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Putting *No Child Left Behind* Behind Us: Rethinking Education and Inequality

Abstract

This review examines four books that may offer some insight into what the discussion about educational policy, reform, and performance may look like after the era of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Collectively, *The Allure of Order: High Hopes, Dashed Expectations, and the Troubled Quest to Remake American Schooling* by Jal Mehta, *Too Many Children Left Behind: The US Achievement Gap in Comparative Perspective* by Bruce Bradbury and colleagues, *Despite the Best Intentions: How Racial Inequality Thrives in Good Schools* by Amanda E. Lewis and John B. Diamond*; and Toxic Schools: High-Poverty Education in New York and Amsterdam* by Bowen Paulle show that concerns with school accountability are now embedded in broader discussions about the importance of investing in children, families, and schools and how the internal dynamics of schools either support or frustrate those investments. We hope that these works represent a trend toward thinking that is less ahistorical and reductionist and more empirically grounded than some of the thinking driving educational reforms when No Child Left Behind was passed.

Keywords: urban education, school reform, educational policy, educational inequality, achievement gaps, minority students

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The ambitious *No Child Left Behind* legislation (NCLB) was enacted in 2001 at a moment of bi-partisan support for accountability and sanctions for poorly performing schools. It remains an apt symbol of how the discussion on education and inequality has been framed over the last couple of decades. Its recent demise may signal a moment of recalibration, or perhaps only another round of old ideas in education being re-named and re-packaged. Four recently published books—*The Allure of Order: High Hopes, Dashed Expectations, and the Troubled Quest to Remake American Schooling* by Jal Mehta (Oxford University Press, 2013); *Too Many Children Left Behind: The US Achievement Gap in Comparative Perspective* by Bruce Bradbury, Miles Corak, Jane Waldfogel, and Elizabeth Washbrook (Russell Sage Foundation, 2015); *Despite the Best Intentions: How Racial Inequality Thrives in Good Schools* by Amanda E. Lewis and John B. Diamond (Oxford University Press, 2015); and *Toxic Schools: High-Poverty Education in New York and Amsterdam* by Bowen Paulle (University of Chicago Press, 2013)—may offer some hints at what the discussion might look like post-NCLB.

Jal Mehta's *The Allure of Order* takes NCLB as its point of departure, arguing that the legislation's limited effectiveness should not have been surprising given the long history of similar top-down efforts to rationalize schools and re-order them along more business-like lines. The Progressive movement of the late 19th and early 20th century, the standards-based reform movement of the 1960s and '70s, and the more recent movement symbolized by NCLB, shared, by Mehta's judgement, a history of disappointing results, leading to the book's central question: "Why have American reformers repeatedly invested such high hopes in these instruments of control despite their track record of mixed results at best? What assumptions…underlie these repeated attempts to 'rationalize' schooling?" (2).

We suspect that Mehta's premise that the long history of poor results in public education stem from business-like school reforms will not meet with universal accord. He does not provide a systematic presentation of the evidence to support the conclusion that attempts to rationalize schools have failed; it is essentially argument by assertion. Some critics might point out that reforms with other philosophical foundations do not necessarily have such a proud history, either. Some may hesitate at the assertion, even with the author's careful qualifications, that something reasonably called a standards-based movement existed in the 1960s and 1970s. His relatively favorable stance toward portfolio districts—school districts that include a variety of school types, including charters and traditional schools, perhaps for-profit schools—will strike some as a curveball, since advocates for portfolio districts also tend to be advocates for the reforms Mehta spends the book criticizing.

Even those who question some of Mehta's premises, however, are likely to profit from his elegant historical detail and careful conceptualizations. One important example of the latter is the chapter showing that an idea like standards-based reform works out to mean one thing in a blue state like Maryland, another in a purple state like Michigan, and something still different in a red state like Utah. Similarly, his emphasis on the robustness of reforms—in his terms, how "thick" or "thin" they are—introduces a way of thinking about change that receives far too little attention. Above all, many readers will appreciate the intellectual force behind what may be the book's most important contention: We are currently going at the problem backwards, emphasizing sanctions and controls at the end of the process, driven by student outcomes. We would be far better off investing more heavily on the front end, by recruiting teachers more carefully, compensating them better, providing real and constant opportunities for professional

growth, and then entrusting the improvement of schools to them rather than to ever-more stringent regulations. In sum, we should raise teaching to the level of a real profession.

The other three books reviewed in this essay do not necessarily disagree with Mehta's recommendation in *The Allure of Order*, but they explicitly or implicitly raise questions about whether it goes far enough. In *Too Many Children Left Behind*, Bruce Bradbury and colleagues concur strongly with Mehta's emphasis on investing in the teaching profession, but they embed that point in an argument about how Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia invest more broadly in supports for poor children and families, higher quality teaching among them. Using databases from each country that allow them to trace a cohort of students over time, they examine both distal and more proximal influences on child development, including the availability of preschool, social insurance, parental health and education, age of parents, family structure, and some aspects of parenting style. Examined in this way, American poverty is shown to be much more damaging to the life-chances of poor children than poverty in these other countries, notwithstanding tenacious assumptions about American exceptionalism. The differences show up early and continue to grow as children age (a pattern that can be obscured in aggregate data).

Based largely on what seems to be working elsewhere, the authors' policy recommendations particularly emphasize increasing access to early childhood education (the authors find that in 2011, only one in four American kindergarteners had attended preschool, compared to 90-plus percent of kindergarteners in peer countries), raising incomes for low-income families, and improving schools, partly through the kinds of investments in the teaching force that Mehta advocates. Neither the authors *of Too Many Children Left Behind* nor Mehta say

very much about leadership. A growing and persuasive body of research suggests that it is unwise to separate improvement of teaching from improvements in its organizational context, and especially in its leadership (Bryk et al. 2010; Louis et al. 2010). One is entitled to wonder exactly how well some of their suggestions translate cross-culturally and cross-politically. Raising teacher salaries, as they suggest, is probably a good idea but it remains an empirical question whether it would have the same effect here as it does in societies where the profession is revered. While the authors of *Too Many Children Left Behind* have chosen comparison countries that have their own struggles with race and immigration, it is unclear whether race exercises its grip on developmental processes in these other countries in the same way that it does in the United States. The more important point, though, is that this book helps us understand youth development more comprehensively and makes a good case that if we commit to investing more comprehensively in poor youth and families, we can reasonably hope to see positive outcomes. Whoever coined the phrase "evidence-based optimism" was thinking of work like this. Note, too, that this book is trying to explain relative success and to understand the conditions under which low-income children do achieve. This can be a much shorter path to improved practice than the far more common tendency, normalized by the Coleman Report, of focusing on explanations for failure.

While *Too Many Children Left Behind* does not offer any sustained thinking about race (even when they talk about segregation!), racialization is central to *Despite the Best Intentions*. Amanda Lewis and John Diamond frame the issue of racial achievement gaps in a particularly compelling way. They look at a high school that has a strong resource-base, that prides itself on being diverse and desegregated, and that has strong community and ask why minority achievement continues to lag. Lewis and Diamond spent four years at Riverside High, observing,

interviewing over 170 people, and supplementing their data with a schoolwide survey of student culture. They use the survey data partly to build a case that student underachievement cannot be well understood in terms of some kind of oppositional culture among black students. Instead, they find considerable evidence of patterns of racialized interaction that leave black and Latino students at a disadvantage, all the rhetoric notwithstanding. This is clearly the case in the area of school discipline, where black students face greater surveillance and receive more severe punishments for a given offense than white students. (We now have ample evidence for how widespread these problems are, e.g., Skiba and Mediratta 2016.) These disparities are glaringly obvious to students of color, but they are also clear to some white students and staff. These differences seem ultimately to be driven by the symbolic meaning of race and the expectations attached to it—race as a signifier of incapacity and anti-social tendencies—and the racial differences in treatment make it very plain to students of color that they are not fully accepted and valued citizens of the institution. The disparities in practices also seem linked to the inclination and capacity of parents to advocate for their children. Black parents are assumed to be considerably less active in advocating for their children, so school officials have less reason to worry about pushback when they assign a black child to a lower track. Lewis and Diamond's analysis of discipline disparities and racialized tracking systems is fine-grained and theoretically grounded, as is their analysis of opportunity hoarding among white parents. While firmly advocating diversity—some even moving to Riverside for that reason—white parents firmly opposed any reforms in the systems that advantage their children. (It would have been illuminating to have an equally thorough treatment of the position of black parents.)

Published in 1966, The Coleman Report—formally titled Equality of Educational Opportunity—has probably done more to shape the way we think about educational inequality

than any other single work. One of the debates it set in motion was about whether schools could do anything meaningful about student achievement in the face of poverty. As a rule, those arguing that schools were generally not capable of making a difference, have paid little or no attention to the internal life of schools. Lewis and Diamond, with their careful analysis of the racialized, and, to an extent, class-inflected, nature of relationships in Riverside, remind us what a huge strategic error ignoring relationships in schools can be. A lack of attention to the internal life of schools lead people to wonder why the achievement of middle-class black children is not higher and to assume that social policies that address poverty will also address race. Lewis and Diamond also add complexity to resource-centered arguments. Social honor, the sense of shared esteem among a group, is a resource too, and it is one that schools may be systematically stripping from black and brown students. If students do not feel like citizens of their schools, will other kinds of resources get the traction we hope for? How far would the professionalization of the teaching force go toward countering the racialization of those who are being taught?

The aforementioned *Too Many Children Left Behind*, which compares US education to that of other countries, signals that American thinking about education is being globalized, however belatedly. Bowen Paulle's *Toxic Schools* appears to be the first cross-national ethnographic comparison of schools serving "profoundly stigmatized, poverty-stricken, and ethnically-marked residential areas" (x), one in the Bronx, the other in Amsterdam. Paulle's focus is on the coping strategies of youth and adults in bottom-tier schools, what Paulle terms "stress factories" (170). There are, of course, many differences between the contexts. The considerable violence in Amsterdam is still less than that in the Bronx, and street gangs do not hold much sway in the Dutch context. Students in Amsterdam came to school more often, changed schools less often, and were less likely to be homeless. Paulle sees lightheartedness in

Amsterdam that felt missing from school life in the Bronx. In accord with the conclusions of *Too Many Children Left Behind*, Paulle contends that Holland's welfare state accounts for much of the difference.

Differences notwithstanding, in both contexts teachers struggled to teach more than 15 minutes in a typical 45-minute class, given the near-constant disruptions. Like Lewis and Diamond, Paulle does not see the oppositional culture thesis as much help in explaining self-destructive behavior. He sees counter-productive behavior as a function of environmental stress, much of it connected to struggles over status and recognition. The kids at the top of the status hierarchies—what he calls the "ghetto fabulous" (xi)—stay there largely because of their style and their capacity to dominate others. Extreme violence may be rare, even in the Bronx, but threats and intimidation are near-constant, with emotional, social, academic, and, if the author is right, physiological consequences. In the context of an academic discussion that is too often narrowly framed around academic development, Paulle performs a considerable service just by reminding us that the first fact of life in the worst of these nearly abandoned schools is the atmosphere of chaos, threat, and intimidation. This takes us much closer to the lived reality of teachers, students, and parents (even though the latter are essentially missing from this work) and explains why both policy discourse and research discourse often seems perfectly irrelevant to those in such schools. Conceptually, even though he almost certainly overstates his point about the over-racialization of these students, Paulle is quite right that we have little understanding of the circumstances under which race is a consciously salient aspect of identity for the most marginalized young people. For many readers, though, the first takeaway may be that students who are similarly situated socially may react to their marginalization in strikingly similar ways.

The book's primary shortcoming is its pronounced tendency toward over-interpretation. If it is indeed true that these children had "no socially acceptable way to give themselves even a few hours of respite from the intimidation cursing the entire student body" (98) that is incredibly important, but it is not clear what students said or did to suggest their lives were this barren. If it is true that school leadership in the Bronx is so worn down that it cannot respond appropriately to incidents of violence that too is of great importance, but again we are given no idea what justifies this interpretation. When support is offered, it is captivating. (Best quote from a teacher: "I demand respect. And if I don't get it, I go on sick leave" [11]). There is also a problem of promised discussions not materializing. Much to his credit, Paulle makes it clear that some teachers in both schools were far more successful than others, even with the hard-case kids, and he makes the insightful point that we should be paying more attention to understanding how the best teachers become good and how teachers who start off with promise get destroyed before they have a chance to get better. After talking on the edges of the issues for a bit, he concludes, disappointingly, that his data, while somewhat longitudinal, "do not allow me to speak to this question" (189). One wonders how much more he could have learned if he just had some conversations with his students about why they respond differently to different teachers.

When *Toxic Schools* is read alongside *Despite the Best Intentions*, the irony is that whether at a diverse, relatively more advantaged school as in Riverside or at an abandoned school such as in the Bronx, black students find it difficult to feel that they belong. Just where would and do black students feel accepted and affirmed? It is pretty clear that, 60 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, we still do not have much of an answer.

NCLB was developed from a questionable research base when it was first initiated and the jury may still be out on its value. What is clear, though, is that research on the relationship between education and inequality—some of it in direct response to the law—has improved markedly. Although the frame of holding schools accountable for outcomes is still a part of public and policy discourse, concerns with accountability are now embedded in broader discussions about the importance of investing in children, families, and schools and considering how the internal dynamics of schools either support or frustrate those investments. It would be nice to think these works represent a trend toward thinking that is less ahistorical and reductionist and more empirically grounded than some of the thinking driving educational reforms of the past.

These studies also suggest something about what kind of work we need going forward. It has already been suggested that we need to pay more attention to issues around building-level leadership. That should be thought of as part of a larger need to better understand the internal dynamics of schools. Part of that line of inquiry could be organized around questions of self-efficacy, like those addressed by Paulle. To what degree do teachers, parents, school leaders and students feel capable of performing their roles effectively? How does that affect the way they interact? What role does race play in shaping those feelings? Beyond that, we think that Lewis and Diamond are quite right to stress that race remains undertheorized in these discussions. We need to understand its construction and navigation from the playgrounds to the places where policy is made. We would also underscore the importance of framing the problem in terms of variations in outcomes, not just central tendencies. Recall, for example, Paulle calling attention to the fact that even in very bad schools, some teachers are consistently successful. Something of a movement has developed, in part, around the idea that understanding variations like that can

accelerate the kind of learning that leads to improvement (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow and LeMahieu 2015). We have been so bemused, as it were, by the failure typical of urban schools that we have failed to give due attention to instructive outliers. Doing so moves us a bit away from understanding the roots of the problems and a bit closer to a discussion about *how* to work effectively with disenfranchised children.

Note

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