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Eric C. Sheffield, Founding Editor
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From the Editors

Essays

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Video Essay

The Academy Talks with
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** Our thanks to the cadre of scholars who serve as reviewers without whose services the journal could not exist.
Colleagues and Friends of the Academy:

Welcome to Volume 6, Issue 2 of CQIE! Before getting to an overview of this issue, we have a couple of Academy updates.

As you may know, the Academy is in its second year of hosting not one, but two annual conferences. Our Director Steve Jones has been diligently working to put in place what will certainly be a couple of great events—November 2-4 in Baltimore and March 7-9 in San Antonio. The Baltimore deadline for submitting proposals is fast approaching. For more details about both conferences, please visit our brand new web site: academyforeducationalstudies.org. You will also find two calls for special theme issue articles—one for CQIE and another for our most recent venture—resurrecting the venerable Thresholds in Education journal published on paper only until recently at Northern Illinois University.

And with that news out of the way, onto Volume 6, Issue 2. Our first essay examines the growing national practice of providing merit pay to school teachers. T.J. Brewer, P.S. Myers, and Michael Zhang examine the history and research on merit pay programs concluding that such “schemes” might create competition rather than collaboration among teacher colleagues. David Roof follows with an intriguing historical piece meant to help us understand where we have been so we can understand how we “got” “here.” Our third manuscript takes up servant leadership as a pedagogical philosophy. Robert Fitzgerald argues that the basic tenets of servant leadership make for a humane, even spiritual, classroom pedagogy. Finally, Andrew McKnight presents his qualitative findings from work with inner city youth and their reactions to time they spent in the institution of schooling—certainly a group from which we could all learn some crucially valuable lessons.

We also have our regular book review: Steve Jones and his student Sariah Roberts critically review William Deresiewicz’ Excellent Sheep: the Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life. Last, and certainly not least, one of our favorite video essays to date: The Academy Talks with Gary Orfield.

PAX,

Eric C. Sheffield, Founding Editor

Jessica A. Heybach, Associate Editor
Critical Questions in Education

Contents

Essays

Islands Unto Themselves: How Merit Pay Schemes May Undermine Positive Teacher Collaboration ..............................................................45
T. Jameson Brewer, P.S. Myers, & Michael Zhang

Mapping Knowledge: A Survey of U.S. Educational Historiography .........................................................55
David J. Roof

Becoming Leo: Servant Leadership as a Pedagogical Philosophy .................................................................75
Robert J. Fitzgerald

“They Never Really Tried to Reach Out to Us:” Examining the Identities and Confronting the Emotional Distance between Urban Youth and Schools .................................................................86
Andrew N. McKnight

Review

Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life
By William Deresiewicz ................................................................................................................................. 103
Reviewed by Steven P. Jones & Sariah E. Roberts

Video Essay

The Academy Talks with Gary Orfield
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_Qg4O0bvBg
Islands unto Themselves: How Merit Pay Schemes may Undermine Positive Teacher Collaboration

T. Jameson Brewer, P.S. Myers, & Michael Zhang, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Abstract

Educational reforms have become the new policy mainstay in educational discourse and policy. Without doubt, “fixing” teachers and increasing student test scores have both been a large component of much of the reform rhetoric. Moreover, calls for implementing merit pay schemes have uniquely combined reformer’s efforts to “fix” teachers while increasing test scores as teacher pay is linked directly to student academic achievement. This article traces the historical use of merit pay schemes, situates the current push for merit pay within the neoliberal education reform movement, while highlighting the overt and covert implications of injecting competition into teacher salaries. In addition to creating an environment that lends itself to narrowed pedagogical approaches and teaching to tests (and even cheating on them), this article suggests that merit pay schemes that require teachers to compete with one another may likely undermine positive collaboration.

Keywords: merit pay, collaboration, neoliberalism

Introduction, Purpose, and Questions

Money can be a powerful motivation. The prospect of making more money often encourages individuals and corporations to work harder, smarter, and more efficiently. In this way, monetary incentives can serve as the proverbial carrot to elicit a desired reaction out of oneself or others. Similarly, the threat of losing money can also be a powerful incentive. In the role of the proverbial stick, the threat of losing money often increases self-reflection and heightens intentionality. In this way, people typically respond to money out of self-interests. The economist Adam Smith (1776/1952) noted that “[i]t is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect out dinner, but from their regard to their own self-interest” (p. 7).

In the context of schooling, teacher salaries have traditionally been linked to a teacher’s level of postsecondary education and duration of service. However, in the present age of market-based educational reforms, merit pay schemes are becoming an oft cited silver bullet to fixing the “horrid state of public education” that was first exclaimed in A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). As a continued response to the perceived ill state of our schools, reformers have continued to offer reforms that purportedly provide the solu-
tions our schools so desperately need. Moreover, many reformers and educators have simply accepted the assertion that our schools are failing and often try to implement reforms before carrying out any systematic investigations on their effectiveness and without considering their many professional and personal implications. This failure to investigate reforms that rest on dubious grounds has and continues to leave education susceptible to neoliberal policies and policymaking. By neoliberal, we mean, as Ong (2007) offers, “big ‘N,’” with neoliberal as a state-centric, economic strategy and also “small ‘n’” neoliberalism, where “optimal gains and profit” are sought through strategies of self-governance. Individuals and groups (learn to) attune themselves to the market (p. 4) and market-based path dependence. Neoliberalism is the universalization of capitalistic logic, where “its social relations, its laws of motion, its contradictions—the logic of commodification, accumulation and profit maximization penetrating every aspect of our lives” (Wood 1997, p. 551). Neoliberalism’s goal of commodification is, as we argue below, the disposition and ideology that reinforces beliefs that a teacher’s individual lesson plans, content knowledge, etc., are ultimately seen as individualistic commoditized goods that are to be hoarded within neoliberal competition of “better” teachers and higher pay that may undermine collaboration. What follows is an analysis of how teacher merit pay facilitates neoliberal thought and practices within schools. First, we outline the history of merit pay and evaluate the evidence of the effectiveness of merit pay in educational contexts. Second, we explore the current state of merit pay schemes in our public schools as construed by policy makers. Finally, we explicate one important implication of merit pay schemes, i.e., the extent to which they might undermine one of the most valuable professional dispositions that teachers employ—collaboration.

With implications to current and future policy initiatives, our final focus is of particular importance. Might such individualistic and competitive systems of pay operate, for example, to incentivize teachers to hoard valuable information, lesson plans, and methods? As teachers are forced to teach to tests to ensure their ability to take care of their personal finances and that their jobs are secure from year to year, teachers might not be encouraged to work together towards educating students as insights, plans, and resources are seen as competitive commodities not to be shared. Will an increased adoption of neoliberal reforms in public education continue to shift teachers’ focus on what is best for the collective good to what is best for the individual as education and teaching are treated as commodities (Walberg & Bast, 2003)? If this is the case, certain students’ learning and achievement may be jeopardized. The benefits of teacher collaboration and the detriment to student learning when collaboration is undermined, then, need to be thoroughly examined.

The History of Merit Pay

Despite the prevailing portrayal of merit pay by its proponents as an original and ingenious way to improve our public schools, merit pay has a longer history than some may care to acknowledge. England and Canada, for example, both instituted merit pay systems as early as the 1800s. England’s 30-year attempt, beginning in the 1860s, was unsuccessful largely due to cheating and other manifestations of teacher individualism (Wisconsin Education Association Council, 2011). Canada’s brief merit-pay stint from 1876 to 1883 was also unsuccessful because many teachers were avoiding helping struggling students (Wisconsin Education Association Council, 2011).

In the United States, merit pay systems have more than a century’s worth of history. Notable earlier examples include the first documented merit pay system implemented in 1908 in
Newton, Massachusetts, the first merit pay wave in the 1920s as a result of Taylor’s theory of scientific management, performance contracting in the 1960s and 70s under President Nixon, and the Reagan administration’s pay-for-performance programs in the 1980s based on the recommendations of *A Nation at Risk* (Wisconsin Education Association Council, 2011; Johnson, 1986). These merit pay systems all failed to accomplish their purposes and were discontinued. In the 1990s, some academic and research developments led to a renewed interest in merit pay. Several neoliberal interest groups and politicians have since advocated for merit pay programs across the country despite unsuccessful results and a lack of evidence in favor of merit pay.

The historical implications of merit pay are important to consider because they suggest that it is hardly ever successful in educational contexts. In fact, a 1979 Educational Research Study suggested that most merit pay implementations are discontinued within six years (Protsik, 1995). They have historically been difficult to administer and fund, while opening doors to corruption and other forms of individualistic teacher behaviors. Perhaps most importantly, they have not been able to make the difference they are designed to make. The question then is: why has merit pay become a national trend today, with the government providing funding for such performance incentives, when their history for improving student achievement is discouraging? Before we address this question, however, we turn to some of the most recent research that assesses current merit pay programs.

**The Research on Merit Pay**

To date, the most comprehensive and scientific analysis of teacher merit pay was conducted in the Metro-Nashville Public Schools by the National Center on Performance Incentives (NCPI) (Springer et al., 2010). The study recruited teachers to voluntarily participate in a three-year study that provided a monetary incentive to raise student scores on a state standardized test. Teachers who performed at the highest levels were eligible for a bonus of $15,000. Other teachers who performed well were eligible for $5,000 or $10,000 in addition to their salaries. In order to qualify to participate, teachers had to teach mathematics within district middle schools. The study had a high participation rate among eligible teachers. This, according to the authors, indicated a general willingness on the part of teachers to engage with merit pay schemes despite the perceived resistance that is associated with merit pay within education. The authors note the purpose of the study was driven by the “notion that rewarding teachers for improved scores would cause scores to rise” (p. xi) while further noting that the perceived absence of such incentives is a leading cause of the underperformance of American schools.

Within this study, teachers did not report an increased sense of individualistic competition or decreased collaboration. However, this is mostly attributable to the fact that the merit pay scheme did not reward teachers for how they performed comparatively to other teachers, rather, a predetermined benchmark. Moreover, if teachers reached the predetermined benchmark of increased test scores, each were individually rewarded bonus money. That is, while the authors explain that the intention was to set high but achievable goals, setting too high of goals would render a sense of impossibility while setting the goals too low would exhaust financial resources. This point, while not examined by the report, may be a crucial aspect of merit pay schemes.

Despite questions of collaboration and competition, there still exists the question of impact that merit pay schemes have on student educational outputs. Here, we use the term outputs, rather than outcomes, given that the most relied upon indication of student learning in the United States are scores on standardized tests. Outcomes, in comparison, would be student college ac-
ceptance and completion, gainful employment, etc. while test scores, by this definition, are simply outputs measuring student and teacher inputs. This distinction was famously made in Paulo Freire’s seminal Pedagogy of the Oppressed where Freire coined the term banking of education to explain the emptiness of teaching to tests and the subsequent tests themselves (1970/1992). Moreover, the increased focus of evaluating student learning and teacher worth via test scores raises into question the possibility that increased test scores that do not represent actual learning, but rather a result of teaching-to-the-test, indicate illusory gains that do not benefit students (Springer et al., 2010). Nevertheless, despite challenges to the validity of standardized tests to accurately measure student learning, merit pay schemes and teacher evaluations are vastly attached to such outputs (Berlak, 2011; Papay, 2011; Sacks, 1999; Sarrio, 2011; Schniedewind & Sapon-Shevin, 2012). Therefore, as pointed out by Springer et al., (2010), operating under such understandings, the NCPI sought to determine if merit pay schemes increase student test scores.

Accordingly, the NCPI report concluded that merit pay incentives alone are not sufficient in serving as a mechanism for raising student test scores. In fact, teachers who were randomly assigned to the control group who were not eligible for bonus money increased student test scores over the three-year period along with those who received bonus money for such outcomes. In fact, those teachers who did not volunteer to participate in the study also raised student test scores over the same period. The authors illustrate that the across-the-board increase of scores is most likely due to teachers increased understanding of the standardized test. The only group of teachers that produced exceedingly higher gains on student test scores were 5th grade teachers. However, the report suggests that this increase is likely due to students remaining with teachers who teach multiple contents and may spend more time on tested subjects while also furthering a relationship with students and not necessarily correlated with the monetary incentive program. In fact, the higher gains of 5th grade students regressed back to the mean by the end of their 6th grade year indicating contextual factors outside of the merit pay experiment.

As suggested by Chamberlin et al., (2002), merit pay schemes that seek to reward groups may often lead to unwanted actions on part of those being incentivized towards predetermined ends. That is, in the case of schools being incentivized to increase mathematics test scores, for example, teachers may subvert other academic subjects in favor of spending more instructional time teaching towards tested subjects. For example, between 1999 and 2010, Beverly Hall, the superintendent of Atlanta Public Schools established a school-wide merit pay scheme that incentivized and subsequently rewarded teachers with approximately $1,000 in bonuses if school-level targets, or benchmarks, were met on state standardized tests. What followed was not only the largest test cheating scandal in United States schooling history, but also, a concerted effort on the part of teachers to ignore non-tested subjects. Accordingly, many principals required teachers to incorporate math and reading instruction into each subject, at the expense of time spent on other subjects, to bolster test scores. While, the school-wide merit pay scheme did not deteriorate teacher collaboration, to the contrary, it created an environment of a collaborative effort to promote one subject over another while also promoting criminal collaboration that has since led to the suspension and criminal prosecution of many educators (Flock, 2011; Wilson, Bowers, & Hyde, 2011). What is more, many schools sought to classify underperforming students as behaviorally problematic in an effort to push them out and thus onto other schools. This behavior does not represent a manifestation of teachers acting as islands unto themselves who do not collaborate, rather as an archipelago of collaborative criminality.
The Politics Behind the Policy

In the push for universal preschool, President Obama stated that “The achievement gap starts off very young” (Associated Press, 2013). The Gates Foundation, the Broad Foundation, and the Walton Foundation are the “Big 3” educational venture philanthropists who push nearly $4 billion into strategies hinged upon closing the achievement gap among poor, minority students. Teacher merit pay is a pillar among these reforms. Driven by the royalty of the wealthy, business models, and a faulty research frame, teacher merit pay (Barkan, 2011), despite historical and empirical evidence against it, is extremely popular with federal and state legislators.

There is a well-ingrained belief in our society that the rich are smarter (Parker, 2012), wiser, and better situated to solve problems. However, though there is evidence that wealth and intelligence are not positively correlated (Zagorsky, 2007), it is assumed that the wealthy, with their successful experience in making money, can also fix schools. Yet, questions of expertise and motive are not raised frequently enough when attempting to understand why the “Big 3” see merit pay as a well-vetted and worthwhile expenditure.

Consider also public managerialism, which represents an engagement of business practices into the governmental and public sphere. Sachs (2001) notes that a managerialist ideology assumes that all problems can be solved with proper management and calls for the usage of private sector models in the public sector. While seductive, this logic is overly reductive. Angus (2012) argues that a “managerial approach to policymaking…results in teaching and learning being regarded as technical processes that occur within the ‘black box’ of the school” (p. 46). This conception of teaching assumes sameness across all contexts, which is, at best, a poor characterization of public schools.

Furthermore, Marchant (2011) argues that the policy frame in education is flawed. Citing merit pay specifically, he argues that individuals who enter the classroom do not do so for a financial reward and that no financial reward will make a sub-par teacher into a better teacher. The failures of public education are often placed at blame for economic issues (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). However, counter to this reasoning, the research actually demonstrates most consistently that the economic issues in American communities are a leading cause of undesired student outcomes in public education. Noguera explains that “[P]overty does not cause academic failure, but it is a factor that profoundly influences the character of schools and student performance...” (Williams & Noguera, 2010, p. 45).

That the very economic inequality (i.e., low wages, exploitative employee practices, outsourcing, etc.) that allows for large multinational companies like Microsoft and Wal-Mart to thrive in America, and which essentially fund the Gates Foundation and the Walton Foundation, leads to the educational outcomes that these entities seek to “fix” is the most ironic of events. In this way, policy-making is not interested in evidence, but rather the regulatory frame for policy-making has been captured by those proposing ideas that inject the ideology of business into education in the most unreflective of ways.

Implications for Teacher Professionalism: Competition Over Collaboration

Merit pay is of particular concern to teacher professionalism. Under an individualized merit pay scheme, when teachers are pitted against each other in a race for a limited amount of “merit” money that is earned by producing higher test scores than their colleagues, teacher competition becomes the more likely outcome rather than teacher collaboration. It follows that teach-
ers might no longer see educating students as a collective process and goal; rather, valuable lesson plans, activities, and resources might be seen as proprial material that is to be kept a close secret. Teachers may begin to embody an ideology of “rugged individual[ism]” that is synonymous with the larger neoliberal, market-based reform movement (Thomas, 2011, p. 62).

We can learn more about the potential effects of individualized merit pay systems upon teacher collaboration by comparing them with the corporate model of organization on which they are based, i.e., sales commissions. According to Susan Johnson (1986), in order for merit pay in the form of sales commissions to be successful, several conditions emphasizing the individualistic nature of performance must be met. For example, salesmen/women must value the reward, i.e., pay, and the product that they sell is always, in some form or other, an instrument to obtain the reward. Salesmen/women ultimately must work independently, and often in competition with one another, for them and their organization to be successful. The teaching profession is starkly different, however, in that teacher collaboration rather than competition is more important because the product—student achievement and outcomes—is naturally an end in itself that all teachers are working toward, rather than a means to some individualistic end such as bonus money. If teachers compete against one another, some students would inevitably suffer. Instead, research suggests that the only type of merit pay that would work within the foundational educational model are those that support differentiated pay as “extra pay for extra work,” or differentiated teaching roles (Cornett & Gaines, 2002).

Reflecting again on the results and implications of the NCPI report (Springer et al., 2010), the study illustrates that teachers did not report an increased sense of individualistic competition or decreased collaboration. However, teachers were not competing against one another—thus, no real person-to-person competition could exist—in addition to the fact that all teachers who hit predetermined non-competitive benchmarks would be eligible for a bonus. That is, while there was a hypothetical maximum amount that could be paid to teachers (assuming they all qualified for the maximum bonus), the teachers were not competing as individuals against one another for a portion of a limited amount of pooled money. That is, teachers may not reduce their level of collaboration if they do not feel there are limited resources (e.g., amount of merit money) for which they are vying. However, given the history of educational mandates, which are often underfunded, this draws into question the financial feasibility of larger scale merit pay schemes. If the pool of bonus monies is limited due to governmental budget constraints, this constitutes the possibility that teachers may engender competitive dispositions in the face of limited resources, which was not a characteristic of the NCPI experiment. Accordingly, it has been shown that when public employees, including teachers, are forced into merit pay schemes in which the available rewards are constrained by governmental budgets, individuals vastly limit the amount of collaboration in favor of individualistic competition (Chamberlin, Wragg, Haynes, & Wragg, 2002).

Given the rampant use of student test scores on state standardized tests as the predominate driving force behind teacher evaluations and merit pay schemes we argue that the research and literature suggest that while incentives can increase collaboration when targeted at groups rather than individuals, the types of collaboration that follow may undermine real and lasting educative experiences for students. Further, if merit pay schemes are underfunded and teachers are forced to compete with each other to clamor for limited resources, it may manifest as individualistic competition that will undermine teacher collaboration. Moreover, despite the increased effectiveness that large-group merit pay schemes have on collaboration, the types of collaboration are not only detrimental, they may incite a deterioration of school-to-school collabora-
tion. That is, if teachers and administrators work together in concert to remove problematic students who are perceived to inhibit efforts of raising school-wide test scores by placing them in other schools, this may undermine school-to-school or district-wide positive collaboration as problematic students are shifted back-and-forth between schools in what would resemble a game of “hot-potato.” In this instance, school-to-school or district-wide collaboration on best practices become less of a concern than does the artificial shaping of the student population within a particular school in the effort to improve or maintain school-wide test scores that are tied to merit pay. Because educating children should be viewed as a public service for the public good, merit pay schemes—even as group incentives—may undermine the collective collaboration that is needed to ensure that students have equal access to quality teachers, instruction, and resources, that will lead to more than just standardized outputs; that will lead to meaningful educational outcomes.

Similar to the possibility that 5th grade teachers in the NCPI study could have spent more instructional time on tested subjects, Chamberlin, et al., (2002) suggests that this is yet another possible drawback to merit pay schemes. While Chamberlin, et al., note that teachers may limit collaboration in favor of individualistic competition, many merit pay schemes attempt to incentivize and reward groups (or in this case, entire schools) based on performance. However, merit pay schemes evaluating and rewarding group-based performance can be detrimental to non-tested academic subjects. Citing Protsik (1996), Chamberlin, et al., explain that,

[w]hile group rewards are intended to promote a collaborative culture, they too have potential drawbacks. The extent to which merit pay can influence the content of lessons, for example, may be seen in reports of a school in North Carolina. A bonus of $1,500 was on offer for all teachers if students improved, but as one of the targets for improvement was Maths, teachers of all subjects focused on that subject. (p. 44)

Therefore, while merit pay schemes may not always undermine teacher collaboration, there may exist the possibility that such collaboration comes at the expense of a more fragmented education for students. This, we argue, may ultimately lead to a furthering of support and resources for teachers who teach to tested subjects, while undermining real teacher collaboration in favor of what constitutes collusion in an effort to increase specific subject scores, thus undermining a well-balanced education. In fact, the conservative Secretary of Education Rod Paige said, “I think it’s completely natural that if you are going to be measured on something, you are going to put emphasis on it” (Glass, 2008, p. 223). Moreover, while teacher collaboration may devolve into putting more focus on tested content areas, what may also occur is criminal collaboration that is evidenced by way of cheating.

**Conclusion**

Here we have argued that merit pay schemes for teachers align with neoliberal education reforms that seek to commoditize and market teaching and learning while simultaneously creating a culture of individualistic competition among teachers. When teachers are forced to compete with one another for portions of merit-based bonuses or supplements to their salary, it follows that such competition may facilitate a lack of collaboration among teachers despite the benefits that collaboration has on teacher preparation and subsequently on student learning. As teachers
are increasingly forced to compete, it is entirely likely that lesson plans, best practices, etc., may not be shared in a spirit of collaboration as such artifacts and insights represent a necessary accumulation for profit that is required within the neoliberal reimagining of schools, teaching, and learning.

Finally, Marion Brady (2011) points out six reasons that merit pay schemes, among other neoliberal reforms, will ultimately not work in public education suggesting that, “(1) Every kid is different…; (2) Every class is different…; (3) Every subject is different…; (4) Every teacher is different…; (5) Every work environment is different…; and (6) Every resource base is different” (p. 210). Nevertheless, education reformers seek to convince policy makers and stakeholders that education is a level playing field where meritocracy rules and is equally just. Despite the unimpressive history of merit pay schemes and the limited empirical research on the impact of implementing merit pay, education reformers continue to press for merit pay in an attempt to incentivize teachers to increase standardized test scores.

The research leads us to conclude that merit pay schemes are not only ineffective in their present constitution, but they also have negative implications for teacher professionalism. The looming question is whether the neoliberal, individualistic, and competitive ideology behind merit pay policy is what will help American education the most. At this juncture, the evidence convinces us that the answer is “no.” That is, as Adam Smith suggested, individuals seek first their own self-interests rather than the collective good. In the case of schooling, the collective good should be embodied in a culture of collaboration towards educating students, however, merit pay schemes may only further undermine any residual bastion of good teaching and learning as positive teacher collaboration suggests sharing information that could otherwise be monetized through competitive merit pay bonuses or by facilitating a new intentional collaboration that approaches teaching as test-prep or, as was the case in the Atlanta Public Schools, the facilitation of criminal collaboration that undermines the ethics of teaching and learning.

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Mapping Knowledge:  
A Survey of U.S. Educational Historiography

David J. Roof, Ball State University

Abstract

The following paper provides an overview of the primary themes that have shaped American educational historiography. It rests on the notion that when guided by an awareness of our past, we can better understand the windows of opportunity available to impact the present. This paper is by no means a definitive statement on U.S. educational historiography. The aim is simply to contribute to an on-going academic conversation, to better understand the manner in which knowledge in our field has spread, and further contemplate how our field might progress over time.

Keywords: history of education, foundations of education, education, historiography, teacher preparation, teacher training, education and society

Introduction

Peter Burke helped us to understand the value in studying the manner in which knowledge spreads.\(^\text{1}\) To understand the peculiarities of the present it is important to review the trends in perspective that have developed over time. Examining central themes in the history of education allows us to understand the manner in which the field is a network and a type of epistemological community in which knowledge is constructed, diffused, and how it evolves over time. Furthermore, understanding these trends can allow contemporary and future historians to ask new questions about the past.\(^\text{2}\) In March of 2000 the Spencer Foundation gathered 40 U.S. historians of education to discuss trends and to facilitate historians asking these new questions about the past.\(^\text{3}\) Participants discussed issues such as race/ethnicity, gender, higher education, policy and so forth.\(^\text{4}\) Nonetheless, some of the last thorough essays on educational historiography in the U.S. were written in the 1970s.\(^\text{5}\) This work seeks to build on these earlier works, as well as the more recent contemplation on future directions, with a broad survey of the field. In doing so, this paper

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2. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
reveals the need to challenge the boundaries of thought that have traditionally defined the field and to reinvent frameworks relevant to the political struggles impacting the field of education.

The history of education is not a simple homogenous category, it consists of multiple histories. There are, however, recurrent themes that have emerged and developed over time. The aim of this paper is to make us more conscious of the knowledge system in which the history of education operates by examining prominent themes that have developed and changed over time. This includes, as McCulloch has instructed us to examine, the field’s strategic location in relation to education, history, and the social sciences. We must remember that the history of education is a contested field of study, a site of struggle, and highly relevant to an understanding of broader issues in history, education, and society. McCulloch suggests the gravitational pulls of education, history, and the social sciences have tended to destabilize the field. He also argues, however, that the field has benefited from scholars building on an enhanced sense of this unstable past. This work, therefore, seeks to examine some of the main themes in U.S. educational historiography.

The first major theme is the role of educational history in academia and teacher preparation. The second section considers the critical examination of public schools, the role of bureaucracy in the formation of public schools in the U.S., and the focus on class bias in public education. The third major theme is the influence of social issues in educational history. The paper ends with some closing thoughts on future directions for the field of educational history.

In Teacher Education, Textbooks, & Social Foundations

One of the most prominent themes regarding educational historiography is the professional development of teachers. As Lawrence Cremin states, “One of the oldest and most respected studies in the professional education of American teachers is the history of education.” He goes on to suggest that during the twentieth century the history of education was a ‘necessary ingredient’ of teacher preparation and dominated the field. Archibald Anderson also notes that prior to 1900 the history of education was one of the most commonly offered courses for teachers. While the training of teachers has been a prominent theme in the history of education, teachers as historical agents is not a prominent theme of historical research. One theory for this neglect is the factor of gender bias in educational historiography as noted in the chapter Teachers

7. Ibid.
and the Male Mystique by David Tyack. Tyack notes that “hierarchical organization of schools and the male chauvinism of the larger society fit as hand in glove.”

Although educational history has enjoyed periods of relative prominence, most historians note that since the First World War, the history of education as a professional discipline in universities and colleges has declined in importance. Bruce Wesley, for example, refers to this as a catastrophic decline. According to Lawrence Cremin, the history of education remained “among the frequent professional offerings” in teacher instruction until its peak in 1925, after which it began to fall off. Many authors note the decline in the status of the history of education in colleges of education at a time when paradoxically there was a massive increase in the number of institutions offering teacher-training programs, the social foundations of education grew as a field of inquiry, and the history of education gained professional status. For instance, Cremin posited this decline may be attributed to an increase in demand for “the practical value in professional curriculum and the contention that history of education failed to serve this value.”

In the 1940s, the social foundations of education developed as a component of teacher education spread from the Teachers College at Columbia to other schools around the country. The most significant impact this had was in The College of Education at the University of Illinois. This included an emerging generation of educational philosophers along with educational historian Archibald Anderson. Cremin also contributed to the professional formation of the history of education by forming the History of Education Society and History of Education Journal, which by 1961 became the History of Education Quarterly. In 1968, Division-F (History and Historiography of Education) was added to the American Educational Research Association. Despite this professional development, the significance of the field had declined. In 1957, for example, The Ford Foundation sponsored a committee of American scholars to explore the historical role of education in the development of American society. Their conclusion was that the history of education had been “shamefully neglected by American historians.” Historians of education, however, were purposely snubbed from the committee with the assertion that “too much of it [the field of educational history] is parochial, anachronistic, and out of touch with main currents of contemporary scholarship.” The field also lost influence in teacher training programs. This factor inspired a variety of responses among educational historians; notably the call “to consider the history of education in the context of a host of other agencies engaged in education.”

15. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 8.
21. Ibid., 21-22.
22. Ibid., 23.
23. Ibid., 4-5.
24. Ibid., 6.
25. Ibid., 6.
There are different reasons given for the decline of educational history in the preparation of teachers. Stephen Rich, for example, attributed the problem to textbooks in the history of education. He suggests that textbooks “do not properly relate education to the social order of each epoch under consideration” and pay “insufficient attention to the actual practical problems of teaching.”26 While Bailyn and Cubberly wrote the most influential textbooks in the field by the mid-twentieth century, they had, according to Sol Cohen, a “promising future and a disappointing present.”27 Edward Power believes textbooks in the history of education have perpetuated several myths, and suppressing these myths may help elevate the history of education to a deservedly significant role in college and university teacher-education programs.28 He believed these myths span from antiquity to the influence of religion in universal education. Stuart Noble presents an extensive criticism of textbooks,

The main fault I find with most textbooks in the history of education, and with thesis and treaties in general, is that they are too narrowly conceived. The older textbooks in American educational history, for instance, were largely accounts of schools and of school administration. The curriculum was only briefly considered and the educative process, which is the heart of the whole matter, was touched upon only in passing. This process of education in any given period cannot be understood apart from its social setting. One must see the moving panorama of people, their motives and interests, their manners and customs, their religion and philosophy, their weaknesses and their strength, if one would understand the educative process in its true perspective.29

Frederic Lilge notes his displeasure with texts in the history of education and specifically those like “Cubberly’s text written in the fact-collecting tradition of scholarship.”30 This led a committee on the foundations of education comprised of scholars and administrators to claim that, “history of education courses are too often presented in traditional text-book manner with no chance for philosophizing or problem solving.”31 The criticism of textbooks also represents a difference of opinion regarding the subject matter and basis of historical content. For example, Perdew stated, “many textbooks reveal adherence to outmoded scientific and historical concepts and fail to make use of the best results of modern scholarship in the fundamental disciplines.”32 Although some of the criticism textbooks is legitimate and justified, it’s also emblematic of a more widespread attack on those in the humanities and social sciences seeking to influence the ethical dimensions of education.

The history of education was attacked by prominent figures in academia. James Conant, for example, attacked social foundations with his 1963 publication of The Education of American

31. Ibid., 47.
32. Ibid., 49.
Teachers. He suggested that courses in this area “frequently attempt to patch together scraps of history, philosophy, political science, sociology, and ideology.” Conant suggested the elimination of foundations courses, stating that give education departments a bad name. Conant stated that foundations courses were often “of limited value” and that “the discipline of psychology is...more closely related to the work of teaching than are philosophy, history, and sociology.”

In 1949, Archibald Anderson acknowledged what he believed were the primary charges made against the history of education; that the work is valueless because it is theoretical; that the aims, materials, and methods have failed. Many educational historians have been equally critical of their profession’s historiography. Bernard Bailyn’s 1960 publication of *Education in the Forming of American Society* sharply criticized the main currents within the field as “parasitic literature created by a powerful ‘academic ecclesia’ to inspire and revere a newly self-conscious profession.” He notes the longstanding neglect of educational history by social and intellectual historians, and suggests that historians are capable of giving educational history more relevance and a place within the public domain. Other historians of education supported this view. Archibald Anderson, for example, claimed that while there was an influence by historians such as Cubberly and Monroe, so-called ‘mainstream’ historians and professional historical organizations, such as the American Historical Association, remained unaware of the history of education.

Another primary factor noted for the decline in the role and significance of educational history was the growing influence of science and scientific research in the field of education. This factor is related to the mental measurement movement as seen with intelligence and achievement testing. An additional factor was the emphasis on child development in education. This led to the notion that the most valuable and relevant training for teachers would be determined scientifically in fields such as psychology. Both Cremin and Bruce Wesley noted the influence of scientists such as Binet, Thorndike, Goddard, and Terman on the decline of the history of education. Many scientists in the early-to-mid twentieth century promoted science as a panacea. For example, in 1910, Thorndike wrote,

A complete science of psychology would tell us every fact about everyone’s intellect and character and behavior, would tell us the cause of every change in human character, would tell the result which every educational force—every act of every person that changed any other or the agent himself—would have. It would aid us to use human beings for the world’s welfare with the same surety of the result that we now have when we use falling bodies or chemical elements.

34. Ibid., 23.
The notion that science would provide the most valuable and useful information in child development grew in popularity over the mid-to-late twentieth century. As Cremin notes, it was believed, and perhaps still is, that science “would reveal what to teach.” Furthermore, several historians of education came to embrace the scientific method as applied to historiography. This, however, did not necessarily increase the validity of the field. Freeman Butts in the *Emerging Task of the Foundations of Education* (the report of the Committee on Social Foundations, NSCTE), points to the following criticism,

the history of education has been taught in a systematic chronological way that often failed to relate the past to the present and failed to indicate the meaning of historical generalizations for the present. Much of this emphasis stemmed from an overly academic view of historical research that borrowed its methods from the physical sciences and was concerned only with facts for their own sake to the exclusion of their meaning for present problems.

These forms of criticism led to a move away from trying to replicate scientific methodology in historiography. Archibald Anderson noted, “there seems to have been some diminishing in the frequency with which the History of Education is charged with being too theoretical as the overemphasis on the ‘scientific’ and technical aspects of education, so typical of the 1920s, has declined.” As Edgar Knight stated,

The right of the past to be heard in discussions of problems of the present is perhaps as clearly established in the field of professional education as anywhere else. Probably nowhere else is history a stronger ally of science than in this field. Even the highly confident use of alleged scientific method in educational effort in this country during the past few decades seems sooner or later to invoke the aid of history in facing problems which the science of education has promised to solve. There may yet remain in the kind of education most human beings need in these days of divided aims some qualities and elements that are not subject to laboratory proof.

The influence of science as a validation of useful forms of knowledge, and the growth of educational psychology over the twentieth century has been a complex issue for educational historians. The modern role of scientific notions about aptitude and ability seen in the deficit model became a focus of inquiry for recent historians of education.

Various authors use the decline of the history of education as leverage for different approaches and concerns. In response to the declining significance of the history of education several authors made suggestions for changes within the field. Archibald Anderson, for example, begins his essay on the role for the history of education in the training of teachers by stating the principles he believes the history of education should be based on. The first is content, or enriching the experiences of the educator. The second principle is broadening or extending the depth or horizon of a teacher’s perception. This includes the idea of situating ‘men in time’, which incorporates the reconstruction of experience, problem solving, and the use of the method of intel-

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42. Ibid.
44. Ibid., 48.
45. Knight quoted in: ibid., 62.
ligence. In addition, Anderson makes an interesting insight, noting the shift and tension between the roles of educational history in the service of the ‘academic’ verses in the ‘training’ of teachers. Cremin concluded one of his essays on teacher training suggesting that historians of education needed to explicitly detail the contribution they could make to the field and follow through in the service of teachers. 47 Sol Cohen, in his overview of the history of the history of education, suggested that university staff want to be ‘useful’, but goes on to ask to whom, with what aim, interest, or purpose. 48 Although there is often push for uniformity in educational historiography, Sol Cohen states, “I think history of education has persevered because there have always been historians of education who have resisted having their function defined by colleagues or institutional pressures and have found different ways of being useful in the professional program.”

Contemporary historians have researched the influence of science on education, which has become a fruitful field of inquiry for educational historians. 50 Although, traditionally, science has been a problematic issue in educational historiography, many contemporary historians of education are optimistic about the relationship between history and the social sciences, as well as interdisciplinary approaches to historical inquiry. Maxine Sellers, for example, states, “Historians of education have built intellectual bridges between history and other disciplines, including psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, economics, demography, history of childhood and the family, American studies, women’s studies, and ethnic studies.” 51 Maxine Greene states, “we obviously need to confront the difficult question of the discipline’s significance in teacher education.” 52 She suggests that historians of education became too interested in their professional public image as opposed to their role in teacher education. She advocates the role of explanatory history over descriptive history. 53 The role of explanatory paradigms is derived from a connection between history and other social sciences. This connection is intended to allow the history of education to deal with relevant social issues, and therefore more relevance for teachers. Greene states, “relevance is still the crux of the matter where the determination of professional significance is concerned; but relevance, to me signifies relevance for the individual teacher or the teacher-to-be not simply utility, and certainly not utility in enhancing the status of the profession.”

More recently, Kate Rousmaniere has taught us about the contrast between the noisy complex world of teaching and the silence about it in the history of education. 55 The world of the teacher is still open territory for historians of education. The historical study of teaching as a profession was shaped by the gravitational pull, in the relation of the field to colleges of education. The relationship of educational historians to teacher development and colleges of education was also impacted by the emergence of a critical examination of public schooling.

49. Ibid., 26.
50. For an example see: Clarence J. Karier, Paul C. Violas, and Joel H. Spring, Roots of Crisis: American Education in the Twentieth Century (Chicago,: Rand McNally, 1972).
53. Ibid., 183.
54. Ibid., 184.
Public Schools, Bureaucracy, & Class Bias

One of the most significant changes that shaped our modern educational system was the shift from religious and private control over education to the bureaucratic and institutional growth of public schooling. This became a primary focus in the history of education in the 1970s and 80s. Bureaucracy is composed of administrative staff that deals with the organization of the school and the curriculum. Critics argue the major goal of bureaucracy is to expand its numbers, protect its members, and gain revenue.

The first wave of new historians to study education did not want to limit education and their frame of reference to the institutional growth of public schools. Cremin, for example, sought to move the history of education toward a much broader conception, in which education and public schools were conceived as naturally interwoven in the fabric of American society. This includes various social institutions and organizations. Jennings Wagner wrote of Cremin that his “main concern, of course, is to encourage historians and others to adopt a conception of education which considers not only formal schooling but the entire range of agencies and associations which educate, a range which would include but in no way be limited to the influence of family life, churches, synagogues, libraries, museums, summer camps, benevolent societies, agricultural fairs, settlement houses, factories, radio and televisions as well as various forms of printed media.” Cremin and Bailyn sought to move educational historiography toward social and intellectual history. In a chapter in Public Education titled ‘Toward an Ecology of Education’ Cremin puts-forward a theoretical framework to analyse both the contemporary and historical dimensions of education. His framework on educational historiography raises questions regarding periodization, chronology, continuity, demarking historical time, as well as location as an issue that runs through much of the theorizing on educational historiography. Maxine Seller, for example, asks the question, “What happens to the history of education, in the United States or any other country, when we conceptualize national boundaries as bridges rather than barriers?” Other historians further the consideration of the relation between schools and society, but in a different manner.

Michael Katz in The Origins of Public Education traces the social, cultural, intellectual, and political development aligned with the formation of organized public schooling. He suggests that those who have criticized the traditional historical narrative and metaphor have un-

57. Ibid., 183.
60. Wagoner, "Review: Historical Revisionism, Educational Theory, and an American Paideia."
fairly been lumped under the single label of ‘revisionists’. He suggests the criticism that has been directed at ‘revisionism’ is political because it presents an antagonism to existing educational structures. He points out that even those who are critical of the so-called revisionists agree that historians of education over the last decade have “dealt a devastating blow” to the traditional narrative, and even these historians can no longer return to a “simple narrative of the triumph of benevolence and democracy.” An example of the narrative Katz rejects can be seen in the writing of Harry Good, who states that historians of education should “demonstrate the continuity and progress of educational endeavors” as “the synthesizing function.” Even in the 1950s historians claimed that “historically a public school is a common school freely and equally open to all races, classes, and creeds in our society” as well as “our public common schools have played a large part in preventing the growth of rigid class outlooks and divisions in American society.”

Regarding the bureaucratic development of public schooling, Katz offers three approaches to educational history centred on why, how, and the results. He centers on the first question of why, linking the history of education to its social context. The four developmental aspects in this case are industrialization and urbanization, the assumption of the state’s responsibility for social welfare, the invention of institutionalization as a solution to social problems, and the redefinition of the family. According to Katz, this links the economy, social order, and schooling to what he calls ‘incipient bureaucracy’ or the strong regulatory role for the state in the area of social welfare and morality, as well as the function of taxation, experts, and a responsibility to legislation. The manifestation of these various factors, according to Katz, can be seen in the proliferation of schools, mental hospitals, prisons, and alms houses. Lawrence Cremin provides some level of support to this thesis by acknowledging the influence of the Iowa Child Welfare Research Station in the 1920s. Cremin also notes the influence of capitalism and the business model and principles influencing education in the twentieth century. He also suggests that from 1933 to the present the economic depression created a ‘profound change’ in the thinking of the American people. This led to a reconsideration of industry and a social criticism of the capitalist system emerged. Ultimately, this created new perspectives on our social and economic organization.

Much of the change related to the bureaucratic development of public education, according to Katz, can be seen through intellectual history as the ideological changes regarding the conceptions and boundaries shaping family structures in the nineteenth century. One example is the ‘cult of true womanhood’ and the ‘feminization of teaching’ which both worked to redefine the role of women in the public and private sphere. The ‘feminization of teaching’ was a com-

64. Ibid., 381.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid., 382.
70. Ibid.
71. Ibid., 384-85.
72. Ibid., 385.
74. Ibid., 3-5.
75. Ibid., 19-21.
ponent of the common schools, which were coeducational, yet these schools were viewed as a ‘nurturing’ environment, and thus women were allowed to work in the educational sphere as it was an extension of family life, considered a women’s traditional place.\(^{77}\) During this period, women’s pay for teaching was low, as women took over the role of educating children in their early years. Other historians have noted the unprecedented political significance that women and the family-unit provided for both moral training and discipline in the U.S.\(^{78}\) Katz suggests that the declining role or disappearance of ‘communities’ led to a reliance upon the state to innovate systems of order and regulation.\(^{79}\) This was compounded by the widespread belief in a growing threat of crime, poverty, lawlessness, pauperism, and immigration.\(^{80}\) These issues drew Katz’s attention to another major theme in educational history.

Assimilation is seen as one of the major issues in the history of education. Katz provides the example of Irish immigration in the nineteenth century, as well as the emphasis upon punctuality, regularity, docility, and the deferral of gratification.\(^{81}\) For example, the Common Schools were overwhelmingly Protestant, although they were claimed to be nonsectarian, which caused Catholics to begin their own network of parochial schools.\(^{82}\) Katz suggests that through school systems the habits of the population could be transformed to match the emerging social and economic order.\(^{83}\) He states, “public school systems existed to shape behaviour.”\(^{84}\) The issue of social and economic order became linked to a fear of idle young people. This also connects the school system to hegemonic social ideology, or as Katz says to be “concerned more with morality than minds.”\(^{85}\) This also ties into the basis for compulsory education, which according to Clarence Karier was mediated through a notion of social crisis, a degeneration of the social body through the lack of proper habit, and mental development.\(^{86}\)

Another example of the bureaucratic growth of schools is seen in the work of David Tyack, who notes that more decentralized control in the early nineteenth century gave Black citizens more control over the appointment of teachers, the way money was spent, and curriculum. The growth of centralized control had many negative outcomes, such as the relegation of Black students into the lowest vocational tracks and diminishment of Black teachers.\(^{87}\)

Katz argues that historians have employed a simple paradigm of pre-industrial –to-industrial and rural –to-urban development in educational history. In contrast, he centers his focus on the spread of capitalism with the continual need for a labor force, and labor power as a commodity.\(^{88}\) A major ideological element in the bureaucratic development of the modern school system is meritocracy. Lewis Terman, Goddard, Thorndike, and other scientists provided justifi-

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80. Ibid., 292-93.
81. Ibid., 394-95.
84. Ibid., 399.
85. Ibid., 403.
86. For more see: Karier, Violas, and Spring, *Roots of Crisis: American Education in the Twentieth Century*.
cation for the meritocratic ‘necessities’ of testing and tracking.\textsuperscript{89} According to Katz, the idea of meritocracy became the norm among historians and failure reflects individual responsibility as opposed to the system itself. This connects the school system to the role of legitimizing the existing social order.\textsuperscript{90}

Responding to the same type of criticism noted by Katz against those who challenged the traditional narrative of progress in educational history, Clarence Karier provides a detailed analysis of the philosophy of history and presentism.\textsuperscript{91} From this perspective, historians do not regard the notion of researching and writing history in response to contemporary questions and issues as inherently flawed. In response to the accusation of presentism, and the idea that history has potential for social change, Paul Violas stated,

acknowledging this fact, however, does not mean that the historian has license to make the past perform whatever tricks are necessary to support his vision of the appropriate future for his present. When the historian’s construct does not adequately account for the evidential data or must warp, omit, rewrite, or pretend that the historical actor did not mean what he clearly said, then we usually can agree that the historian’s construct needs reformulation or that his history is really propaganda.\textsuperscript{92}

Karier rejects the belief among some historians that any form of socially relevant or critical history is a form of presentism. He wrote that for us, “To argue further as some have that we should not write a critical history of progressive education because it undermines public support of the schools today is clearly an abuse of presentism.”\textsuperscript{93} The relationship between history and the present has been a complex issue for educational historians.

Many within the field of educational history have attacked the historiography of those labelled ‘radical revisionist.’ Sol Cohen suggests that while radical revisionist historians of the 1960s saw urban schools as an instrument of social control for dominant elites, other historians have pointed to widespread support and participation of the working class in education development and reform.\textsuperscript{94} Urban and Wagoner suggested that Katz’s argument that the wealthy maintained social control of lower classes through use of the Common School, is made with tenuous evidence.\textsuperscript{95} In addition, some historians maintain a primarily positive view of schools. A primary critic of the so-called ‘radical revisionists’ was Diane Ravitch, who separated ‘revisionists’ into two groups, characterizing Cremin and Bailyn as moderate and Katz, Karier, Violas, Gintis, Bowles, and Spring as radical.\textsuperscript{96} She claimed that revisionists have an inability to meld their dual commitment to liberty and equality. This includes a commitment to spontaneity, freedom, and individuality along with the urge for schools to pursue equality as an outcome or goal.\textsuperscript{97} Hammack, Floyd Morgan. "Review: Rethinking Revisionism," review of The Shaping of the American Educational State by Karier, Clarence. Reason and Rhetoric: The Intellectual Foundations of 20th Century Liberal Educational Policy by Feinberg, Walter, ibid., no. 1: 54.

93. Ibid., 161.
mack also critiques ‘revisionism’ and specifically Clarence Karier’s *The Shaping of the American Educational State* and Walter Feinberg’s *Reason and Rhetoric: The Intellectual Foundations of 20th Century Liberal Educational Policy*. Hammack finds fault with both authors’ work and ‘revisionism’ in general. He wrote that, “Karier does not go far beyond the statement that America is a racist, elitist, materialistic and classist society.” Hammack further suggested that Feinberg neglected historicity in favour of an ethical critique of liberalism.

Some of the historians who are critical of ‘revisionist historians’ still appreciate the contribution they have made to educational historiography. George Kneller in 1967 acknowledged, “the increased sophistication of recent studies, particularly as achieved by the revisionist.” Others, like Joseph Kett, suggest the debate over revisionists, “underscores the role ideology has played in forcing historians to consider new questions.” He suggests an over emphasis by both parties to stress the economic and social factors undermining the significance of culture and the function of transmitting culture. Kett wrote that, “the new history is properly concerned to discover what really happened rather than what past philosophers and administrators wanted to happen.” Though the move from the intensions of administrators is positive the idea of discovering ‘what really happened’ is an outdated remnant of historical positivism. Jettisoning notions of ‘discovery’ and ‘what really happened’ are essential for the advancement of educational historiography.

According to contemporary historians, bureaucracy remains a pertinent issue and there have been controversial political responses including home schooling, school choice, privatization, and charter schools. These ideas supposedly allow schools to operate outside the control of state and local bureaucracy, effectively increasing diversity and innovation in instruction and organization. This question of ‘public’ verses ‘private’ has been an on-going issue in educational historiography.

## Contemporary Issues & New Directions

Some of the common social issues taken-up by historians of education are economic growth, social mobility, social reform, and social/political values. In addition, the theme of social issues in educational historiography is shaped around the history of those excluded or marginalized in the traditional ‘mainstream’ currents of education and educational research. For some historians these questions and issues are interrelated. Victoria Maria MacDonald notes, “contempo-

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99. Hammack, "Review: Rethinking Revisionism."

100. Ibid., 59.


103. Ibid., 234.

104. Ibid.


106. Ibid., 190.

107. See for example: Butts, "Our Tradition of States' Rights and Education; ibid.
rary social, political, economic, and educational issues raise the troubling question of why Hispanic-American history remained neglected for so long.”

The notion of orienting the history of education toward relevant social issues is an ongoing theme when addressing the relevance to society and the professional development of teachers. Stuart Noble states in *The Relevance of the History of Education to Current Problems*, “I wish to conclude as I began by asserting my conviction that the history of education is a liberal rather than functional study, and depreciating the present tendency to use it only as it may contribute toward the solution of current school problems.” Thomas Woody wrote that we must, “let a problem of the present day be the point of departure, and make it the centre about which pertinent historic experience is integrated.”

As stated, many historians found the growth and influence of the social sciences useful for educational history. Freeman Butts, for example, suggested in 1967 that a genuine renewal in the history of education required “the need for constructing a vital and viable conceptual framework suitable alike to the requirements of historical scholarship and to the findings of recent social science scholarship devoted to the fundamental study of social change.” He also notes that education has become a central factor in the alignment of political, economic, and social forces in contemporary US.

By the late 1960s, social issues began to drive the changes in educational historiography. The 1960s and 1970s are noted as the golden era of history connected to significant social movements. Other historians disagree with this notion. Edward Power writes that, “Neither history nor the history of education has any commission to identify personal or social goals for us, or to formulate contemporary guiding principles or devise present-day practices.” Other historians feel differently, and have theorized new approaches to social issues. The question of cross-cultural education, for example, has been taken up under the ethno-historical approach.

Michael Coleman who researched American Indian children and Irish children suggests that the process of triangulation can ‘prove objective truth’. Other historians see a need for varying approaches.

David Tyack suggests an appraisal of the history of education regarding northern black ghettos. He points out that almost no mention of northern black education appears in the pri-

112. "Our Tradition of States’ Rights and Education," 211.
117. Ibid., 84.
118. Tyack, "Growing up Black: Perspectives on the History of Education in Northern Ghettos."
mary works in educational history. Tyack suggests that an appraisal of African American education cannot be carried out with traditional historiography and sources. He states, “one will need to try to see the school in its social context, from the black man’s point of view.” He suggests the need for a psychological aspect to the history of education that can bring a voice to feelings and experiences. In addition to Tyack, Ronald Butchart suggests the historiography of African American education offers different interpretive and analytical frameworks for writing history.

Building on the aforementioned factors, Charles Payne highlighted the considerable thought required when considering source material and methodology. He states, “Intellectual elitism has less to do with explicit feelings about race, gender, and class than with the kind of general models available to scholars, the kinds of questions that will flow from those models, and the background assumptions scholars bring to their work, assumptions about the nature of social structure and political change.” This indicates the need to go well beyond a focus on topics and subject matter, to consider new theoretical frameworks available as the field expands its focus. Many scholars noted the significance in developing new frameworks when studying the dimensions of race, ethnicity, religion, class, section, and gender. Victoria-Maria MacDonald, for example, notes a need for revised methods and sources related to the history of Hispanic education in the United States.

The need for new theoretical frameworks notwithstanding, several historians of education have found methods to document the experience of individuals who struggled for literacy and education. For well over a century, for example, a select number of historians have traced the struggle of the African-American community for education. This includes the struggle for literacy and education.

120. Tyack, "Growing up Black: Perspectives on the History of Education in Northern Ghetto,", 292.
121. Ibid.
124. Ibid., 439.
126. Victoria-Maria MacDonald, "Hispanic, Latino, Chicano, or "Other"?: Deconstructing the Relationship between Historians and Hispanic-American Educational History," ibid.41(2001).
eracy in the antebellum and postbellum periods, how the law and social conditions shaped the educational opportunities of African Americans, and how historians have recorded and analysed this history. The historians who sought to document this history often did so against a racist mainstream in educational historiography. Victoria-Maria MacDonald notes that Cubberley in Public Education in the United States, which sold over 100,000 copies by 1941, incorporated scientific racism into his historical account. In his book, Cubberley describes eastern Europeans as "largely illiterate, docile, lacking in initiative, and almost wholly without Anglo-Saxon conceptions of righteousness, liberty, law, order, public decency, and government." The educational historians in the 1950s who criticized Cubberley’s textbook for its relevance to the field, generally failed to note this fact. MacDonald also notes Cubberley’s view of assimilation and education as a hegemonic force and ‘solution’ to the United States immigration burden. As previously stated, one of the most significant issues in the history of education is assimilation. A major issue regarding assimilation in schools is the issue of language and literacy. This issue took different forms, for example the physical and psychological punishment that accompanied the removal of Native American language in boarding schools over the twentieth century.

**Conclusion**

The major themes of teacher training, bureaucracy, and social issues are interwoven and interrelated. They have been the focal point for various historians and gained prominence at various times. The most persistent issue is change within the field, as well as uncertainty and concern for the historical significance and future relevance. Rather than considering the field of U.S. educational historiography as having passed through various developmental milestones, perhaps it's more fruitful to consider the themes examined in this paper as fluid, on-going concerns for educational historians. These recurring themes are not inherently problematic, however the tendency to confine the focus of the field to a limited domain or to function solely as the handmaiden of disciplines that become fashionable in the field of education. In addition, a survey of the past reveals that educational historians should be involved in on-going debates, discussions, current political struggles, and deliberation on future directions. The survey of past educational historiography indicates that the field’s strategic relation to other disciplines impacts its developmental trajectory by revealing trends in perspectives over time. Therefore, historians of education must be prepared to take part in debates arising in the social sciences. McCulloch suggests, for example, the field must be interdisciplinary including cultural studies, and history. He suggests, the field must avoid becoming a pale imitation of the constituent parts and focus on...
instead on becoming a broad coalition. Ellen Langman notes that the relevance to contemporary social concerns must be more than just a string of dates, facts, and vignettes.

Many scholars note the need for a wider range of approaches, those that go beyond narrow institutional and national accounts. In addition, scholars suggest the need to examine contemporary globalization in the rapidly changing world in which we now live. Furthermore, there is a movement to use new sources in educational history to facilitate these broader contemporary examinations. One examples would be collaborative efforts to expand the domain of primary source materials to include images of schooling leaving open questions about interpretation and meaning.

McCulloch suggests that there is a future for the history of education if new opportunities are pursued. One potential new opportunity is a focus on how educational history can inform our understanding of contemporary reform movements and policy. James Leloudis notes that educational history can be a remarkable tool for thinking about policy, though educational historians often have a hard time finding a voice in policy debates. In a tradition of continued influence for the ‘practical value’ in teacher education, history may lose out to a technical development approach. In addition to contemporary reform movements, there are ways in which various influences merge to shape scholarship. One example is the manner in which feminist scholarship of the 1990s shaped work related to teacher education. Another under examined illustration of the potential for a convergence of influences to shape educational historiography in disability studies. Kate Rousmaniere, for example, has shown how disability studies can provide an analytical framework to examine how female teachers were situated within the socially constructed binaries of normal/abnormal, able/disabled, and so forth.

Scholars argue that this theme still remains under-researched, and remains one to be reinvigorated. There are other under-researched topics in educational historiography that have the potential to merge contemporary reform movements and policy with contemporary civil rights movements. One such example, would be examining experiences relevant to LGBTQ history in education.

Mapping knowledge is generally a challenging undertaking. Problems of classification, the identification of themes, and the establishment of patterns are difficult. The attempts at these undertakings often merge our curiosity with a crisis of knowledge that arises with floods of new information. When guided by an awareness of our past, we can better understand the windows of

135. Ibid.
136. Ellen Langman quoted in, ibid.
opportunity available to impact the present. This paper is by no means a single definitive statement on U.S. educational historiography. The aim is a contribution to an on-going academic conversation, to better the manner in which knowledge in our field has spread, and to further contemplate how our field might progress over time.

Bibliography


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Becoming Leo:  
Servant Leadership as a Pedagogical Philosophy  
______________________________________________________________________________  
______________________________________________________________________________  
Robert J. Fitzgerald, University High School Illinois State University Laboratory Schools  

Abstract  

Teachers must accept that they need (and are required by law) to do more for their students than they have ever before been expected to do. If success in the classroom for every student is a priority, this neither can nor should be readily disregarded. The question is not whether teachers have to better assist struggling students, but rather are they adequately prepared and equipped with strategies to be more involved in ways that might help them overcome the obstacles they face daily. Robert Greeleaf’s philosophy of servant leadership is a technique teachers should consider if they aspire to better help students surmount their daily struggles and be more willing to engage in learning. Those that adopt servant leadership and apply its principles in their classrooms will be more equipped to help students face daily obstacles by turning away from authoritative instructional techniques towards a more all-encompassing, communal approach to learning.  

Keywords: Robert Greenleaf, servant leadership, critical spiritual pedagogy  

Introduction  

Anyone who has ever stepped foot in a classroom understands that all students at one time or another are going to struggle in some way. Time management, test anxiety, social awkwardness, indifference to learning, organizational skills, parental pressures—all of these (and a host of others) have been well documented by scholars as serious issues that characterize the daily experiences of students in America, impeding the ability of many to find meaning in their intellectual development and engage in classroom activities. Marge Scherer used the phrase “the silent strugglers” to describe these students and suggested broadening its scope to include more than those labeled at-risk. “In a sense,” she stated, “every student struggles with something.”  

This is an unavoidable part of education every teacher should acknowledge. Teachers must accept that they need (and are required by law) to do more for their students than they have ever before been expected to do. If success in the classroom for every student is a priority, this neither can nor should be readily disregarded. The question is not whether teachers have to better assist struggling students, but rather are they adequately prepared and  

equipped with strategies to be more involved in ways that might help them overcome the obstacles they face daily. Are they ready and able to help the silent strugglers Scherer suggested are in need of more assistance? If teachers are to ensure all students receive the high quality educational opportunities they deserve, this has to happen.

The Servant Leadership Philosophy

In this paper I promote Robert Greeleaf’s philosophy of servant leadership as a technique for teachers to consider if they aspire to better help students surmount their daily struggles and be more willing to engage in learning. I assert that teachers who adopt servant leadership and apply its principles in their classrooms will be more equipped to help students face daily obstacles by turning away from authoritative instructional techniques towards a more all-encompassing, communal approach to learning. I do not claim this is the only effective approach for teachers to use in helping struggling students. Rather, I am optimistic about what it can do for them in light of the assistance and intervention many need to make it through the challenges of the school day and achieve their intellectual potential. Based on anecdotal and experiential research, I believe that servant leadership as a pedagogical philosophy for teachers is well worth considering.

“Servant leadership,” according to the Greenleaf Center, “is a philosophy and set of practices that enriches the lives of individuals, builds better organizations and ultimately creates a more just and caring world.” A more spiritual approach to interacting with students than most might be familiar or comfortable with, servant leadership can be a liberating philosophy for those teachers feeling trapped and helpless concerning their abilities to help students in need. For those individuals open-minded enough to consider what it has to offer, servant leadership can encourage positive change in themselves and their students. For those less inclined to consider change, the following may result in some introspection concerning what it means to be a teacher in America today and the role they play in the development of their students.

The Story of Leo

Specifically, it is the story of Leo that can encourage consideration of service as a teaching philosophy. Referenced in the first few pages of his book, Greenleaf admitted that the idea of servant leadership first came to him while reading Herman Hesse’s *The Journey to the East* and contemplating the role of Leo in the story. “He is a person of extraordinary presence,” we are told. “All goes well until Leo disappears.” For Greenleaf, Leo embodied the leadership principles he felt were most conducive to having a positive influence over individuals and the groups with which they associated. It was specifically from Leo that the idea for servant leadership was born and it is in Hesse’s novella where one can find out more about this character and how he modeled the ideal put forth by Greenleaf. For teachers interested in servant leadership as a pedagogical philosophy, Leo’s story is enlightening.

“This unaffected man had something so pleasing, so unobtrusively winning about him that everyone loved,” is one of the first descriptions of Leo given by the narrator in *The Journey*
to the East.\textsuperscript{4} Relatively ignored by those around him, he is characterized as the “ideal servant” of a group simply called the League engaged in a magnificent and heroic journey, the exact purpose of which is never made clear. Though none are aware of their final destination, all are united in their intentions and confident at the outset they will arrive. Like the students in every classroom, each came with their own baggage and a general sense of direction while none knew exactly where they would end up. As the narrator explained concerning the membership, “Each one of them had his own dream, his wish, his secret heart’s desire, and yet they all flowed together in the great stream and all belonged to each other, shared the same reverence and the same faith, and had made the same vow!”\textsuperscript{5} Though every member had their own goal and purpose for being part of the excursion, the cohesiveness of the group is made clear through Leo’s presence.

In the beginning of the journey all is well. The narrator, himself a member of the League, chronicles episodic sojourns in distant lands where spiritual experiences are had on a seemingly endless trek eastward. The value of Leo to the travelers, who is described by Hesse as simple, natural, and friendly in an assuming way, is clear and his understanding of the excursion’s intentions unparalleled among them. As the narrator stated, “Leo knew all kinds of things, that he perhaps knew more than us, who were ostensibly his masters.”\textsuperscript{6} With Leo present there is an apparent air of confidence and direction among the members. Unfortunately for those on the journey, this would soon come to end.

In a moment of suddenness, Leo disappears without reason. With a “feeling of impending disaster and menacing destiny” the League members awaken to find their faithful servant gone and unable to be found. “This was the beginning of trouble,” the narrator continued, “the first indication of a storm which would break over us.”\textsuperscript{7} With an increasing sense of hopelessness growing within the group, the members begin to question themselves and the certainty of their involvement on the journey. In Leo’s disappearance and the futile search for him, the coterie’s dissolution comes quickly to fruition. As the narrator reflected later in the text, “Hardly had Leo left us, when faith and concord amongst us was at an end; it was as if the life-blood of our group flowed away from an invisible wound…indeed, it did seem as if the prosperity of the League, the cohesion of the whole, was completely gone with Leo’s departure from our little group.”\textsuperscript{8} Without Leo, the group dissolved, each member turning away from the rest and the original purpose of the journey.

It is eventually revealed that Leo was not simply the servant but rather President of the League. His calculated exodus from the group was the beginning of a test of faithfulness to its principles. And in the final moments of the story, it is understood that it was not Leo who abandoned the group, but rather the members themselves. Without his service, unassuming presence, and unifying aura, the wayfarers had become disillusioned and confused as one after another deserted the others and their eastward trek. It is apparent that without Leo—without a self-effacing and selfless leader whose actions were grounded in service to the undertaking rather than individual gain—both the group and its members were lost. As Greenleaf made clear in his book, to lead is to serve. Leo is the model of this maxim. With his service to the group gone, so too was the confidence and faith of every member in themselves and the journey. Again, for the teacher interested in becoming a servant leader in the classroom, the story of Leo offers insight into the

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{4} Hermann Hesse, \textit{The Journey to the East} (New York: Picador, 1956), 25.
\bibitem{5} Ibid., 23-24.
\bibitem{6} Ibid., 35.
\bibitem{7} Ibid., 38.
\bibitem{8} Ibid., 133.
\end{thebibliography}
unassuming presence and quiet influence such an individual can have over others and the group as a whole.

Larry C. Spears, former President and CEO of the Greenleaf Center, summed up the essence of servant leadership in the following statement: “True leadership emerges from those whose primary motivation is a deep desire to help others.”9 This was the spirit of Leo and the essence of his involvement with the League. Servant leaders are individuals who have a natural predisposition to share decision-making power, encourage community, and put the needs of others before their own, all of which Leo exemplified during the group’s journey. As Greenleaf asked in his initial essay on the subject, “Do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?”10 Not something that can be attained easily, servant leadership is a life-long process, a way of living and engaging others that has the potential to be instrumental in encouraging change for the betterment of all. According to Spears, “Servant leadership truly offers hope and guidance for a new era of human development and a prescription for creating healthy organizations.”11 For teachers, hope and guidance is exactly what is needed to help them in their day-to-day dealings with students who are struggling or disaffected for whatever reasons.

**Characteristics of Servant Leadership**

Spears catalogues ten characteristics of servant leadership I encourage teachers to adopt if they want to better help their students work their way through the stress and strain of classroom life.12 These are listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. If teachers became aware of these characteristics and used each in their classrooms, they would better serve their students, especially those who may be struggling in the silent manner Scherer spoke of. The following describes these characteristics and why teachers would be well served if they allowed them to inform their pedagogical philosophies.

**Listening and Empathy**

The Stoic philosopher Epictetus supposedly said, “Nature hath given men one tongue but two ears, that we may hear from others twice as much as we speak.” In order to hear what others are saying we must first stop talking, and this ironically includes teachers. Servant leaders are individuals who are deeply committed to hearing the voices of others and those within themselves. They are reflective in nature and are constantly examining their thoughts and actions within the context of the needs of others. They make a conscientious effort to listen to what others are saying, both verbally and non-verbally, and truly care about what is being said rather than simply waiting to speak.

Coupled with empathy, listening is the foundation upon which the remaining characteristics of servant leadership are constructed. One cannot begin to heal, be aware, persuade, or build

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12. Ibid.
a community without listening to those around them and understanding their situations. For the teacher considering servant leadership, learning to listen and embracing empathy are essential to moving beyond simple classroom instruction towards understanding the needs of all students and ensuring these are met.

Today, teachers are expected to do much more than simply teach. And gone are the days when students sat neatly and quietly in rows, listening attentively yet passively to the lesson being taught. Rather, teachers today must provide evidence they are adopting strategies to ensure all students are learning. For most, this is mandated by law and even part of their evaluation processes. Yet many are attempting to do so without listening to their students, hearing their stories, and figuring out what their actual needs are. The teacher who wishes to serve their students and who is truly concerned about their development makes listening the most important thing they do. Without listening they cannot hear, without hearing they cannot know, and without knowing they cannot empathize and begin to coordinate their classroom activities to meet the needs of every student and in the process empower them to learn.

Michael P. Nichols stated in his book *The Lost Art of Listening*, “Being listened to means that we are taken seriously, that our ideas and feelings are known and, ultimately, that what we have to say matters.”¹³ Imagine a classroom where students felt this way—understood and empowered, heard and cared for. Imagine what a teacher can do who creates an environment characterized by this feeling among their students. As Greenleaf asserted, “(Listening) begins with a genuine interest that is manifest in close attention, and it goes on to understanding in depth—whence cometh wisdom.”¹⁴ The teacher who becomes a listener will be afforded much greater insight into the needs of their students and have a better conception of what they can do to meet them.

**Healing and Awareness**

“One of the great strengths of servant-leadership,” Spears stated, “is the potential for healing one’s self and others.”¹⁵ Servant leadership rests on the principle that individuals are not whole and that to serve others is to complete ourselves and them alike. Consider the following passage from Thomas Merton: “We will see that we are human, like everyone else, that we all have weaknesses and deficiencies, and that these limitations of ours play a most important role in all our lives. It is because of them that we need others and others need us.”¹⁶

Merton, a Trappist monk and author of the book *No Man Is an Island*, understood and wrote extensively on the idea that life, regardless of struggle and despair, has meaning and that only through our relationships with others will we come to better understand ourselves. Becoming aware of our own faults and weaknesses and understanding how our interaction with others helps fulfill our lives is critical to being a servant leader. To heal, according to Greenleaf, is to make whole. “There is something subtle communicated to one who is being served and led if,” he stated, “implicit in the compact between servant-leader and led, is the understanding that the search for wholeness is something they share.”¹⁷ The servant leader is aware of their limitations

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and seeks the opportunity to serve others not only so that they might help them become whole, but also to help themselves in this regard. As Merton stated, “We cannot find ourselves within ourselves, but only in others.”

For the teacher interested in becoming a servant leader, the idea of healing might make them initially uncomfortable, especially if only given shallow consideration. Unsurprisingly, many are likely unwilling to admit they have certain weaknesses and faults or acknowledge these might be partially responsible for the inability or unwillingness of students to engage in their classes. As a defensive posture, this is natural and should not deter anyone from considering servant leadership. Few of us like to admit we might lack certain skills and knowledges needed to reach all of our students. To consider this makes us feel like failures and as teachers this is personally unacceptable and antithetical to the function we perform. But to be a servant leader in the classroom means we must first accept the fact that we are neither perfect nor complete, and that our interactions with our students can help us recognize our deficiencies.

Essentially, by focusing on healing our students—helping them become more whole—we are healing ourselves. In healing ourselves we in turn become more capable of healing our students. And as this cycle continues, growth in everyone occurs. Coupled with listening and empathy, healing makes up what one might call the spiritual characteristics of servant leadership. Once these are embraced by a teacher, they can begin to focus on applying these principles in their preparation, instruction, and daily interactions with students.

**Persuasion, Conceptualization, and Foresight**

Two of the most important ways a servant leader begins to shape and influence an organization and its members are through conceptualization and persuasion. This means they can think beyond immediate, short-term gains and towards future goals and dreams. They do this while considering the communication techniques required to convince others of the direction needed to make these a reality. There is no room for coercion in the lexicon of servant leadership. Rather, a servant leader’s goal should be towards gaining consensus among the group, not coercing members into following a preordained path. In simplest terms, the servant leader is the antithesis of Machiavellianism where power and authority is maintained through deceptive techniques, manipulation, and the engendering of a culture of fear.

Machiavellian leadership focuses its attention on the leader first and foremost and how they can go about maintaining their position of authority. Meanness and the coercive techniques that accompany it have no place in a leadership ideology grounded in service to others. Instead, the servant leader should be capable of conceptualizing the mission and direction of the organization, an approach that encompasses thinking beyond the here and now. Once this is achieved, persuasive rather than coercive methods are used to attain consensus. The results are a clear, growth-oriented plan of action that everyone agrees with and believes they had a hand in crafting.

Conceptualization and persuasion do not characterize a leadership style that is authoritarian, and the teacher as power broker is regrettably still the norm. As previously alluded to, it is hard for a teacher to consider giving up some of their authority; this seems to be incompatible with what we consider the role of the teacher to be and misguided in light of our responsibilities for the intellectual development of our students. We hold the keys to the kingdom and will decide who will use them and when. The teacher that chooses servant leadership understands that a

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18. Merton, xv.
coercive philosophy of education is never conducive to real learning. Though our students may do the homework and remember what they have been taught up through whatever assessment is given, if inveigled into doing these things it has the potential to be meaningless.

“The more you rely on coercion and extrinsic inducements, as a matter of fact,” asserted educationist Alfie Kohn, “the less interest students are likely to have in whatever they are induced to do.”¹⁹ A servant leader in the classroom recognizes the futility of manipulation, rejects it as a pedagogical approach, and instead considers the importance of including their students in the conceptualization process. If this is done, simple persuasive techniques rather than coerciveness become the foundation for learning. The result is a classroom where students feel actively engaged in the learning process rather than passively submissive to the authority of the teacher.

Inherently connected to persuasion and conceptualization is the ability of the servant leader to use foresight. According to Spears, “Foresight is a characteristic that enables the servant leader to understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequence of a decision for the future.”²⁰ This mentality is reflected in the following passage from the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu’s Tao Te Ching:

When it is peaceful, it is easy to maintain
When it shows no signs, it is easy to plan
When it is fragile, it is easy to break
When it is small, it is easy to scatter
Act on it when it has not yet begun
Treat it when it is not yet chaotic
A tree thick enough to embrace
Grows from the tiny sapling
A tower of nine levels
Starts from the dirt heap
A journey of a thousand miles
Begins beneath the feet²¹

Though Lao Tzu may have believed that the capacity for prescience was something anyone could gain through a deeper understanding of and commitment to the Tao, Spears admitted this might be a leadership characteristic one is born with rather than learns. For teachers who truly care about the development of their students, this should not deter them from becoming servant leaders in the classroom who consider past events and present happenings as sources of insight for future decisions and actions. As Greenleaf stated, “(One) must cultivate the conditions that favor intuition…The prudent person is one who constantly thinks of now as the moving concept in which past, present moment, and future are one organic entity.”²² The servant leader envisions the first step of a journey before even taking it; they lead through foresight rather than response and reaction. To do the latter, according to Greenleaf, is an ethical failure on the part of a leader and a negation of their charge.

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²² Greenleaf, Servant Leadership, 38.
For the teacher, foresight is a technique that can have great benefits in their classrooms if applied consistently. Too often teachers react to what immediately takes place rather than consider prior to each lesson what has happened in the past, might happen in the present, and plan accordingly. The result is a hastily organized experience where the slightest mishap can potentially derail the lesson and disengage students. Though planning ahead is important, this does not mean foresight is being used by the teacher. It rather is applied when reflective anticipation becomes a critical part of the lesson-planning process. Based on previous experiences, servant leader teachers consider what could happen and how students might respond to specific aspects of each day’s class. To do this requires practice and constant cultivation; it requires the teacher to acknowledge the past, be aware of the present, and be mindful of what might occur daily.

Stewardship and Commitment to the Growth of People

In their relationships with others, servant leaders must also be stewards committed to the growth of every individual they serve. They are entrusted to hold the wellbeing of others and the institutions they lead above their own and must perform this duty with the interests of all in mind. Consideration of the greater good is critical for the servant leader and their actions should reflect a championing of this conviction. Spears used the word “nurture” to inform this characteristic; the servant leader must do everything they can to foster growth in those they lead. This can range from inclusive decision making to providing assistance to those who might fall on hard times and be in need of even greater help, akin to the silent strugglers every classroom has. St. Francis of Assisi once said, “Remember that when you leave this earth, you can take with you nothing that you have received—only what you have given.”\(^{23}\) The servant leader is one who yields to others, expecting and taking nothing in return. When they depart, as Leo momentarily did when he left the travelers, it is not for their own sake or personal gain but for the betterment of the group and the individuals they serve.

Nurturing is at the core of education and is what teachers should be doing daily in their classrooms regardless of whether or not they aspire to be servant leaders. The word “educate” derives from the Latin *educare* which means to rear or bring up. Teachers who embrace stewardship understand that nurturing is a critical component of their pedagogy and should inform their daily planning, preparation, and classroom activities. As Greenleaf stated regarding the importance of this role in education, “Raise the spirit of young people, help them build their confidence that they can successfully contend with the condition, work with them to find the direction they need to go and the competencies they need to acquire.”\(^{24}\) Consider how productive the classroom might be where nurturing for confidence, competency, and success characterizes the relationship between every pupil and teacher.

One cannot embrace stewardship without having a deep sense of commitment to others. This commitment translates into genuine care for their wellbeing above one’s own and begins through recognition of their value as fellow humans, neither different nor subordinate. As challenging as this may be for those in positions of authority such as teachers, particularly in light of the contemporary emphasis on competition and individual achievement, it is paramount for all

\(^{23}\) St. Francis of Assisi quoted in Edie Fraser and Robyn Freedman Spizman, *Do Your Giving While You’re Living: Inspirational Lessons on What You Can do to Make a Difference Tomorrow* (Garden City, NY: Morgan James, 2009), 220.

\(^{24}\) Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*, 185.
servant leaders to embrace this approach. This characteristic is resonant of the following passage from Peter Gabel:

I aspire to see you and to exist in relation to you not as a mere “you over there,” as a mere passing or glancing presence going by, but as a full presence both there and here, the very completion of myself insofar as we emerge into a We that is neither fleeting nor in danger of dissolving back into reciprocal solitudes corroded by mistrust and fear. 25

The person who is committed to the wellbeing and growth of those they serve is able to see herself/himself in others and encourage a reciprocal recognition from them. Teachers who embrace this approach are able to recognize in their students themselves; their struggles are their struggles, their successes theirs also. Immanuel Kant in his *Grounding of a Metaphysics of Morals*, specifically the second formulation of his categorical imperative, stated, “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end.” 26 For the classroom teacher, commitment begins with an acknowledgement that their students are means to nothing, but rather ends in themselves, all valuable regardless of their backgrounds, efforts, levels of intelligence, or any other determining factor. When the teacher begins to truly see the inherent value of every student—inherently recognizing their own value as well—they can become committed to each individually and begin to put their needs above their own. Only then will they truly begin to serve their students by ensuring the wellbeing of each is provided for.

**Community Building**

Servant leaders are able to recognize in those they serve an innate desire to be part of something greater than themselves. Describing it as “the lost knowledge of our times,” Greenleaf iterated the importance of community to the philosophy of servant leadership. “Where community doesn’t exist,” he asserted, “trust, respect, and ethical behavior are difficult for the young to learn and for the old to maintain.” 27 It is the responsibility of the servant leader to build a sense of community among those they lead and to make sure everyone feels accepted as a meaningful member of the greater group. All should feel valued and respected; none should feel marginalized, ill-treated, or repressed. Consider the following by Robert Bellah:

In my understanding of community shared values and goals do imply something more than procedural agreement, they do imply some agreements about substance, but they do not require anything like total or unarguable agreement. My idea of a good community is one in which there is argument, even conflict, about the meaning of the shared values and goals, and certainly about how they will be actualized in everyday life. Community as I see it is a form of intelligent, reflective life, in which there is indeed consen-

sus, but where the consensus can be challenged and changes, often gradually, sometimes radically, over time.\textsuperscript{28}

The teacher committed to becoming a servant leader in the classroom understands Bellah’s conception of community as characterized by exchange, reflection, and actualization of group goals. They understand there is need for consensus but never at the expense of the growth of the group or the individual members. They create an environment where values are shared with the understanding these might change periodically as new ideas and goals gradually emerge.

For Greenleaf, the foundation of community building is a word few teachers are comfortable using in terms of their classrooms and students—love. Only when leaders embrace their roles in such a fashion can the importance of community be restored. In the classroom, this means the teacher takes on absolute responsibility for the growth of every student. As servant leader to them all, there is no limit to their liability in this regard. To do this they must love every student, something few teachers are even comfortable talking about let alone expressing concerning their classes. “Love is an undefinable term, and its manifestations are both subtle and infinite,” asserted Greenleaf.\textsuperscript{29} For the servant leader in the classroom, these demonstrations of caring and concern, though likely unrecognizable to any outside observer, have the potential to profoundly impact a student’s development, happiness, and life. Though it may be undefinable, it is known when felt. Servant leader teachers strive to make this feeling characterize their classroom communities and relationships with each student.

As previously stated, all students struggle at one time or another. This is an unavoidable reality of the profession. Are teachers equipped to handle every scenario that presents itself in regards to these struggles? Not likely. Will becoming a servant leader in the classroom make them better prepared and capable of doing so? If one truly cares about one’s students, their well-being, and their individual development, allowing the principles of servant leadership to inform one’s pedagogy is critical. Striving to become Leo is the first step in a journey that just might last a thousand miles. With our selfless encouragement and service to their growth, the tiny saplings in our classrooms might one day become the trees thick enough for us to embrace.

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\textsuperscript{29} Greenleaf, \textit{Servant Leadership}, 52.

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“They Never Really Tried to Reach Out to Us”:
Examining Identities and Confronting the Emotional Distance
Between Urban Youth and Urban Schools

Andrew N. McKnight, University of Alabama at Birmingham

Abstract

This paper looks at the perspectives of 22 young adults concerning their upbringings and life experiences, experiences in inner city and suburban schools, after leaving school, and later in a privately funded urban GED preparation facility in a large southern city. Specifically it addresses the conceptions students have about school and their perspectives concerning their former public school teachers and the staff at the GED preparation facility. Some of the participants in the study left or were removed from public schools due to issues with attendance, discipline, or a desire on the part of the respective school’s administration to, in their estimation, lower their liability concerning not meeting state testing standards. Others left because of community or family factors outside of school. All but one of the participants was African American and most indicated poverty as part of their backgrounds. The first part of this paper looks at what the interview data reveal about the participants identities and experiences, specifically looking at culture, race, gender and socioeconomics. The second part examines how the participants conceive of education and the acquisition of knowledge, and looks at issues of student alienation, the disconnect between community culture and that of the schools attended, and the perceived lack of care and irrelevance concerning institutionalized schooling. In an effort to point this research toward problem solving the paper concludes with a brief discussion of how the findings might positively inform teacher education.

Keywords: urban education, urban poverty, equity, racial identity and education, culturally relevant instruction

Introduction

This paper looks at the perspectives of 22 young adults concerning their experience in schools, out of schools, and in an urban GED preparation facility (herein referred to as GEDPF), respectively. It also addresses the conceptions students have about school and school personnel, and how this led to either positive or negative perceptions about the former. As illustration, the quote in the title is from Dennis, one of the participants, and is reflective of many of the participants’ perspectives concerning their former public school teachers. Some of the participants in the study
either left or were removed from public schools due to issues with attendance, discipline, or a desire on the part of the respective school’s administration to, in their estimation, lower their liability concerning not meeting state testing standards. Others left because of community or family factors outside of school. After dropping out or being pushed out of school the participants attended a privately funded inner city adult education facility with a large GED preparation program. All of the participants lived within the metropolitan area of a large southern city, most within the city limits, with a few coming from a surrounding county or satellite cities. At the time of the interviews their ages ranged from 19 to 43; 6 were male and 16 female; 21 were African American, one African; their socioeconomic status could be best described as working poor.¹

What follows looks at the participants’ reporting of their upbringings and life experiences. Specifically it looks at their beliefs and attitudes regarding both the schools and the adult educational facility they attended. It then poses questions on two fronts. The first part of this paper looks at what the interview data reveal about the participants identities and experiences, specifically looking at culture, race, gender and socioeconomics. The second part examines how they conceive of education and the acquisition of knowledge. It also looks at issues of student alienation, the disconnect between community culture and that of the schools attended, and the perceived lack of care and irrelevance concerning institutionalized schooling. In an effort to point this research toward problem solving the paper concludes with a brief discussion of how the findings might positively inform teacher education.

Background²

The research was conducted with the cooperation of a privately funded inner city adult education facility as an effort to present the voices of a number of their GED recipients. The participants for this study were identified by Stephen, the GEDPF’s director, from among their successful graduates.³ Humans operate within a socially engendered set of expectations and beliefs concerning human existence and essence, and how the social and physical worlds function; the realities that many inner city young people face, of course, informed how the participants in this study spoke of their chances, choices, and values. Pursuant, the data will be presented as situated within extant economic, political, racial, cultural, and gendered circumstances.

The overall aim of this project is to document and recount the participants’ life experiences, specific encounters with a large city school system, and time spent working with the aforementioned adult educational facility. The depth, context, and nuance of the aforementioned interview data will be examined in reference to their perceptions of their own experiences in education. This piece is specifically concerned with how these voices reflect, inform, and exist within the context of the how the participants view the nature and scope of their lives, their views on the acquisition of knowledge and its use, and their viewpoints on what has been, and hopefully will be, beneficial to their lives. Some attention will be paid to where these categories also intersect within the narratives.

¹. Much of this interpretation was gleaned from what was reported in the interviews concerning vocation, vocation of parents, lack of access to healthcare and transportation, and issues with securing and retaining housing. This is consistent with Federal data concerning poverty, e.g., Charles Hokayem and Misty L. Heggeness, “Living in Near Poverty in the United States: 1966–2012,” United States Census Bureau, 2014, https://www.census.gov/prod/2014pubs/p60-248.pdf.

². There have been many studies to focus on the voices of inner city youth. One of the most recent, and the one that mostly closely mirrors the context of this study, is Feel These Words: Writing in the Lives of Urban Youth by Susan Weinstein (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009). In it she used interviews, observations, and analysis of student writing to tell the stories of students who attended an alternative high school after leaving a traditional one.

³. He died of cancer shortly after the interviews were concluded. The GEDPF has since closed.
Philosophical Framework and Methodology

The study was philosophically informed by phenomenology and the research itself was narrative inquiry. The nature of each will be discussed in what follow, as well as the methods deployed concerning the organization of the data. Concerning the former, the spirit in which the research was conducted is best framed by Moustakas:

Empirical phenomenological research returns to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions. These descriptions then provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis to portray the essences of the experience. First the original data is comprised of ‘naïve’ descriptions obtained through open-ended questions and dialogue. Then the researcher describes the structure of the experience based on reflection and interpretation of the research participant’s story. The aim is to determine what the experience means for the people who have had the experience. From there general meanings are derived. 4

If reference to this project, the researcher approached the interviews with only a general idea concerning documenting the participants’ relationship to their school experience, their communities, and those within the GEDPF.

As previously stated the methodology of the study was narrative analysis which will be discussed in what follows. Outside of the mechanics of having a set of questions that was standard for all interviewees, the flow of the interviews was largely conversational and follow up question came from the context of the initials stories told. 5 It represented what Chase describes as “a joint production of narrator and listener.” 6 In reference to this point the impetus of this study lies more with the spirit of narrative research that looks at the polysemic nature of narratives from diverse backgrounds. Although there were similarities across several of the narrative conversations the primary position of this form of research is to emphasize “the uniqueness of each human action and event rather than their common properties.” 7 It was though analysis in this spirit that the aforementioned general meanings were derived from each narrative as a reflection of individual experience.

These narratives at their more revelatory represent the direct visceral experiences of the participant as located within their cultural point of reference and beliefs about the nature of our world and their reality. As Casey (1995) put it

Every narrative is highly constructed text structured around a cultural framework of meaning and shaped by particular patterns of inclusion, omission, and disparity. The principal value of a narrative is that its information comes complete with evaluations, explanations, and theories and with selectivities, silences, and slippage that are intrinsic to its representation of reality. 8

7. Ibid., 657
The narratives include declarative statements about experience but also provide context about how these experiences are interpreted by the participant through their emphatics, their language, their voice, and their world view.

A component of this research perspective is that the research must recognize the self in the communicative transaction that takes place between interviewer and interviewee.\textsuperscript{9} Thus limitations must be acknowledged concerning the location of self and the narratives recorded and presented. Conversations, conceived in this way, are a co-construction\textsuperscript{10}:

we speak to our participants and ourselves to fulfill the relational responsibilities of representing our co-constructive experiences. The priority in composing research texts is not, first and foremost, to tell a good story; the priority is to compose research texts in relation with the lives of our participants and ourselves.\textsuperscript{11}

There is the additional issue in narrative research, and indeed all social science research, that “although researchers compose research texts attentive to the experiences of participants and themselves, they cannot know the intimate workings of a participant’s thoughts.”\textsuperscript{12} Added to this is a potential cultural distance between a middle class white male academic researcher and participants who were predominately African American, living in poverty, and female. I tried to report the narratives given as faithfully as possible, through a lens admittedly somewhat disconnected from the lived experiences of the participants.

With this caveat the intention of narrative analysis is to suss out “the ways that human beings make meaning through language.”\textsuperscript{13} In this spirit, what is reported relies heavily on the actual words of the participants. It would be remiss here not to point out that one of the intentions of this project is to document the participants’ experiences within their social locations, but also to potentially call into question present educational practices and policies. It was immediately apparent that experience within their given environments dictated, and to some degree limited, what the participants knew and how they interpreted their circumstance. However, there was a distinct notion expressed in many of the narratives that knowledge and education was perceived to be connected to social power. To best report the events revealed in the narratives as related to the participants experiences in schools and at the GEDPF, and in an effort to be faithful to the narratives, as given, dialects were not altered.

Methodological strategies were employed to ensure that the verification process for this study occurred at all stages.\textsuperscript{14} All the audiotapes were first reviewed by the principal investigator and later transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber.\textsuperscript{15} After receiving the typed transcriptions, the principal investigator edited each transcript, to ensure the accuracy of audio-to-typed

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{10} D. Jean Clandinin and M. Shaun Murphy, “Relational Ontological Commitments in Narrative Research,” Educational Researcher 38 (2009).
\item \textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 600.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 601.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Casey, “The New Narrative,” 212.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Irving Seidman, Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998).
\item \textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
translation, and then made summary notes.\textsuperscript{16} The data was then read for themes that were implied by the interview protocol and then arranged by how they were revealed in the transcripts. From this I conducted narrative analysis concerning what the participants said about their experiences and their emotional reactions to these as lived and in retrospect. I tried to pay specific attention to the cultural locations of their experiences and how this provided a larger context concerning their aspirations.

The participants did not review their transcripts.\textsuperscript{17} Prior to the interviews all participants were asked to read and sign an Internal Review Board’s (IRB) approved consent forms. To protect anonymity, all of the names of people and places have been changed. The shared physical space where the interviews were conducted ranged from the GEDPF, my office or my university library, and two took place at state correctional facilities.

\textbf{Data Analysis}

The project necessitated looking at the intersection of the participants’ experiences and their beliefs concerning education. To begin my telling of their stories I wanted to look at their beliefs about the nature of their existence, identity, and the social context in which these beliefs were formed. This included religious beliefs in terms of how they view their social position as a matter and mode of being (and also how religion helps to inform their lives as discussed regarding personal ethical orientations), and class, race, and gender-related consciousness forced upon, and perhaps differently perceived of by, the participants. The urban poor generally live under significantly oppressive external dictates as is evidenced by their inequitable access to health care, legal counsel, safe housing, education, and a host of other physical and emotional privations; the question is what those who find themselves in these circumstances internalize both physically and emotionally concerning the aforementioned nature of their relative power, or lack thereof.\textsuperscript{18} Pursuant to the former, most of the participants came from spaces of poverty.\textsuperscript{19} Many reported experiencing verbal and physical abuse in the home and community. Several of the female participants left school due to pregnancy and lack of related support; several of the male participants left school because of violent acts or involvement with illegal drugs.\textsuperscript{20}


\textsuperscript{17} This was largely due to difficulty in contacting them. It was apparent early on that contact numbers were short lived for many of the participants due to the transient nature of their residences. This was confirmed by several statements made in the transcripts.

\textsuperscript{18} There is a lot of data that supports these assertions concerning the lives of the urban poor a good and brief example of which would be the report by Lisa Dubay and Elena Zarabozo, “How Economic Insecurity in Children Changed Over the Course of the Great Recession,” Urban Institute, 2013, http://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/alfresco/publication-pdfs/412907-How-Economic-Insecurity-in-Children-Changed-Over-the-Course-of-the-Great-Recession-Fact-Sheet.PDF


\textsuperscript{20} The effect of urban poverty have also been well documented in the works of Jonathan Kozol, e.g., \textit{The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America} (New York, Broadway Books, 2006) and \textit{Fire in the Ashes: Twenty-Five Years Among the Poorest Children in America} (New York, Broadway Books, 2006).
Additionally at issue is how these narratives reflect either conformity to what one might expect as resulting from these conditions, or in contradiction by way of resilience and resistance. One might infer that what follows supports what some call a deficit perspective. I would argue that the fact that these individuals attended the GEDPF under their own volition contradicts the former. The narratives that follow speak to a spirit of survival and achievement. Also, the views of teachers and schools could be seen as unfair. I would like to stress that most of these stories reflect students that left school—students for whom school was not a pleasant or meaningful experience.

Identity and its Context

These social dialectics existentially affect the perceptions of these young adults with regard to their beliefs about being (the social and physical location of their existence) and about essence (identity), and related issues of meaning, purpose, and even fate. Concerning the effects of the participants perceptions of their environs, Sonya, a 25 year old divorced mother of three gave the following description: “a bunch a powder smokers, snorters, crack-heads, shooters, gang-bangers.” This statement was typical of the responses I received when I asked the participants for descriptions of the young people they grew up around. The narratives as a whole represented a confluence of resignation, survival, agency, and at some level, as mentioned before, fate within circumstance. With regard to resignation, several of the participants stated beliefs about the environment from which they came.

Kevin, who was 20 and incarcerated at the time of our meeting, and who had previous gang affiliation gave one of the most incisive comments pursuant to survival. (I interviewed Kevin in a narrow corridor between the Fairwood Correctional Facility’s disciplinary segregation unit and the general prison population. He had been in a fight the day before and pursuant to prison policy wore close hauled handcuffs during the interview with a guard posted just on the other side of the door to the ‘disciplinary segregation unit.’) The notion of education and knowledge as empowering was a common thread shared by most of the participants. Kevin saw a paucity of knowledge as possibly fatal (Kevin was convicted of robbery in the first degree): “my people die from the lack of knowledge. I feel that a lot of Black people now especially die from a lack of knowledge.”

Speaking of his upbringing and his resignation to life in the immediacy of his early experiences he stated,

life exists in the moment and consequences are generally not thought of. You really don’t plan for the future, everybody just live for the day, it’s like you really don’t see no future outside of what you’re seeing every day. I learned…you’re seeing dope…so okay boom! that’s your aspiration and that’s what you want to be. You not seeing that you can come to prison for this, you not seeing could die from this you not seeing you know what I’m saying the bad consequences, your mother getting hurt, anybody getting hurt around you.

Matthew, 23, was another participant who was incarcerated at the time or our interview. His gang membership was conceived of as a form of support where he suggested they “brought me in as far as like a family.” This theme was furthered when expressing a desire to eventually get married, have a family, and help others through the church. Survival and finding stability was a common theme among the narratives and intermeshed with survival themes were notions of
struggle, a belief among some in a form of meritocracy, and a consistent desire for socioeconomic stability among the female participants. For instance, Catherine, 19, stated, “when you actually look at it, you know, you can’t get to that stage of having a nice house…nice cars and having a nice job until you actually get serious…you really want to have those things just because you have it in your mind don’t mean it’s right there, you have to work for it.” Betty, 27, echoed a similar sentiment: “a lot of people want things that are easy in life which is not going to last long cause it’s so easy instead of doing the hard route and really working for something.” Both Betty and Amanda, 20, expressed a desire for stability with the latter specifically seeking “financial stability and just stability in general” and the former tying it to her ideas about merit: “I just wish that you know in five years that I be at that point where I feel like I achieved a lot in my life. I’m happy and I’m comfortable and like I said I don’t have to worry about things.”

Many, if not most, claimed at least some agency and free will, although it was often delimited by perceptions of circumstance. As example Angel, 19, stated, “I’m a unique individual and I know it…some people see it, some people don’t, [and] I can’t convince anybody that I’m good but I think I am…the thing I like about myself most is I always voice my opinion.” So in some ways, and in the same statement, we have an assertion of uniqueness and a certain amount of resignation that others might not recognize this. Angel also shared a fairly negative opinion of the general nature of life: “cause it’s cruel, the world don’t treat you nice.”

Many of the participants revealed other lenses concerning where they felt they fell in the societal order in terms of economic and political power. This generally took the form of seeing one’s present socioeconomic circumstances as existing within a historical context. Pursuant to this Kevin stated,

You have to go back farther than that you have to go back so many years to the segregation. So they segregate us we always stayed in poor homes more so than White people staying in it. It’s like it never changed like we had that Emancipation Proclamation we’ve been set free but to where you didn’t have no education, you didn’t have nowhere to go, nowhere to eat I’m talking about we didn’t have no clothes, no shoes, no nothing.

Two comments that do not follow the general themes above as directly, but certainly connected to circumstance, came from Catherine and Kevin, respectively. Catherine heartbreakingly spoke of a friend “who had a child well actually she has two, [and] she just turned 18” and has an interesting take on agency with regard to fulfilling her need to be loved. She states, “her reason for having children was the fact that she wanted somebody to love her as much as she loved them so I guess it’s I don’t know if you would call it a selfish thing issue or just basically feeling lonely in the world and they just want somebody to be there.”

The second echoed gendered expectations and assumptions that were intertwined in some of the comments made regarding survival. For instance Kevin stated “almost like people say the hood is almost like a jungle…I’m talking about you have like the dominant males you have like the, you know what I’m saying, pre-dominant, I’ll say females that everybody want.” It can be gleaned from the end of Kevin’s comment that gender hierarchies played a factor in how the participants saw their place in the world. In the case of Kevin it is apparent that men are in competition and that female gain power though the male gaze. Differed gender expectations were revealed in Angel’s narrative. She reported her stepfather’s belief that “the right way of marriage is that the wife stays at home and don’t work, just take care of the babies and the husband go out and work.” She on the other hand countered with, “okay I’m living in the real world and women
do work and take care of the babies and maybe even run a household by themselves, and his thing is all woman need is a man, she needs to sit at home and do nothing and have babies and that’s just ludicrous.”

Race featured in some of the narratives, usually as a source of conflict or alienation. Jennifer, 20, who at various points in her schooling attended predominantly white county schools and predominantly African American city schools, felt that she experienced discrimination while attending the county schools. She reported that the teachers looked for excuses to mete out discipline or “to put you in special ed.” Sonya also had experience in both county and city schools, but had a different take on the import race played in her life. When she transitioned from the former to the latter she said “they used to call me white girl with black skin.” This prompted her to adapt her persona to the new circumstances, but it created a tension that still resonates with her. She stated, “I can do it both…I could be just as ghetto as you and be as sophisticated as I want to be it’s like I’m still dealing with that in my mind trying to place myself trying to [get] used to always listened to what everybody wanted me to be.”

Nancy, 21, who described herself as “biracial [and] proud that I have a lot of nationalities” spoke of her racial identity within the context of attending a school where there was a lot of racial tension. She stated, “It was pretty bad at that time...people didn’t really come together I mean I really didn’t like that because with so many races going on in my family it was just like God, White people always want to be with the White people, Black people hang with the Black people...I’m like okay Mexicans had their own little group I just don’t like to be in an environment like that...it was real uncomfortable for me.” As will be discussed later, most of the other participants were aware that there were differences between predominately white schools, but also few had experiences in both settings. What follows describes the participants’ experiences and attitudes concerning their own experiences in school and their thoughts about education in general.

**Perceptions of School**

The responses of the participants fell along four main themes concerning the emotional context of their school-related experiences, although there was some degree of overlap. The first involved looking at their experiences with, and attitudes about, discipline in schools, and their perspectives about disparities among the institutions they attended. This section primarily speaks to perceptions of how disparities exist in education, mostly based on socioeconomic status (SES). The second theme looks at caring, or more specifically their feelings about how school staff viewed them, treated them, and viewed their position as educators. The third theme looks at one of the more intangible aspects of schooling, one that broadens possible responses to communities as another facet affecting success in school. Specifically, the participants spoke of how cultural currents outside of the school itself vied for their interest and attention, and how often schools fail in this competition. The last looks at their experience with the GEDPF and its director.

**The Emotional Context: Perceptions of Discipline and Disparities**

Many of the participants felt as though they were positioned in an adversarial role with school staff. This was mostly expressed as feelings of persecution and disrespect, and of being prejudged/profiled as disruptive or disrespectful. Dennis, for instance, described a threat of vio-
lence for disciplinary infractions: “all I remember is just you know do your work when you don’t you get sent to the principal’s office if you get in trouble all they want to do is whip [you]”. Other teachers criticized the dialects spoken by their students. Devon, 26, recalled a teacher bringing a student to tears by mocking a student’s speech and saying “I don’t understand Ebonics.”

A minority of the participants held a slightly more sympathetic view of the school staff. Angel, who stated that she grew up in a poor but very protective household, was one of several of the participants who spoke to the problems teachers face with discipline in some city schools: “because they don’t teach I mean they teach, but by the children being so bad and disobedient, they don’t get to teach and if you do learn it’s you’re doing it on your own time, it’s actually you going home reading the material which that’s no help, in that case I don’t need to go to school then.” Thomas, 28, had a similar sentiment. He attended three different high schools, had a gang affiliation, and was eventually expelled for fighting. However, like Angel he expressed frustration with the lack of discipline in the classrooms he experienced, and said “kids who don’t want to be in classroom get them out, who gonna mess up the classroom as far as everybody else.” Sonya, 25, identified herself as very religious and experienced moving schools several times. Concerning the aforementioned lack of discipline, she would have preferred a more authoritarian approach: “[teachers should] be like if y’all move I’m gonna knock y’all out, like look I’m the teacher you the students I already got my education you gotta get yours.”

Amanda was a 20 year old college student whose educational experience was negatively impacted by diabetes, homelessness, and an attempted suicide while in high school. She had experience in both majority white county schools and city schools, shifting from the former to the latter due to a change in family circumstances unspecified. She revealed a perception about urban schools, one that had distinct racial overtones:

I keep making that distinction because it is different it’s very, very, very different to be in a school that is predominately White and one that is predominately Black…my mom was very afraid to put me in a city school knowing that it would be predominately Black because of course you’re not going to get the quality of education that you would get at another school.

Kevin correspondingly saw access to knowledge and power as resting in the dominant culture, and the culture in which he grew up as a hindrance with reference to how it affects the social climate within the school. He stated, “[if] I got a better opportunity for my child to learn something I would have to go to a school with less Black people…I don’t think it’s a racist thing, I think it’s has to do with some of the things associated with Black people coming to school…the environment they grew up in.”

Many of the participants perceived disparities in schools resources depending on district attended. For some this was based on belief, for others from direct experience in different schools systems—the latter participants were particularly revealing about how expectations concerning location are firmly rooted in the perception of the intersection between race and social class as related to educational equality. There was also a perceived disparity in the relative quality of their elementary and secondary educational experiences.

Both Dennis and Devon spoke to differences between the more affluent schools in the surrounding suburbs and the city schools, revolving around resources and population. Dennis, for instance, was keenly aware that there were differences between the education he received and
that of children from an affluent suburb, although he was not able to name these differences specifically. In a clear statement of class consciousness he stated,

in Vista Creek they teach you stuff like on a college level…I would have liked to learn you know stuff that normal people don’t know you know like on a higher level, basically what I’m trying to say…[is] I could be more prepared for the future you know cause…I can compare Greengrass [a lower socioeconomic urban public school] to like Vista Creek [a very affluent suburban public school] or something like that.

Devon’s perspective and experience was similar to those above in that she included a racial component in discussing the perceived differences between more affluent suburban schools and their urban counterparts:

it’s a better education when you move to a White neighborhood, they take more time, they try to make sure you know you do good, they try to make sure you understand what you’re learning. I want to say they had better books at Edison, better lunchroom food, everything was just better.

Amanda continued this theme and stated that the teachers in the predominately white county district that she initially attended were “pretty good,” and were “more like parents…one teacher actually took me in like keeping me every afternoon after school in order for my mom to work…so I guess I felt like they were more of mother figures and people trying to protect us.” By contrast at Elmwood, a city high school, she recalled,

I don’t remember learning anything there. [We] never had textbooks…they would just give us like worksheets and it seemed like to me at that time a tactic to just keep us quiet you know and keep us under control not really teaching us anything.

Thomas was also aware that some schools have better facilities and resources than others: “as far as city schools they don’t invest enough money in these schools they probably light years behind education wise.”

*The Emotional Context: Perceptions of Caring*

A lot of the criticism centered on the perceived quality of the teachers, specifically as related to their behavior related to what many of the participants viewed as personal needs and their efforts toward effective instruction. Angel had experience with both city schools and ones in a more affluent neighboring county system. Concerning the latter schools, Angel had a similar impression as the one previously reported by Amanda, “the teachers I mean they cared a lot about your education.” Monique, 43, had a much different initial upbringing growing up in the country with horses and other animals. She describes her parents as lovable and “God fearing.” She also presented the common perspective that the instruction she received in elementary school was good and that in high school this broke down with the teachers failing to explain their expectations. Matthew’s story fell along these lines. He was doing well in a trades program in high school and was kicked out for reasons he would not specify. He then moved on to selling drugs, and other criminal activities, which eventually led to a conviction for being an accessory
to an armed robbery. He stated that in elementary school he had “good teachers, good atmosphere you know it was a lot of respect between the teachers and the children,” but by middle school that changed where the environment became more violent and less relevant:

once I got to high school it just wasn’t interesting I mean the teaching…[there were] some good teachers…some that didn’t care…some teachers they just come and don’t do nothing they just tell you to do work…they need some better teachers.

Teachers were often described as inattentive, disengaged, aloof, dismissive, discouraging, or just cruel. Pedagogically they often preferred “direct” methods of instruction rather than engaging the students in processes of inquiry and dialog. Amanda, for instance, felt that the teacher’s attitudes are important and are keenly perceived by students:

Some teachers act like it’s a chore to come to school every day and of course that gives you a bad attitude about school…so when a teacher is there and they act like they want to be there and teaching you is really a passion to them then I think that’s what made me feel that they were good teachers or better teachers…teachers make a difference they really do and they affect you…you don’t realize it maybe you know at the time that it’s going on, but I would really just change how the teachers respond to the students and they treat the students.

Perceived teacher apathy was a common theme among many of the narratives. Betty, a 27-year old college student and mother of one, was potentially a student particularly in need of care given that her cousin was killed outside of their high school. She thought that the teachers didn’t try and stated, “we’re not going to try and find out why you can’t focus in class…we’re not going to try and find out why you can’t learn this…time I had teachers in high school that was like [that].” Because of these perceived attitudes, and perhaps also the backgrounds many of the student came from, most students came to hate school. Betty thought

they’re too busy on just trying to get rid of the student you know trying to find out the bad and not really trying to find out how are the kids being treated…kids not want to go to school because they feel like either the teachers are talking down towards them or not paying them any attention.

Joanna, 22, was another former student who likely would have benefitted from some nurturing attention on the part of her teachers. She lost her father young and had a brother in prison. In addition to this she became pregnant her senior year of high school. She left school for both monetary and emotional reasons related to embarrassment and depression.21 She stated,
I had a lot of complications and I had flunked out of a lot of my classes...I was so frustrated seeing my other peers and the people I grew up around in a higher grade than me...that’s so embarrassing and I was trying so hard but with me having a child trying to do night school and summer school it was just not happening and for one I didn’t have the money...it depressed me for a long time because I knew I was better than that I used to say that I was going to be the one to make something out my life.

She felt that the lack of care was something that directly led to her leaving school and spoke of those circumstances as frustrating and depressing, given that she felt she was always looked at as “the smart one that’s going to do something with her life” by her family. Indicative of the position teachers viewed themselves in relative to their students, she stated that teachers would say “please don’t raise your hand because we really don’t have enough time to take questions.” It was apparent that she internalized a perceived lack of interest in her. When asked what would have kept her in schools she replied “better teachers, a better school, a better community, a better...better friends.”

Yet another for whom childhood was difficult due to community and family circumstances was Talia. At the time of the interview she was 34 and had five children. She admitted to being raised in a dysfunctional family, and had served time for stealing to provide for her children, but gave few details of these experiences. She also spoke of the advent of crack use in the 1980s and its effects on urban communities. She felt that teacher failed to make the emotional connection:

they knew how to teach, but when it came to dealing with the child they didn’t know what to say...they would make me feel sad instead of embracing me and making me feel like I was somebody because they didn’t know what I was going through at home, instead of telling me it’s okay you know come talk to me and tell me what’s going on.

Several participants echoed the perception that some teachers were there simply for remuneration rather than out of any real care or commitment. One such was 21-year-old Christine who stated,

it just seems like they didn’t have the passion for it...it just seem like they were doing it just to do it to get a check and I don’t see why. If you don’t feel like that’s what you want to do then switch your profession because if you can’t nurture a child then I don’t see why you should be in the school system.

Thomas was blunter about his perceived lack of care on the part of teachers. He stated that were “some with good intentions, some with bad you know, they really didn’t care about education...some teachers are just there to make a check [and] sit in the classroom, hell you think they the substitute teacher how they teach.” The theme concerning remuneration rather than care was also reported by Dennis who laid some responsibility for his resignation on the part of those who he feels should have supported people in his situation. He stated,

we never really thought about the future or what we wanted to be when we grow up you know stuff like that cause like in my neighborhood I can say that teachers were there just for the money you know they never really tried to reached out to us or strive.
He further explains that this affected his motivation: “you know how some people graduate it makes them feel a certain way, I never had that feeling you know as to where I wanted to do something more.”

As an extension of this lack of care many of the participants felt that the teacher were not interested in their backgrounds, but thought this was a key component to being a successful teacher, especially among population that are mostly low SES/at-risk. Concerning this Nancy stated, “there were teachers who don’t want to know you personally or they just want you to do the work and…they weren’t interested in all that trying to conversate and just get to know you.” Thomas was as usual more emphatic: “[you need to] understand the kids there they come from man.” Angel believed that teachers need to understand the emotions of their students and said

I don’t think you can teach somebody if you don’t understand where they’re coming from like you couldn’t tell me too much about the suburbs cause I didn’t come from the suburbs so I mean like you couldn’t tell me nothing about the ghetto cause you don’t know nothing about the ghetto. I think if the teachers were more concerned about the whole well-being of the child and not just the education part, but because if you got something wrong in other areas of course it’s going to affect their education.

Catherine also spoke to the intersection of home life and school, the latter being, and needing to be, a potentially positive place for young people by stating,

it was just somewhere to get away from home…you can come to school and you can be around your friends and you know you really don’t have to worry about the problems at home…basically have an eight hour vacation every time from the problems at home.

The Emotional Context: Competing Interests

What is apparent, to be fair to schools referenced, is that there are many things outside of institutions of education that compete for students’ interest. A possible conclusion one might make is that distractions within the community are a more powerful draw for students’ attention than the schools provide. As discussed in what follows these might include the pursuit of intimate relationships, use of intoxicating substances, dysfunctional family circumstances, and violence. It is also quite possible that teachers do not possess the expectations of these students that might spur them to wholeheartedly try to understand their students’ circumstances and deploy pedagogies that would be relevant to the former. The following narratives concern whether school staff are prepared and willing to make a concerted effort to do an adequate job in piquing and holding students’ interest, both during the instructional periods and before and after school. Obviously this would likely necessitate changes in educational policy and in the allocation resources for extra-instructional activities.

Tanya, 37, was at the time of our conversation married and a mother of a son. She attributed much of her decision to leave school to being “boy crazy.” She also attributes it to a perception, in hindsight, that the school staff was unconcerned about her frequent skipping. She stated, “principal, I just don’t remember anybody coming you know and say see me so we can talk about what’s going on with you nothing like that.”
As mentioned before many of the female participants said that they left schools as the result of pregnancy. For Diane, 27, it was the allure of life within the community coupled with a stated ease in skipping school that led to this becoming a reason for her dropping out. She reported “I got pregnant and that came from me skipping school. I wasn’t able to complete the 12th grade. I had to complete a half of a semester in order to graduate and I just didn’t see it fit so I gave up.” Devon had a similar story in that she was on track to graduate, but experienced complications during pregnancy. She stated that this was the primary reason she left school: “It wasn’t because I was a dumb student or because I was having difficulty at school.”

Concerning her perception of her peers attitudes about school Catherine stated, “a lot of ‘em are thinking education is something they really don’t need to get anywhere in this lifetime when actually it’s the opposite.” Talia made a similar point in that she feels that a lot of the people she grew up with “didn’t have nobody at home telling you how important education was.” Is it possible that the people she speaks of were not demonstrated school’s relevance by those that work there?

Some of the reasons given for leaving school represented other distracting factors. Kevin stated that the reason he left may have been due to the allure of other distractions within the community, some which might be hard for a school to compete with. He stated, “so the reason why I didn’t go complete school, it’s just smoking weed, sex.” Thomas was ever terse and made the following statement echoing a familiar theme previously stated that interest in school waned for many of the participants after elementary school. He said, “I felt like school was a waste for me even though I could do some of the school work you know it wasn’t a fact that I was dumb or nothing like that cause in elementary I made A’s and B’s.”

**Views of the GEDPF**

It should be noted that there was an inherent selection bias in that the participants were GEDPF attendees and were all successful GED completers. However, what is significant are the conditions that were created to make the interactions of the participants with the GEDPF beneficial and what insight they provide concerning meeting the needs of these particular students. The views of the GEDPF were generally given in brief but positive descriptions and in stark contrast to those about the schools attended. What is interesting, on a side note, is that all of the males I quote here referred to the institution and all of the females specifically mentioned Stephen. Regardless, the GEDPF’s environment proved a socially and academically beneficial space. The following narrative excerpts paint a picture of care, discipline, and a willingness to help provide the things that many of the participants were in want or need of.

Kevin thought that the GEDPF was a big opportunity: “everybody was friendly everybody there was concerned about you to help you…it was like the exact opposite of the public schools.” Matthew stated that “it was a good experience I mean everybody that worked there they put a helping hand in,” emphasizing a common theme that the instruction at the GEDPF was much more hands-on and individualized. William, 19, was loath to give specifics about his life experiences, but did admit to having a problem with fighting. He stated that “the GEDPF was good due to a lack of distractions.” Thomas thought the experience was “real good man its people… it’s some people up here willing… willing to work with you as far as getting deep into detail and helping you learn.”
Catherine described the GEDPF as student centered and Stephen as encouraging. Concerning the latter she stated that “Stephen applauds you because you’re trying to do something.” Betty described Stephen’s helpfulness and loyalty:

I had like the summer or something and I had no daycare for my little girl and Stephen has helped me find summer camps and help me find ways to get to the places that I need to get to cause at that point in time I had no transportation…he’s not going to turn his back on you.

Angel stated that Stephen would find money to buy students groceries. Nancy highlighted Stephen’s valuing of individual student voice: “Stephen listens to what you have to say.” Joanna thought of Stephen as a father figure. Diane cried when she told me that her experience at the GEDPF was life changing. She described it as “acceptance, understanding, motivation, praise, love…I could say so much more but I just the words just they’re not there…it has been a wonderful experience.” Tanya Described Stephen as “a cheerleader.”

Elizabeth, 28, was from Kenya and attended mostly boarding schools, which she described as strict and competitive. She reported a positive experience at the GEDPF: “my experience was actually good, I liked the people, if I had any questions or whatever they’re really helpful.” Stephen emerges here as someone generally interested in the backgrounds of his students and of someone that constantly wanted to learn. As example Elizabeth describes his interest in learning Swahili: “Stephen was funny he always had something nice to say about you and he really liked to learn Swahili—he knew a few words that didn’t necessarily mean anything.” Regardless of Stephen’s linguistic abilities in Swahili the end lesson seems to be that he tried to make a connection with each and every person who came through the doors of the GEDPF.

The Response of Educators

This paper simply provides further voices describing the myriad reasons why young people in urban areas leave school. It adds to the important research already conducted, from Fine’s seminal work _Framing Dropouts_22, to more recent contributions from Tilleczek23 and Rumberger.24 The debate concerning primary causes continues. However, I am most concerned with, and what this research hopefully points to is what can be gleaned by educators concerning their, perhaps limited, but nonetheless important part in creating environments that are relevant and beneficial to the emotional and intellectual growth of their students. One of the things that I most like about qualitative research is that it is localized and interpretative. That said I think the real strength of most narratives is what is communicated in terms of the individual’s lived experiences and how that becomes a site of reflection for others.

What is obvious from what precedes is that the participants in the study were certainly aware of the context of their upbringing, aware of social class distinctions in society and its educational institutions, and aware of lingering racial tensions and related disparities. They also hold

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memories of their school experiences that speak to a profound emotional divide between what schools claim as their mission and how they are perceived by their primary constituents. From a phenomenological stance the fact that it is possible that these teachers and administrators were misunderstood, or that they were not guilty of the claims of the participants, is not the point. To paraphrase Merleau-Ponty, perceptions are prime, and those in question are largely unambiguous. Again the probative question for us today is what could be altered in teacher education or in educational policy that might lead to a more favorable view?

Simply put, this paper contends that probably the most important impetus behind student engagement and learning, emotional understanding, and connection is widely ignored in teacher education in favor of narrowly defined training in “classroom management.” The result, as voiced by the participants in this project, is a demonstrable difference in the attitudes these young adults had about their K-12 teachers, and that environment, and those concerning their experience with the instructional staff at the GEDPF. The paper further contends the teacher education, more completely developed, should move beyond limited behavioral expectations to include emotional and cultural understanding in an effort to make the aforementioned intangibles more easily apprehended and accommodated. What this leaves us with concerns the context in which teachers might embrace and learn about students’ lived experiences, and beliefs about schooling, and encourage those students to engage in a personal and communal learning process, to a large extent on their own terms. This allows us to move from a deficit model to one that allows for and draws strength from what the students bring with them into the classroom. What I hope is that pre and in-service teachers will listen to the voices like the ones presented here and elsewhere and use them as a heuristic to earnestly and sincerely attempt to apprehend each of their student’s identities, aspirations, and experiences. The question for us today is how does each of these narratives speak to something that should be addressed in teacher education, pedagogical practice, or in educational policy?

Bibliography


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"Excellent sheep" is the best way to describe the students who seek to and actually attend our most elite colleges and universities, William Deresiewicz argues in his 2014 book, Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life. And Deresiewicz offers an equally scathing portrait of the elite colleges and universities that create these sheep-like students by means of ill-conceived admissions policies.

Abstract

Not everyone worries about what goes on in America’s best colleges and universities—places like Williams, Cornell, Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Stanford—and not everyone needs to. But we should all care that some people look into such things, as William Deresiewicz has done in Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life (New York: Free Press, 2014). We should all hope that our best institutions offer their students the very best education. But, as the title of Deresiewicz’s book suggests, he thinks this is far from the case. This readable, challenging, dinsightful and yet problematic book not only calls out the institutions for the education they are offering; it also calls out the rest of us. Too many of us—parents, teachers, students, and interested citizens alike—have our own limited and skewed vision of a college education.

Overview of the Book

The miseducation Deresiewicz worries about does not begin after students step on the coveted campuses of elite colleges and universities. Rather, that miseducation starts with parents and with educators in elite private and public K—12 schools—each of whom is all too aware of the strenuous, often outrageus, admissions processes put in place by elite schools. From a very young age children are thrown into a whirlwind of indefensibly high extracurricular participation, SAT and ACT prep classes, tutoring sessions, and advanced placement courses. Learning and experience are no longer ends in themselves, but simple means to achieving admission to the elite university the student dreams of attending. These are students, according to Deresiewicz, who have been taught that education means nothing more than “doing your homework, getting
the answers, acing the test.” They see no larger purpose. “They’ve learned to ‘be a student,’ not to use their minds” (p. 13).

If these young sheep manage to accumulate an adequate number of gold stars and survive the admissions process, the meaninglessness continues. Students are typically thrown into a deepening cycle of incoherent general education and elective courses under the guise that such courses will develop the students’ moral character on their way to settling on a major they (or their parents, peers, or social class) feel is best suited for them. Economics is the most popular major at elite colleges and universities, Deresiewicz reports, and finance and consulting have emerged as the most coveted careers (p. 16, 17).

Often it is inertia (p. 20) rather than greed that is the driving force behind choosing these majors and careers (although we might assume high beginning salaries would also have something to do with it). Rather than risking the loss of the praise that their psyches have, at this point, been conditioned to need, students lose themselves in the pack and follow a well-worn path. They play it safe (p. 20, 21). They feel almost forced to choose a career that isn’t “beneath” them (p. 25).

Everything our leading colleges and universities teach, Deresiewicz claims, is now vocational because of the spirit in which subjects are taught. “Elite schools like to boast that they teach their students how to think,” Deresiewicz claims, “but all they mean at this point is that they train them in the analytic and rhetorical skills that are necessary for success in business and the professions” (p. 63). Entering students may hear a speech or two along the way that encourages them to ask “the big questions,” but mostly they are taught how to answer the little questions central to specific fields (p. 64). Academic rigor is gone (p. 64) and college has become a business (pp. 67-70).

Can this be the education we should want for the exceedingly bright and capable students who are privileged to study at our best universities? Should the end or purpose of higher education be so narrowly utilitarian? Are college years spent at these schools supposed to be about acquiring vocational skills and establishing social relationships so these students can attain the status, wealth, and social recognition they (and their parents) believe they deserve—and so they can eventually give lots of money back to the universities that made all this possible?

Deresiewicz argues for something better, deeper, richer. The first thing college is for, he argues, is “to teach you to think,” especially to think “with rigor”—to think “precisely, patiently, responsibly, remorselessly” not just about ideas ingrained in us, but about all the new and wonderful ideas to which we should be introduced (p. 79, 81). The purpose of college “is to enable you to live more alertly, more responsibly, more freely: more fully” (p. 82). Or, as Deresiewicz puts it, the purpose of college is to “build a self.”

Deresiewicz thinks all freshmen need to hear what freshmen at Columbia were told on the first day of class by the “legendary” Columbia professor, Edward Tayler: “You’re here to build a self,” he apparently told them (p. 83). That’s a serious business for Deresiewicz, and he borrows Keat’s phrase “a vale of Soul-making” (p. 83) to indicate what is at stake in the effort. “Everyone is born with a mind,” Deresiewicz writes,

but it is only through this act of introspection, of self-examination, of establishing communication between the mind and the heart, the mind and experience, that you become an individual, a unique being—a soul. And that is what it means to develop a self. (p. 84)
Deresiewicz wants students to make themselves interesting, and what makes someone interesting, he says, “is reading, thinking, slowing down, having long conversations, and creating a rich inner life for yourself” (p. 86, 87). Deresiewicz challenges students to “invent” their lives. That involves, among other things, finding a vocation or meaningful work, having ideals, embracing risk, challenging the ideas of parents and others, taking a “gap” year to explore life options, serving others, and taking leadership roles.

Formerly a professor of English at Yale, Deresiewicz certainly believes the humanities—and Great Books in particular—should play a central role in helping students “build selves.” “The humanities—history, philosophy, religious studies, above all, literature and the other arts—are the record of the ways that people have come to terms with being human.” The humanities investigate “[q]uestions of love, death, family, morality, time, truth, God, and everything else within the wide, starred universe of human experience” (p. 156). The arts give particular help in the search for the self and are especially valued by Deresiewicz. When thinking about a poem, a sculpture, or a piece of music we ask “Is it true for me?” (p. 160, italics in the original). “Is it true for me,” Deresiewicz writes, then, “Does it make sense, not to me but of me.” The essential experience of art is in this “That’s me!” moment—as we see ourselves in the other and the other in ourselves (p. 161). But, he says, we ought not to look for something like “Truth” in the humanities, especially in art. Truth has been multiple and personal, not settled and dogmatic, since the work of science and the critique of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (p. 156).

But an education in the humanities is lost in our elite colleges and universities to the vast majority of students committed to setting themselves up for a socially and economically secure and even privileged future.

In the final chapters Deresiewicz offers solutions to the problems he’s outlined throughout the book, many of which are attainable. He wants colleges and universities to change their admissions process so more and different students can be admitted—so not just the excellent sheep who collect the most gold stars get to attend our elite colleges and universities. He wants a weighting of SAT scores that accounts for socioeconomic status. He wants to revisit an idea that was proposed in the 1990s—that affirmative action policies should be based on class rather than race. Deresiewicz wants colleges and universities to eliminate admissions preference for legacies and athletes—a change, he argues, that would do much to counteract a self-perpetuation of the elite (p. 235).

Still, these changes are not enough. According to Deresiewicz, “it is time for the hereditary meritocracy…the elite as a whole…to start to undertake its own self-overcoming.” The elite must finally admit that the system no longer works and gather the courage to create a different system altogether (p. 235). Universal higher education is necessary to provide all individuals a first-rate education, and the elite must be willing to make sacrifices for the greater good (pp. 237-239). Universal higher education isn’t cheap, of course, but Deresiewicz believes that the money is there if we only stop spending it on the wrong things. We must be willing to “tame the $700 billion gorilla of defense, defeat the prison lobby in the states, and raise a lot more money” (p. 240). Raising more money, not surprisingly, means raising taxes. He suggests that “[i]f businesses want workers who are better trained, they’re going to have to help the rest of us pay for them” (p. 240). And the families who have the means to send their children to elite schools are going to have to contribute, too—and not just families of the “one percent” that everybody likes to talk about, but also upper middle class families who also rig the economic system for their own good and the good of their children. We give lip service to equal opportunity, Deresiewicz
claims, but we “all know, in our heart of hearts, that social mobility is a zero-sum game. For every person who climbs up the income distribution, someone else falls down” (p. 241). Privileged families are not too worried about all the hoops their children have to go through in order for them to gain admission to elite colleges. These hoops are expensive, and the expense eliminates competition from below. That this prep work comes at some cost to the happiness of these children may be regrettable, but also necessary.

Deresiewicz wants all this reformed. “If we are to create a decent society,” he writes, “a just society, a wise and prosperous society, a society where children can learn for the love of learning and people can work for the love of work,” then we must be willing to promote a system of equal opportunity. “We don’t have to love our neighbors as ourselves,” he writes, “but we need to love our neighbor’s children as our own” (p. 242). And we’re not even close to doing that.

Our Problems with the Book

Readers will have to choose for themselves if they think Deresiewicz’s political and economic solutions are either appropriate or possible. Long-standing and closely-held political values will help determine how one feels about his final chapter. Current political stalemates and continuing arguments over such things as the Affordable Care Act suggest something of the reception Deresiewicz’s ideas are likely to receive. Policy makers and the elite as a whole—those Deresiewicz deems “brilliant, gifted, energetic, yes, but also anxious, greedy, bland, and risk-averse, with no courage and no vision” and lacking in “beliefs, values, and principles” (p. 228, 229)—are the same individuals he now expects will courageously envision a new system built on the beliefs, values, and principles they lack. Unless the elect undergo a sudden change of heart, this contradictory solution is rendered improbable at best. This contradiction might only get resolved gradually, when solutions that can be enacted within the higher education system, discussed above, begin to change some attitudes—if elite institutions can produce a new privileged graduate capable of greater vision and more sympathetic values.

In other ways, however Deresiewicz’s book should be well received. Excellent sheep don’t just go to Harvard, Yale, Cornell, and other elite colleges and universities—they go to every college and university. It may well be that good numbers of the best of these sheep go to the best colleges and universities, but every honors program or scholarship program at every college and university is full of those students who have lost the purpose of education in their mad attempts to earn enough gold stars to be admitted to a preferred college and gain a scholarship. We’ll bet that every reader of Deresiewicz’s book who is at all familiar with how things work in college admissions and scholarship decision-making will appreciate his description of these students and the admissions and scholarship criteria that require the sheep-like behavior of applicants. And we’ll bet that most will approve of his desire for students to worry more about self-building than future-building that is limited to a vision of financial security and worries about social status. Certainly we resonated with his concerns.

We also appreciated his writing in more general ways, save for his decision to switch, on occasion, to a 2nd person almost letter-writing style addressed to the young people he worries about so much—a switch these two readers found puzzling and a little annoying. And shame on Deresiewicz and Free Press, the publishing company, for how they handled—or didn’t handle—footnotes in the book, especially given Deresiewicz’s penchant for quoting other authors. No footnotes, endnotes, or list of references appears in the back of the book—only a final line that
states readers should go to a website for source notes and suggestions for further reading. The website is only minimally helpful. Readers interested in the particular quotes used by Deresiewicz will have to search entire books or articles as neither Deresiewicz nor his publishers felt the need to provide page numbers or other clues to the exact location of quotes.

Maybe this kind of sloppiness happened because Deresiewicz didn’t understand himself to be writing an “academic” book—a book that conducts a sustained argument that develops, unwinds, or critiques the arguments of others—but, instead, a more popular book, a conversation-starter, a book that challenges those working in elite institutions, or a book that speaks personally to young people wanting to attend such schools. This may be why Deresiewicz slides so easily—too easily, we would maintain—around ideas like “self-building” and its relation to the soul, to truth (or Truth), and to “the tradition” as he makes his argument about the kinds of things our best institutions should provide their students. But we are afraid Deresiewicz’s haste costs him a better argument about the best kind of education our best institutions might offer their students.

Much of what happens in college often gets described as an effort of students to “find themselves”—to try new things, to envision new possibilities, to study new areas—to find out what they’re good at, interested in, or passionate about. Deresiewicz is right to worry that students from privileged families who come to school already having chosen an economics major and a banking future miss all this self-discovery. That’s why he spends so many pages challenging students, in his 2nd person style, to “invent” their lives—to choose a meaningful life, have “ideals,” embrace risk, challenge the ideas of parents, serve others, etc.

To read books—especially Great Books understood to be part of “the tradition”—is part of this self-discovery. There is a “That’s me!” moment of recognition that can happen, and often does happen, in the reading of a great novel, poem, or play—and it can happen, though less often and in a less direct way, in the reading of a great work of philosophy or religion. The Great Books reading Deresiewicz encourages addresses the perennial “Who am I?” question that is at the heart of the kind of self-discovery so important to college students.

But there is another version of the “Who am I?” question that points less to self-recognition than to critical reflection. Allan Bloom writes the following in his 1987 book The Closing of the American Mind:  How Higher Education has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students:

> Despite all the efforts to pervert it…the question that every young person asks, “Who am I?,” the powerful urge to follow the Delphic command, “Know thyself,” which is born in each of us, means in the first place “What is man?” And in our chronic lack of certainty, this comes down to knowing the alternative answers and thinking about them. (p. 21)

A liberal education, in this reading, is less about the “Ah ha!” moment of discovery than it is about a sustained search—a sustained search, we might say, for the truth of things. But to say the “T” word—capitalized or not—is to open up the biggest and most controversial can of worms, and Deresiewicz, like most moderns, doesn’t want to go there. Science and the Enlightenment, Deresiewicz has told us, should have taken care of any crazy notions we might have had about absolute truth.

The “What is man?” question can take us anywhere. Socrates spent his life discussing with other men and with himself opinions about what virtue is, what love is, what justice is, what piety is, and more—that is, Socrates spent his whole life trying to discover the “truth” about
these things (See Bloom, 1987, p. 179). And that’s what the “tradition” does, too. The “tradition” is nothing more or less than a sustained argument conducted by the best and clearest thinkers in our history about what is true about us, our lives, and our world. A liberal education in places that take this tradition seriously—places like the University of Chicago and St. John’s College—is an initiation into these ideas and the manner of thinking about such things. What it isn’t is an easy way into self-discovery that stops with moments of self-recognition.

Finding vocation, creating ideals, challenging authority, and the joy of self-discovery—all that can and should happen in the serious reading of books central to the tradition. But that’s never the reason to read these books or to view art carefully—never the reason to study a particular text or work of art and talk with others about it. What matters most is the truth these works contain. What matters most is the passion the student has for seeking the truth in a particular work—sometimes even a fear that the truth of the work will elude the seeker, that he or she will miss it, or misunderstand it, or not fully comprehend it, or not be able to connect it to the larger dialogue in the tradition. What matters is the sometimes desperate “I have to have this” grasping of the student—the sense the student has that if he or she doesn’t grasp the truth of this piece that he or she will have missed something that would have profoundly changed his or her life. This is never really a desire that celebrates too long over moments of self-recognition. Gratefulness is the more usual response: Why do I deserve the privilege of receiving this wisdom that has the power to correct my understanding and right my life?

“[L]onging for completeness is the longing for education,” Bloom (1987) writes, “and the study of it is education” (p. 133). Bloom means more, in saying this, than what Deresiewicz intends when he proposes that the purpose of education is to build a self. Deresiewicz would surely disagree and would likely point to passages where he argues that college should prepare students for the living of serious, thoughtful lives. But, for Bloom, “longing for completion” means realizing the highest possible ends for man. That requires an unceasing desire to know these ends—and that’s the subject and purpose of education. That requires a life of seeking, the shape and direction for which must be given during the college years. Deresiewicz never quite honors or describes “completeness” as the end of education, nor does he capture the power or madness of the longing—that erotic power that consumes the seeker and demands satisfaction. Yes, every student has a “self” they want to realize. Bloom (1987) is as aware of this as anyone and explains the emergence of the concept of the self in the modern world (p. 173-179). But there is something higher to seek with one’s life. Socrates didn’t have time to seek self-realization. He was after the truth of things.

Certainly the excellent sheep who want to attend elite colleges and universities, major in economics, and become financial planners to the wealthy may have corrupted their longing for completeness. In fact, there is no “may have” about it: the eros Bloom talks about, or the divine madness of Socrates, or what we have described just above as the desperate grasping of students for the truth of things—all this is corrupted in these students. But our very best colleges and universities don’t need to stand for this, even if they want to keep their prestigious law schools, medical schools, and business schools at the graduate level. Our best colleges and universities should not be places where undergraduate students go only to invent their lives; neither should they be places students go in order to secure their place in the social and economic order. They need to be places where seekers go to find people, books, art, academic disciplines, and experiences that help them complete themselves in the truest and deepest ways possible.
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