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Review of "Excellence for All: How a New Breed of Reformers is Transforming America's Public Schools"

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Excellence for All: How a New Breed of Reformers is Transforming America's Public Schools by Jack Schneider, Vanderbilt University Press, 2011

The 2012 presidential election focused on issues of the economy, healthcare, and foreign policy. Though mentioned briefly in the debates, education policy and reform was absent from this campaign cycle. Some may argue that the troubled economy was a much more significant concern, one that needed more focus. But upon closer examination, it seems clear that education policy was not discussed because both Obama and Romney had similar plans for education reform. They both planned to increase teacher accountability through standardized tests, and they both emphasized alternatives to traditional public schools, such as charter schools and school choice. Though Democrats and Republicans, as well as liberals and conservatives, have different views of education, their educational reform goals are remarkably similar. In his 2011 work, *Excellence for All: How a New Breed of Reformers is Transforming America's Public Schools*, Jack Schneider analyzes how divergent viewpoints of educational reformers have coalesced around a set of issues that challenge the very nature of public schools.

Schneider argues that since World War II, two competing ideals have emerged for public schools in America: social efficiency and social justice (11). Social efficiency advocates argue that schools should provide educational experiences to best prepare students to economically contribute to society. In making the case that education should rigorously focus on math and science to develop students who compete internationally, social efficiency types make arguments that have resonated since at least the early Cold War. Because America competes globally, students who have the potential to become leaders in society should be given a rigorous curriculum. Thus, social efficiency reformers value a "pyramid-like" shape (14) of student ability, where natural leaders rise to the top. In short, for social efficiency reformers education should be excellent.

The opposing ideal focuses on social justice. Social justice reformers contend that education is an American right. All children should have equal access to a quality education. As the civil rights and women's movements developed during the 1950s-1970s, social justice reformers challenged segregation and tracking, arguing that minorities and girls should have access to the excellent education usually reserved for those students positioned atop the ability pyramid. In short, for social justice reformers, education should be for all. In this vision, schools were to become the champions of social justice, helping to overcome oppression and discrimination in society.

Since the ubiquitous report ominously titled *A Nation at Risk* was issued in 1983, Schneider explains, conservative social efficiency and liberal social justice reformers discovered a common education reform model that allows them both to achieve their goals: privatization of education reform (30). For social efficiency reformers, privatized education reform maintained excellence in education and promoted free-market competition without government involvement.

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Social justice reformers, many of whom went to private schools themselves, saw educational access to private schools as paramount to social justice. They saw their own education as excellent, and believed all children should have access to excellence. Social efficiency reformers similarly embraced this perspective because educational pursuit of excellence was inherently competitive, and allowing increased access to the competition would only strengthen schools. Most significantly, this could be done without government intervention. Thus, by the end of the twentieth century, the mantra of “excellence for all” became the battle cry of both social efficiency and social justice reformers (39), and they both waged war against public schools.

Using this historical backdrop, Schneider analyzes the current 21st century iteration of education reform and its critique on public schools advocated by both social efficiency and social justice reformers. The three-front assault on public schools focuses on school size, teacher quality, and rigorous curriculum. He supplements each chapter with the actual experiences of public school systems in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles (8). Schneider uses these three aspects of education to emphasize the unity between social efficiency and social justice.

In regards to school size, Schneider explains that large public schools threatened both excellence and equity because individual student needs were ignored. In response, education reformers championed small schools. From the social efficiency perspective, small schools provided “an opportunity to advance ‘privatization and voucher schemes that seek to replace public education with a market system...’” (48). They represented a market-approach to education, where small schools (businesses) could compete for students. Simultaneously, social justice reformers saw small schools as places that concentrated on social reform, overcoming the “ ‘one-size-fits-all curriculum’” (48) which discriminatorily labeled children.

Poor teacher quality also negatively affects both excellence and equity. For social efficiency reformers, poor teachers lack content knowledge and cannot rigorously prepare their students for a competitive future. For social justice reformers, teacher education programs do not prepare teachers to be culturally sensitive, so they lack compassion when they work in schools. To solve these divergent problems, both tout the success of Teach for America (TFA), a privately run teacher reform program (74). TFA pleases both social efficiency reformers and social justice reformers because it targets private university graduates, rich with content knowledge, to teach in urban schools. As Schneider explains, TFA recruits people with subject-area degrees, not teaching credentials, supporting the notion that, “The best schools and colleges... [look for those who] know their subject and are willing to be with kids. These schools usually do not hire prospective teachers who have been trained and certified by the standard system” (91). For social efficiency reformers, the best teachers have gone to private schools and universities and do not hold a teaching degree, just like the recruits for TFA. Concurrently, social justice reformers value TFA’s mission to improve urban education. A TFA corps member explained: , “ ‘a tough class requires a teacher with skills that come with experience and practice...’ and ‘need more than an enthusiastic college



graduate's good intentions and good ideas..." (94). For TFA, a college graduate with an education degree might have good intentions of becoming a quality teacher, but their education credentials are not grounded in TFA's model of education reform. TFA challenges both the lack of content knowledge and dedication to social justice of traditional teacher education programs.

Finally, Schneider argues, social efficiency and social justice reformers both advocate for a rigorous curriculum traditionally taught at private schools in America. Schneider uses the Advanced Placement (AP) curriculum as a model embraced by both social efficiency and social justice reformers (105). AP was originally conceived after World War II as a rigorous curriculum model for the best and brightest American private school students. Social efficiency reformers supported AP because, "business, industry and our total society should benefit from these efforts to insure that each and every student is challenged to reach his/her highest academic potential" (118). Social justice reformers also embraced AP because it could develop "educational equity for all students' [and] American society as a whole would benefit from higher enrollments of minority students in AP classes..." (118). According to Schneider, access to AP has expanded rapidly over the past twenty years, and this has caused some private schools (the very model for AP excellence for all) to actually stop offering AP classes, and in part "allowed elite schools to once again distinguish themselves from the pack" (126). Thus, the unity between social efficiency reformers and social justice reformers only works when the pyramid structure remains firmly in place.

Schneider deftly proves his argument that both social efficiency and social justice reformers have embraced the privatization model of education reform, through their advocacy of small schools, Teach For America, and Advanced Placement. Unfortunately, however, Schneider does not offer a critical analysis of whether this model is beneficial for education. Does this focus on privatization undermine the spirit of public education in America? Should public education be dismantled in the face of privatization if both Democrats and Republicans embrace these reforms? These questions are left unanswered, and this is troubling. Privatization leads to the commoditization of education and turns knowledge into a competition for the highest bidder. Children and their knowledge are not to be bought and sold.

Though economic productivity has been a part of the American public school system since the 18th century, the industrialization of the late 19th century brought with it a focus on capitalist productivity in schools. The encroachment of capitalism on the democratic principles of schools has become even more significant with the development of NCLB and Race to the Top. If capitalist principles continue to invade schools, public schools will shift from being a right (albeit, an unequal one) to a privilege completely inaccessible to many.

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