading and writing, figuring out what’s going on. You gotta know what they know.” (Phillip, 53)

Literacy is who I am, what Harlem is, what big G [gentrification] is taking away. But with literacy, my word’s my weapon. (Khaleeq, 55)

In Harlem on Our Minds, Kinloch presents a negative print of urban school reform, describing what schools are not, but could be. Typical schooling takes students out of their communities, marginalizes their knowledge, and assumes disinterest. Her example displays that schooling could be project oriented,
authentic, and deeply engaging. The Regents examination process defines learning as abstract, skill and fact based, and individual. All participants in the study show that learning is contextual, meaning oriented, and collaborative. The school’s official curriculum treats literacy as singular, print-based, and finished. Phillip and Khaleeq demonstrate that literacy is multiple, multi-modal, and emerging. Kinloch enables us to see their continuous sense of becoming – a student, a leader, a teacher, an activist, an expert, and a traveler across physical, cultural, and emotional boundaries. Their Harlem is not menacing, dysfunctional, and helpless. Rather it’s a community full of culture, resources, and history that is currently struggling with a specific example of complex global practices of acquisition and recolonization. For Kinloch, the main danger appears to be that we cannot learn to value these possibilities in all their messiness and complexity.

Choose Your Own Adventure

Duncan and the authors of these five books offer multiple frames and representations for school reform. They suggest different solutions and promise differing futures. They invite us to read their interpretations of schools with social competence in order to join their consensus and to perform their position. Although parts of their arguments overlap, they do not overlay each other. For instance as a frame, Duncan inventories civil rights, the economy, and national security. Ravitch ups the ante, claiming civilization is at stake. Hess seeks to maximize personal freedom. Payne and Bryk and his coauthors seek to make the system work like it should. And Kinloch frames school reform to contest assigned positions within a
neoliberal, normalized future. Each represents schools as lacking: competition, academic rigor, flexibility, social capital, frameworks of essential supports, or connections to community. In turn, they call for a race to the top, a worthy curriculum, flexible design and operation, patience and resolve, research-based decision making, or faith in the learning capacities of youth. If we choose one position and act, then the future promises continued world leadership, a rational populace, market efficiencies and effectiveness, functional schools within functioning poor communities, an engineering orientation to problems and solutions, or citizens acutely aware of the glocal (local to global connections) nature of the 21st century.

Like the concept of progress, reform is typically associated with modernity – the use of rationality to discover the regularities of the cosmos and all that’s in it. Even in times of postpositivism, where “warranted conjectures waiting to be disconfirmed” (Popper, 1965) are the best we can hope for, modern citizens seek to know the “real” by identifying and harnessing its causal relationships in order to “get better faster.” Payne and Bryk and his coauthors offer modern readers comfort in the way that they take up “the problem” of getting better at education – offering systematic evidence that disciplined human actions cause steady progress or stagnation in schools. They place the rigor of their scientific evidence (organized into grounded theory through inductive and deductive reasoning) before their peers and the general public and expect it to wash away the dysfunction in and around schools. Demonstrating a modern sophistication, they invoke an “all things being equal” caveat to explain the human conditions of inequality that discourage the
possibilities of the tools of progress that they uncovered. Yet even in that context, they accept that in the spirit of modernity’s four-century campaign - science will displace the traditional.

Hess, Ravitch, and Kinloch doubt the scientific promises of modernity, but for quite different reasons. Hess straddles the traditional/modernity binary, substituting “the market” for the authority of the gods and arguing that the world is too complex to be harnessed in “one size fits all” theories. To change schools, there must be competition in education. Then, the “invisible hand” of the market will move entrepreneurs to offer goods and services customized to the needs of rational education “buyers” (221) within specific contexts, displacing the dysfunctional with the “choices” of each individual. He confirms this rationality through carefully chosen examples. Rather than a modernist approach of empirically testing the viability and likely consequences of new educational products, Hess recommends that a good business plan will attract finance capital and then the market begins its “deliberation.” Acknowledging that some Americans will be left behind and that waste is likely, he argues that this is the realist position in the 21st century.

After three decades of steady promotion, Ravitch backs away from Hess’s future. “The effort to upend American public education and replace it with something market based began to feel too radical for me.” (13) Rather the future should be built slowly and carefully on the past traditions, customs, and values that have brought us to this point. If the present is not ideal, then it is because we have lost our way through hurried progressive efforts to engineer some utopian future through a centralized plan. Currently schools suffer under the legacies of scientism,
vocationalism, social adjustment, and radicalism. All could be fixed with a return to a strong, coherent, explicit curriculum grounded in the liberal arts and sciences. Modernity’s science cannot determine what should be included in this curriculum – what we should know is a subjective decision to be negotiated between practicing educators and the general public. At present, she contends that the business, the federal government, and “the billionaire boys club” (195) exert too much control over common core standards, curriculum and assessment.

Kinloch expresses postmodern concerns about modernity and the traditional, while displaying traces of both in her study. Science constructed the norms that position Harlem as dysfunctional, Phillip and Khaleeq as menacing, and difference as deficit. The market created winners and losers, enabled urban gentry to displace locals, and rendered place less important than flows. The traditional locked inequalities in place, discouraged some from participation, and froze the past as the future. Kinloch seeks an education that will enable citizens to read the discourses behind these frames and representations in order that we might choose our positions rather than simply accept others’ choices for us. Yet she composes a polyvocal text in order to demonstrate multiple ways and levels through which such an education might unfold within a community, and thus, she demonstrates that science broadly defined is a tool for understanding; markets are ways for communities to meet some of their needs; and the traditional reminds all of the artifactual nature of built societies. Nothing is neat; nothing is simple; everything is continually in a state of becoming.
Reading Wide Awake

Read together, these authors trouble the notion of paradigm shift. Rather than a serial process of replacement, at least three epistemes occupy the field of school reform simultaneously, working strategically to frame reality and represent good common sense. The traditional is shouting back at modernity, promoting reforms based on the authority of social stability or the market in order to deduce what should be done, and then, selecting evidence for confirmation. Modernity holds its nose at the irrationality of those authorities, while pointing out how evidence considered logically will promote social progress and spread it equitably among all. Postmodernity pokes through to examine how these grand narratives have left, and continue to leave, so many at the margins of economic and political life. Reading these interactions can help to explain the crazy quilt of current calls for reform, reform movements, and reform policies which come from and aim us in different directions – recently - the Gates Foundation/Pearson collaborative project to build a virtual curriculum for the core common standards (Dillon, 2011); the inclusion of lexiles as the means to measure text difficulty in many states (Common Core, 2011); Arizona’s policy of segregating English Language Learners for four hours each day to make them proficient within one year (Civil Rights Project, 2010). None are necessarily bad, but all are dangerous, at least to some groups. In the end, the diversity among epistemes and recommendations seems to frustrate the book authors’ (and perhaps readers’) search for consensus on how to design and implement school reform– these positions on school reform reveal a pluralism that
cannot be easily papered over with appeals to particular forms of rationality and common sense without the suppression of some groups.

This tension between these desires for consensus and American pluralism could work for us as well as frustrate us. These six positions demonstrate that Americans have not reached consensus on the content, the criteria, or the course of school reform. Moreover, the histories provided in these books attest that power circulates in American education and reform cannot be imposed. (This explains, to some extent, some groups’ vigorous public attacks on school boards, administrators, and teachers and the government's financial incentives to inveigle governors to accept the federal position.) Yet, if we truly value pluralism as we say that we do; and we are willing to push past reading with social competence to negotiate our personal lives daily; then we can read about school reform with sociological imaginations in order to consider how we wish to live together with our differences and what roles can public school play? This reading wide awake becomes a form of agency in which we can enter the school reform debate, recognizing the consensus among these six positions concerning the value of public education for all in the United States, but also identifying the dissensus on how that value should be defined.

It’s this consensus on central values and dissensus on definitions that make pluralistic democracy possible in our communities. Our fundamental commitment to public schooling for all keeps us talking with one another, while our reading with sociological imagination enables our understandings on how positions of school reform differ and what they mean for various community members and where those
differences come from and where they might lead. Our commitment and our reading propel us to negotiate how we can live and work together with those differences. The authors of the books reviewed and the groups they represent seek to define clearly their positions on public education in order to attract new members and build coalitions sufficiently large to win, or at least influence, the debate on school reforms and subsequent action. Some coalitions have already formed at points where the six positions might overlap, and their current levels of influence are relative to the political power behind those points. Yet, as the authors demonstrate, those coalitions are temporal as actions bring new circumstances and new dangers. Our ethico-political choices among the positions articulated in these texts, and ones we have yet to identify, will depend upon our consideration of which frames and representations we judge to be the main danger in this context and at this time.

References:


