

Book Review

Public Education Under Siege

Michael B. Katz and Mike Rose, editors
Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013.

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The impetus for the book came from a collection of essays designed for a special series on public education for *Dissent*, the political and social criticism magazine. The editors develop a broad analysis of the topic in this book, commissioning additional works to support the series' direction. Authors were selected based on a shared interest in challenging the current ideology of American public education. The subsequent essays are wielded as critiques of mainstream public education reform. The result is intended to critically examine American technocratic education reform, a term used by multiple authors without lengthy definition in the text. Despite this, each contributor addresses the idea of technocratic education reform, with the consensus from the essays being that technocratic education reform privileges economic factors. According to this logic, the education system must produce workers who can stimulate the economy. The public's investment of assets into the education system must sufficiently yield productive members—whose necessary contributions are defined according to the technocratic hegemony—and these must outweigh its liabilities of those who do not. In *Public Education Under Siege*, concepts including the perils of and alternatives to technocratic reform and education, race, and poverty are used to act as framework of recurring themes in the book's chapters that critically examine social underpinnings that perpetuate technocratic reform.

The use of the word "siege" in the title of this collection sets an immediate tone meant to convey the position of its editors and their purpose in compiling such an anthology. Considering siege in the context of mainstream education reform—distinct in its terminology from the word "revolution"—strikes an engaging balance. Siege is represented by the editors to be understood as a persistent attack, typically with a military connotation. Readers of the text are likely to be teachers, professors, students, and policy makers who are interested in a critical perspective of American education reform. This positions the text as trying to seek out the enemy of public education, and to find what is responsible for holding the institution in a captive position. While the priming offered by siege is effective, its use is limited to the title alone. Thus, the framework upon which to build the individually themed essays remains underdeveloped. Using the word "siege" as a concept within educational contexts has been explored by Aronowitz and Giroux (1985, 1993) for the past several decades; in turn, the book takes this already established focus and directs it to technocratic reform and accompanying social constructs.

What is the enemy, then? The editors and contributors see the enemy as the inequities and inequalities that plague the social structure of the American education system, particularly those that are economic, geographical, and racial. More specifically, the thrust of the book's argument decries mainstream education reform that individualizes the issues and blames teachers as the

ineffectual cog in the system that is considered turning toward economic prosperity. The perils and alternatives to technocratic reform are underscored with social constructs that are considered as overlooked systems. This lack of regard for these systems derails the educational process as it moves from theory to practice.

The application of market principles to the education system combined with high-stakes tests is considered a response to what is summed up as “accountability.” Proponents of technocratic reform place blame for the current state of education on teachers, their unions, and teacher education programs, without appropriate consideration of the systems exerted on teachers and how they are taught to work. The individual essays that comprise the book’s chapters focus on four major concepts, illustrating how the mainstream education reform movement frames education merely as a technocratic system. First, the movement lacks a contextualized philosophy and theory of teaching and learning. Second, an unincorporated history of American education and reform furthers the disparity of understanding, contextualizing the contemporary circumstances and issues. Third, current methods of American educational reform fail to extend consideration of the systematic inequalities and diversity that individuals carry into, and experience, within the classroom. Finally, the education reform movement results in an imbalance on the issues that reform critics claim to be the most significant factors shaping public education. The critics call for a system that subverts the prioritization of education as a demand for “getting it right” by becoming a vehicle of economic stimulus. An insistence that testing is the most valid means to assess students, and thereby their teachers’ proficiency does not reliably measure what reformers seek to ascertain, let alone those who seek a system outside the status quo.

Unfortunately, the authors do not heed their own directive in considering the aspects education reformists fail to consider. While impossible to cover the array of issues surrounding a critical perspective on education reform, some of the matters concerning what education reform lacks—which are succinctly identified by the essayists—fail to be engaged within the analysis of the book. For example, the text problematizes the absence of a developed theory of learning that informs current educational reform, since this underdevelopment fuels the technocratic aspect of reform. The aforementioned lack of theory remains unchallenged because the editors place significant weight on the problem of poverty and its impact on the education system instead. This singular focus on economic capital is a key link to the problematic issue of considering education as the answer for the country’s economy. The omission of other constructs misconstrues the importance of the educational process with implied but not explored human capital, economic, philosophical, and underdeveloped theoretical foundations that undermine what education represents. As a result, the democratic underpinnings of education are superseded by political agendas. A deeper exploration of the class relations that underpin issues in the classroom, and the push for education to become the font of economic stimulus, could be further developed with an incorporation of Marxist theory to consider these power dynamics (e.g., Marx & Engels, 1875[1975]). Likewise, a Bourdieuan notion of cultural capital in the context of understandings that which students bring, or do not bring, to their own learning processes, would round out the argument. Incorporating the works of these theorists would contextualize the assumed position of the works that largely establish the baseline from which students are marked throughout their education (Bourdieu, 1986). What the editors highlight well is that outcome-driven reform assigns blame: it does not explore the myriad issues that layer and stratify complex systems of teaching and learning. In the context of American education, the rhetoric of reform individualizes the issue by “pointing the finger” at teachers and

teacher education programs for the problems that plague education. The insight that blame is dissociated from control is a keen one for how these two can be so easily cleaved, particularly as power and authority continue to distance themselves through bureaucratic processes. Yet the associated accountability can remain firmly located at the level of execution. Conversely, the governmental influence in quotidian education reform—meaning to say, the presumed governmental engagement with education reform as it is discussed in political forums, also must consider how it is executed on a daily basis in the classroom—embodies the same patterns of the American welfare state, positioning the school as an agent of socialization that produces and reflects these inequalities.

Each essay acts as an individual piece capable of being analyzed individually; however, as a collection knit together the emerging pattern pinpoints how the editors see education as being “under siege.” The balance of critical and provoking themes and concepts provides a contemporary analysis of an American viewpoint, though it can be applied to other contexts so long as there is an understanding of the power dynamics between and within education systems. Isolating the factors that comprise the American education system fragments them, which obscures the infrastructures that are affected by, and impose their own effect on, teachers, students, and schools. Overall, this book can provide insight into how a siege can be used as a metaphorical tool for educational researchers, students, and teachers as they struggle against the inequities and inequalities that immobilize the American education system.

References

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