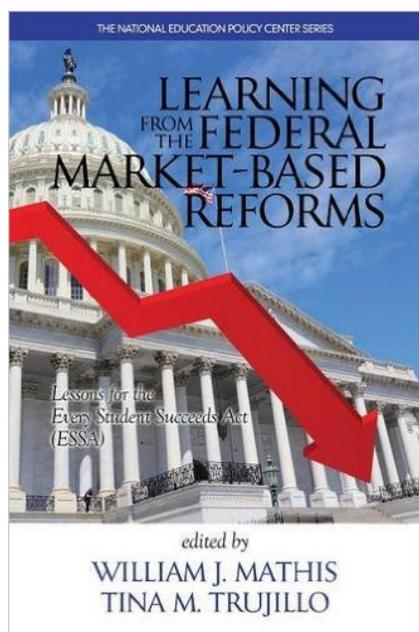


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## *Review of Learning from the Federal Market-Based Reforms: Lessons for the Every Student Succeeds Act*

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“...we’re dealing with people, not things, we can’t trust unregulated markets to deliver a decent outcome.” (Krugman, 2016)

Readers won’t find much specific about language and literacy education in Mathis and Trujillo’s (2016) *Learning from the Federal Market-Based Reforms*. Contributors do not discuss the National Reading Panel, The Reading First Initiative, or Response To Intervention. A single chapter is devoted to the Common Core Standards. Yet, the 28 chapters and the five section summaries largely fulfill the editors’ promise to provide “the most rigorous research examining the conditions, policies, and reforms that advance equitable, democratic public schooling, as well as those practices that thwart or inhibit the common good” (p. ix). Their purpose is to supply the authors of the reauthorization of the ESEA, the Every Student Succeeds Act, with the best available information. If we are to be agents of equitable, democratic, and effective language and literacy education, then we must be cognizant of these dynamics that surround and infuse our work. SPOILER ALERT! Market-based policies thwart mostly, while ones established to promote participatory parity among all students/citizens advance primarily.

In the first three sections, Mathis and Trujillo provide a textbook example of Larry Cuban’s definition of educational policy (2010): “A policy is both a hypothesis and argument that a particular action should be taken to solve a problem. That action, however, has to be politically acceptable and economically feasible” (n.p.). Contributors to Section One comment on and evaluate how the unstated agent of Cuban’s second sentence controlled the negotiations among unstated agents of the first over the last 35 years.

The problem:

...conservatives and neoliberals see schools as wasteful, ineffective, and not sufficiently focused on results, thereby contributing to the failed potential of students, the protection of ineffective and overpaid teachers, school and school system leaders,

and the inability of the United States to compete on international educational assessments or prepare workers to fill the jobs needed by corporations. (Scott, p. 13)

The hypothesis: In a clever interpretation, Kantor and Lowe (2016) detail how the liberal Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965—by making schooling the primary government lever to deliver racial and economic justice in America—invited a neoliberal takeover built around market-based values: “flexibility, competition, and choice” (p. 49). Neoliberals argued that by measuring learning and teaching with standardized tests as if high scores were profits, market forces would hone schooling until only the effective and efficient survive, rewarding those who took the initiative and sanctioning those who chose the status quo. Although these reforms were initially put in place by true believers, Mintrop and Sunderman argue, they are now held in place by the winners in the markets that were created: “those deriving economic benefit from the law (e.g., testing agencies, educational management organizations, segments of the school improvement industry) and those deriving political benefit from the dysfunction of the sanctions: driven approaches (e.g., politicians campaigning on a platform of educational reform)” (p. 79).

The argument: In Sections Two and Three, contributors test that hypothesis. They do not dispute the accuracy of neoliberal conceptions of the global economy (See Chang, 2010 for that). Little time is spent explaining how these market-based reforms achieve other neoliberal values—cutting public spending for social services; reducing government regulations through charters; positioning students and families as entrepreneurs working to accumulate cultural, social, and informational capital; or privatizing public services (See Saltman, 2012). Few references are made to existing, at best mixed, evidence concerning market-based reforms in other institutions and countries—think Halliburton and meals for American soldiers in Iraq, Management and Training Corp and Mississippi prisons, or BP and Deepwater Horizon (See Ball, 2014).

Rather in Section Two, the contributors dig directly into school data in order to evaluate applications of the neoliberal assumption that test scores can be treated as profits from the learner/teacher exchange. Miron and Urshel explore the idea that markets require competition and consumer choice in order to become effective and efficient, concluding that vouchers, charter schools, and virtual schools are poor competitors because they “perform similarly to traditional public schools” (p. 180). The other three chapters of the section investigate the consequences of “corporate take over” tactics for schools with enduring low test scores as recommended in both No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top. From transformation to closure, these strategies target school personnel for exchange or replacement and not do not address the social economic context of the schools in question. They conclude that “the existing literature documents a concerning picture of such policies in practice” (Malen & Rice, p. 110), advising policy makers to look past any movement in test scores in order to see “the broader negative consequences that occur” (Kirshner et al., p. 209).

In Section Three, contributors take up specific propositions often used to justify market-based claims, providing evidence beyond test scores in order to debunk: scaled up miracles from Texas, Chicago, and the Knowledge Is Power Program; value-added statistics; the grassroots of the Common Core Standards; zero tolerance discipline; subcontracts for school services; and high tech/virtual schools. Perhaps with a note of frustration, Mathis and Trujillo conclude, “as shown in other chapters, these interventions have not shown systematic or broad success. Thus we called them “The False Promises”” (p. 431). In other words, the market based hypothesized solutions have not worked as planned, and the argument for their continuation is ideological and without an empirical foundation.

In Section Four, Mathis and Trujillo turn toward non-market based reforms that feature goals and values outside of the neoliberal frame. “They are focused on the nation’s most important educational shortcoming, the lack of democratic equality of opportunity” (p. 435). In these chapters, terms begin

to change from competition, testing, sanctions, and choice to collaboration, participation, public responsibilities, and equity. In separate chapters, Berliner and Rothstein contest the articulation of the official problem, arguing that American schools are not failing, rather the governmental neglect of growing poverty and segregation means that there are two school systems in America—one for the White middle and upper middle classes and one for racial and language minorities and the poor. Other contributors describe progressive interventions to address that problem through just school funding, universal preschool, detracking, reduced class sizes, and community partnerships organizing from schools outward and from neighborhoods inward.

In a 12-paged Section Five, the editors summarize and add to the conclusions of the preceding 28 chapters in order to restate the problems facing public schools, and to hypothesize evidence based “solutions” to those problems that take local contexts into consideration. They offer their policy suggestions in hopes to countervail the fact that, “state policymakers are not students of educational improvement; think tank lobbyists, not scientific experts, heavily shape the information they receive” (p. 95). The editors note that many celebrated the reauthorization of the ESEA, replacing NCLB with ESSA. Yet, they point to the fact, “From a teacher’s point of view, the new law continues the basic operations and principles of the previous law: It is fundamentally a test-driven, top-down, remediate-and-penalize law. However, the ‘assistance’ and sanctions will depend on the state” (p. 667). They fear that state officials will make the same poor choices as the federal officials, particularly around opportunities for all students to learn. Countervailing requires the application of equal force against. In order to make their recommendations politically acceptable and economically feasible coalitions of citizens will need to follow Former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich’s advice:

Nothing good happens in Washington, or for that matter, in state capitals, unless good people outside of Washington and those state capitals make it happen. Unless they

push very hard. Unless they're organized, mobilized, and energized to force the political system to respond. (as quoted in Cook, 2012, p. 36)

In that spirit, I borrow a strategy that Ha-Joon Chang (2010) offers in *23 Things They Don't Tell You About Capitalism* to suggest five alternative pathways through the 28 chapters for progressive coalitions interested in equitable, democratic public schooling.

To 'feel the Bern,' read: Chapter 20, 3, 6, 8, 9, 22, 23, 26, and 27.

Because Black Lives Matter, read: Chapter 14, 21, 2, 3, 15, 16, 23, 26 and 27.

Freak-onomists, read: Chapter 4, 7, 12, and 28.

Classroom teachers read: Chapter 1, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 18, 19, and 26.

Legislative aides (because members of Congress don't read), read Chapter 1 and Section 5 and stop listening to "think tank" pundits.

To my reading, one thing lacking from *Learning from the Federal Market-Based Reforms* is caution about the concept of "scaling up." That's a lesson language and literacy educators should remember from the quick translation of the National Reading Panel report into the Reading First Initiative of NCLB. As Robert Calfee paraphrased from Gamse et al. (2011),

the findings were clear cut but rather discouraging: (1) time spent on the program components increased—teachers did what they were told to do; (2) program impact on reading comprehension was negligible; and (3) there was no trend for comprehension performance to increase over the grades as teachers gained more experience with the program (2014, p. 5).

Response to Intervention faces similar concerns because a first grader's "assignment to receive reading intervention did not improve reading

outcomes; it produced negative impacts" (Balu, et al., 2015, p. 1). In both cases, scaling up evidence-based practices discounted local context and knowledge and failed to produce promised results.

From different vantage points, Biesta, (2010), Bryk (2015), and Erickson (2014) advocate for practice-based evidence to replace evidence-based practice in the hypotheses and arguments for solutions to the problem of inequalities of educational opportunities. Instead of asking, does this intervention work through randomized field trials, Bryk suggests "how to make various work processes, tools, role relationships, and norms *interact more productively under a variety of conditions* is the improvement-community's learning goal. The resultant knowledge and associated empirical warrants are *practice-based evidence*" (p. 473, italics in original). "That means the celebration of local adaptation rather than an attempt to stamp it out by centralized planning and monitoring—policy that provides wiggle room—provides for custom tailoring of practices to fit the particularity of local circumstances" (Erickson, p. 4). Based on their summary of Section Four, Mathis and Trujillo seem like-minded. And Reich points the way to make practice-based evidence politically acceptable and economically feasible.

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