

EDITOR'S CONCLUSION: TOWARDS NEW PERSPECTIVES ON PUBLIC EDUCATION AND SCHOOL REFORM

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Thanks from the Editorial Team

As our special issue comes to a close, I want to thank all of the contributors who have expanded our view of the current educational crisis in Philadelphia. They have detailed ways in which groups and individuals are providing powerful counter-narratives, resisting challenges, and how, despite many obstacles, staying positive and creative. The authors illuminate, interrogate, inspire, and galvanize others into action. I want to thank Torch Lytle for providing the central piece that inspired the creation of this issue, and Michelle Fine for powerfully connecting the various manuscripts together. I especially want to thank Robert LeBlanc, our guest editor and the driving force behind this issue. In closing, I will reflect on some of the tensions, dilemmas, and themes that emerge from many of the manuscripts. I will also imagine some of the possibilities for school reform in moving forward.

Tensions, Dilemmas, and Themes

One of the central tensions of this issue is the challenge of balancing our reactions to threats to public education while also being proactive in the effort to improve it. There are forces in state government and in the private sector that are diligently working to defund and dismantle public education. As many of the manuscripts in this issue detail, resistance to the opposition of public education has a long history and is of particular concern in our contemporary situation. We need to fight against efforts to defund and dismantle public education in Philadelphia, but it is not enough to only respond to these immediate threats. Many of this issue's authors admirably find a way to think long term and offer solutions and advice on how to address underlying issues and permanently strengthen public education. It is not enough to make our schools merely functional. We must provide a first-class education that fully meets the intellectual, emotional, and developmental needs of our students. We cannot accept schools that are merely, as Philadelphia Superintendent Hite describes, "functional" (The Notebook, 2013). As many of the authors argue, we need to have a positive, proactive agenda that calls for new ideas, new leadership, and a broad coalition.

The Hidden Curriculum of the Movement to Dismantle Public Schools

Another tension that is revealed in this issue concerns the unveiling of the neo-liberal, racist, classist subtext that lies underneath the surface of efforts to dismantle public schools (Lipman, 2011). Messages like, "Philadelphia's families and students don't deserve a first-class fully-funded education and if we gave it to them they would mess it up" or "The schools, students, and parents are so bad and the system is so corrupt that there is no hope" lie just underneath current critiques and the lack of political will to invest in public education. While urban children are acutely undervalued, an argument can be made that the state and nation also deeply undervalue youth and education. If we valued children and a high quality education for everyone in this country, our educational system would be vastly different. We need to find ways to increase our commitment to the education of our children.

The Unaddressed Central Question of School Reform: Moving from "Functional" to "Optimal"

When we illuminate the values, assumptions, and stereotypes that fund the current movement to dismantle public education, we can begin a process to have a conversation and perhaps a movement addressing the real question: What do *all* our children need to "optimally develop"? By optimal development, I mean development across a range of areas: intellectual, physical, social, and emotional. Teachers act as facilitators that can work toward setting the conditions for optimal learning, knowing and

responding to their students on individual and group levels. Schools systems are organized for this deep learning as they provide more time for teacher planning, reflection and collaboration, have smaller or variable class sizes, increased parent involvement, and new modes of school leadership. In these times, we don't spend much time imagining or developing "optimal" schools. We don't give time to important questions. How do we foster the development of great teachers? How can parents, community organizations, and the private sector collaborate to support the deep learning of all our children? What resources and funding are necessary to do these things? If we don't deliberately imagine the possibilities, the current conflicts regarding education in Philly will obfuscate our capacity to understand and address the underlying problems of undervalued children. We need to take inspiration from many of the authors of this issue that we can have a both/and approach to be reactive and proactive.

The Promise of Inquiry, Reflection, and Research

James "Torch" Lytle's use of inquiry and practitioner research is an exemplar of this both/and approach. In his book *Working for Kids: Educational Leadership as Inquiry and Intervention* (2010), Lytle provides insights into the possibilities of what schools and educational systems can look like when we deeply value children and put their needs for learning and development at the center of our work. Throughout his career as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, and superintendent, Torch adopted an inquiry stance to critically examine his sites of practice, but he has also become a practitioner-researcher, utilizes inquiry and both quantitative and qualitative methods to systematically understand educational processes. Furthermore, Torch involves stakeholders at all levels of the organization and community to also engage in inquiry and research as well. Other Philadelphia school leaders such as Chris Lehman at the Science Leadership Academy have also embraced inquiry as a way to create a vibrant, successful school culture. The work of Lytle and Lehman demonstrate what is possible for all of Philadelphia's students when students are put first. The impact of such engagement can be transformative both for individuals and systems. An "optimal" educational system studies itself.

Building a Broad Coalition

In their article, Connor and Rosen describe the importance of establishing broad based alliances. Indeed, our current crisis in public education, presents a critical period for coalition building and engaging a wide variety of individuals and groups in the process of making and funding better schools. Quinn and Mittenfelner Carl equally provide insights into possibilities with organizing parents. Students are organizing and protesting on a regular basis, and teacher voices are being heard across the city through activism and action. And just as Sam Reed has become an "accidental activist", so to, could many parents, teachers, and students be galvanized to action. While Michelle Fine, Torch Lytle, and issue's authors critique corporate takeovers and "drive-by" entrepreneurs, we would benefit from including the widest range of stakeholders in the broad coalition. These partnerships must be forged in an egalitarian manner with deliberation and planning and a deep respect for the expert knowledge of educators.

Respond and Share Your Ideas

We encourage you to reflect on the articles and get involved through action, and engaging in discourse through letters, meetings, and other creative ways. Please consider writing a letter, commentary, or response. We will publish many of the responses on our webpage.

Author

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