

Book Review

What's Wrong With Our Schools and How We Can Fix Them

Michael C. Zwaagstra, Rodney A. Clifton, & John C. Long
Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010

Reviewed by: Simon Blakesley
Whitehorse, Yukon

I most often approach books offering “fixes” with a certain measure of caution. I base this on the fact that, from my experience such books often address the complex topic(s) raised by the author(s) from a relatively limited or superficial perspective. Sadly, my sense of caution was validated as I engaged with *What's Wrong With Our Schools and How We Can Fix Them*. To position myself in relation to the topics the book examines, I should say that I have been a public school teacher and administrator for the past 23 years. I have taught all grades from K-12, and adults in vocational, college, and university streams in a variety of settings. My post-graduate research examined the principalship and schools in northern Canadian and Indigenous contexts. It is from this multiplicity of perspectives that I offer the following observations on this book.

About the book

The philosophical approach of the book is as follows: (a) traditional methods in public education are good, and (b) efforts to stray from them are misguided. “Romantic progressive” approaches to education are unwise and should be avoided or abandoned if already subscribed to. In presenting their perspective, the authors rely heavily on E. D. Hirsch, Jr., founder of the Core Knowledge Foundation, and Professor Emeritus of Education at the University of Virginia, and author of such works as *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them* (1996) to support their arguments. The perspectives of progressive educators including Paolo Friere, Maxine Green, Michael Apple, Peter McLaren, and William Ayers are called into question early on, with the authors challenging the view of schools as vehicles for social change. In particular, Alfie Kohn is identified as ill-informed, misguided, and incorrect in relation to such topics as discipline, student-centred instruction, rote learning, or schools as democratic places. His practice is considered inconsistent with his student-centered philosophy, based on the authors' indication that Kohn has employed the lecture method when presenting to adults.

The book is divided into three parts, all sub-divided into 14 short, topical chapters, and followed by a concluding chapter. The chapters follow a set structure: A vignette is presented in the Prologue, followed by an Introduction summarising the episode. A situation in which some form of discomfort or dissatisfaction is experienced by a teacher, parent(s), a student, or

university student of education is portrayed. Two opposing or conflicting perspectives are presented on the central issue raised in the vignette. Arguments for and against the concern are then presented, followed with recommendations by the authors. A briefly annotated bibliography concludes the chapter. While this structure makes an individual chapter readable and accessible, I found that when reading from the beginning it became quite predictable and repetitive by the latter stages of the book.

Part 1 of the book is titled "Some Things Are Fundamental," and presents six chapters examining such topics as subject content and a "core knowledge" that all schools should teach. In this first section, topics ranging from inclusion and exclusion of students, tests, discipline, and "effective" teachers are explored. In the final two chapters of Part 1, the authors explain how some teachers are better than others, and how the "good" teachers should be rewarded on a performance-based system. With respect to schools, the authors advocate for parental choice of schools, the need for greater accountability of schools and teachers, and the use of standardized assessments as a key measure of student achievement.

Part 2, organized under the heading "Some Things Are Practical," is again divided into six chapters. Chapter 7, titled "Classrooms Should Be Teacher-Centered," presents what could be considered an extreme example of student-centeredness to make the point that classrooms should be teacher-led. In order to reinforce their argument, the authors employ the example of a pass/fail driving test at a driving academy to underscore their perspective on the ill-advised nature of student-centered approaches in classrooms. In such a scenario, the student would set their own goals and decide on how to drive, the instructor serving as a facilitator and fellow learner who lets the student explore their own driving methods. Reinforcing their call for a greater application of teacher-centered approaches, the authors offer that there are already too many traffic accidents, thus concluding: ". . . the absurdity of a thoroughly student-centered educational philosophy applied to a driving school speaks for itself. Why then do we allow this philosophy to dominate many public schools and schools of education?" (p.100). Building further on this argument, the following chapter explores direct, "traditional" instruction, the authors stating: "We commend teachers who courageously and tenaciously continue to use direct teaching and other traditional methods for the sake of their students' learning" (p. 111). In chapter 9, rote learning and practice are reinforced, using musical examples to "drill" the point home that repeated practice and repetition are important for student understanding. This section ends with two chapters exploring the importance of grades as indicators of achievement, and the "misguided" nature of social promotion.

Part 3, titled "Some Things Are Distracting," is comprised of two brief chapters. The first sets its sights on the self-serving nature of teacher unions, cautioning teachers and parents to ask whether teachers' unions serve the public interest when representing teachers' interests. In the final chapter professors of education and progressive educational thought are typified as employing "jargon, edu-speak, or edu-babble" (p. 169) and, therefore, students of education who wish to become teachers must use "edu-babble" in order to succeed in their courses. Rather than presenting a balanced view of pedagogy, ranging from teacher-led direct instruction to student-centered activities based on the needs and ages of students, the nature of the activity, and the intended learning outcomes, the authors position these two approaches as being in competition with and counter to each other, rather than complementary, contextually-dependent instructional approaches.

Analysis

In my estimation, the book's primary focus is on schools as places where factors mediating student achievement are located. In doing so, I think that the authors present too narrow a view, and miss the opportunity to encourage readers to take a broader, sociological perspective of schools and schooling. The authors present a view of schools which does not take into account community culture, geographic location, socio-economic factors, and historical context in which they are situated. While the conception of schooling that the authors present may be well-suited to urban and southern locations it may not, based on my experience, fit as well with rural, isolated, or impoverished areas. The "traditional" pedagogical practices advocated by the authors appear to neither take into account these important nuances, nor consider parental experiences in schools, and how their experiences may mediate their ability to trust and engage with schools in the manner which the authors describe. While an attempt by the authors to suggest that community and school context may be a factor mediating educational outcomes is presented in the closing pages of the book, I feel that this stated view comes too late, requires greater attention, and should be positioned at an earlier stage in the development of their argument.

I found the language employed in the book, particularly when presenting concepts counter to the traditional and pragmatic methods the authors recommend, to be a clear signal of their biases. For example, progressive approaches to education or "partial truths" are deemed to be "myths," a "war" of ideas where "allies" form two opposing camps (one guided by "common sense" and "wisdom," the other in need of "rescue" from "failure"). To their credit, the authors clearly declare their perspective "up front" in the introduction of the book, leaving little question on the part of the reader as to their educational philosophy. In sum, I found that such polarized language served to weaken the authors' claims rather than make their arguments more convincing.

I believe this book would appeal to those seeking justification for a greater focus on what the authors refer to as "traditional" approaches to education. The authors' arguments in favour of approaches involving, for example, greater use of standardized testing, a reliance on rote learning, or direct instruction, would certainly provide support for readers wanting or needing to defend their own traditional practices.

Having said that, I must say I do not wish to suggest that this book is not an informative and engaging read on a number of important educational topics. It is, particularly when presenting arguments on homework, inclusion, and mainstreaming. The authors point to the need for homework to be judiciously assigned by teachers, and to be practical and relevant. This notwithstanding, the caution I expressed at the beginning of this review was justified when I read the section that began with the introduction, subtitled "Whatever Happened to Common Sense"? The term "common sense" implies a common understanding or acceptance that what the authors identify as problematic or in need of fixing in schools would be commonly agreed upon by all readers. I suggest that such a position should be taken with caution, particularly in a multicultural and pluralistic society such as Canada's where the ends of education are manifold and contested. With respect to the valued ends of education, it becomes clear (particularly in chapters focusing on homework, assessment, and grading) that a valued end of K-12 education are marks and percentages suitable for college and university acceptance. These may not be the readers' shared "common sense" goals.

I offer that the examination of what is “wrong with our schools” requires a broader lens than that through which the authors view and examine schools. I note that, for example, while the authors present the problem from the perspective of students, parents, and teachers, those of vice-principals, principals, superintendents, or board members are absent. Their inclusion would have helped, I feel, to offer readers a broader range of perspectives with respect to the matters raised by the authors. While the authors’ argument that student achievement is mediated by teacher effects, school environment, and levels of resourcing, it falls short of presenting a more complete portrait of the factors affecting student achievement by not including discussions on student attendance, parents’ income, education level, and occupational status.

Concluding thoughts

While I believe a value of this book is that it examines school practices closely, and is highly accessible to readers given its structure, the authors have, perhaps, missed an opportunity to promote broader educational conversations than those initiated by the book as it is written. Schools do not exist in a vacuum, thus their examination requires that the broader societal, economic, cultural, and political forces be taken into account should a goal be to foster more thorough and broader educational debates and perspectives. Greater scrutiny needs to be given to matters of representation, governance, culture, voice, and community engagement, placing an emphasis on the study of schools within their communities, and vice-versa. While the authors advocate numerous times for “common sense” in this book, I am reminded of the adage “there is nothing common about common sense,” further validating my feeling of caution expressed earlier, when “fixes” are applied to otherwise complex topics. When considering their recommendations, the authors are, nevertheless, tinkering with a system paradigmatically rooted in an Industrial Age model, still scheduled on an agrarian timetable. This raises the larger question whether it is a broader lens that would be of utility, or instead a fresh perspective on schools and schooling that is ultimately required.

References

- Hirsch, E. D., Jr. (1996). *The schools we need and why we don't have them*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Zwaagstra, M., Clifton, R., & Long, J. (2010). *What's wrong with our schools and how we can fix them*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Simon Blakesley is a school administrator in Whitehorse, Yukon. A graduate of the University of British Columbia Ph.D. Educational Studies program, his research interests include educational leadership in northern and rural contexts, the role of identity in leadership constructions, and education policy. He has published in journals such as *Compare: A Journal of Comparative Education*, *The Canadian Journal of Education*, *The Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, and *The Northern Review*.