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The Cyclical Rhetoric of Educational Reform and the Rationalization of a Failed Zeitgeist

John W. White

University of North Florida

Patrick R. Lowenthal

University of Colorado Denver

Abstract

Educational reformers have revived the notion of managing schools like businesses. By borrowing the rhetoric of the industrialization era, the current reform agenda not only presupposes that learning and maximum financial efficiency are synonymous, but also equates students and consumers. In the following paper, we argue that history has shown that its unproductive to talk about or even worse to treat schools as businesses; instead, we argue that it is time to learn from history's lessons and reframe the way we talk about and therefore think about education.

The Cyclical Rhetoric of Educational Reform and the Rationalization of a Failed Zeitgeist

Since the very inception of our nation, people from all sides of the political spectrum have advocated for implementing their particular vision of how we should school our children. Suggestions for change—whether they be conservative, progressive, or even radical—have brought about both a never-ending influx of educational reforms and, with such reforms, varying degrees of success in changing the ways schools operate. Yet, no matter what approach taken, school reform in America has always been fractional and limited. Reform movements have also been launched on premises that, though popular in the era in which they arose, have been limited in scope and vision. The rhetoric of each major epoch in American history has carried with it a fervor for reforming schools in the zeitgeist of that epoch and, occasionally, for subsequently reforming schools in direct opposition to that zeitgeist. Such has been the case with conservative reformers and their zeal for—and idealized notion of—the past eras in American history and American education. The rhetoric of the current conservative reform movement, which can most easily be labeled the "back to basics" movement (Allen, 1992) has certainly played a prominent role in shaping the debate and to limiting alternative possibilities of reform. Unfortunately, it is a rhetoric based on a distorted view of history.

Conservative reformers have consistently found favor with a public that is largely dissatisfied with the limitations of liberal and progressive approaches to educating America's youth (Will, 2008), but their own approaches to reform have also been limited (Day, 1971; Gatto, 2005; Giroux, 1998; Norris, 2004). William Bennett (1987), E.D. Hirsch (1988, 1996), and Chester Finn (1991), among others, have capitalized upon both the most recent revival of

anti-progressive fervor and a selective and glorified view of the past with what they have labeled a "back to basics" approach to education. As the name suggests, this is not a new approach to educational reform; rather, it harkens back to a bygone, simpler era. Unfortunately, in their zeal to try something different (although by no means new), conservative reformers have too readily forgotten the lessons learned from their forebears.

The conservative language of school reform today largely mirrors the industrialization era and its focus upon social efficiency. School reformers at the turn of the last century attempted to follow the model of big business (Tyack, 1974). Borrowing from the industrialization era, conservative reformers saw notions of standardization (e.g., statewide and nationwide curriculum, routine testing, and rigid rubrics for teacher training) as the elixir to the problems confronting schools (Elson, 1964).

The conservative movement today has revived the notion of managing schools like businesses. Their calls for reform are filled with such words and concepts as “accountability,” “measurement,” “standards based,” “outputs,” “public school choice,” “teacher merit pay,” “vouchers,” “school competition,” etc. The imagery evoked by these terms is clear (and an almost ghost-like apparition of those from times past): schools can and should operate like factories. Students should enter schools as basic raw materials (and they should enter either with specific middle-class, WASP-ish prior knowledge or enter *carte blanche*), they should get specific quantities of pre-determined, state-sanctioned ‘inputs’ at specific times along the school K-12 assembly-line, they should go through quality control measures via tests, and they should emerge ready to begin twenty-first century jobs.

By borrowing the rhetoric of the industrialization era, the current reform agenda not only presupposes that learning and maximum financial efficiency are synonymous, but also equates

students and consumers. The current trend in school reform, led largely by business leaders, helps to establish a respective identity of "consumers" for students and "managers" for educators. In the following paper, we argue that history has shown that it's unproductive to talk about or even worse treat schools as businesses; instead, we argue that it is time to learn from history's lessons and reframe the way we talk about and therefore think about education.

Conceptual Framework

Understanding the role of language in a reform movement is imperative to gaining a true understanding of the ideology of that movement. The language of a movement cannot be separated from the ideology nor the action of a movement. Language is itself the foundation of culture (Ong, 1982). This is more than linguistics.

Language reveals who we are and how we think; it serves as the basic scaffold for cognition and identity (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). Similarly, because language is so imbued with cultural meaning, it can never be value neutral; language is inherently the reflection of individual, cultural, and even national values and beliefs (Bourdieu, 1970). Similarly, meaning is made through the interaction of language and context (Fairclough, 1992, 1995). The language used within and/or authorized by the powers of a society shapes who we are and how we think (Fairclough, 1995).

Academics and practitioners alike must examine not only what is said or written, but also the manner in which types of discourse (e.g., academic discourse, media discourse, the discourse of reform, etc.) authorize and shape some ideas while editing and silencing others (Elson, 1964; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Thus, rhetoric goes far beyond describing the ideas behind school reform. Rhetoric has the potential to expand—and just as importantly, to limit—possibilities for

change.

Rhetoric of School Reform

School reform today is similar to the turn of the last century (Cuban, 2004; Gelberg, 1997). The ties between schools and corporations are becoming increasingly obvious, more so than at any time since the industrial revolution. This is happening largely through the power of discourse and rhetoric. Today, conservative advocates for reform are achieving great successes. Yet with this "success" comes significant dangers—dangers that were foreshadowed by the "successes" of the earlier movement.

The rhetoric of reform closely mirrors the rhetoric of business management today and from the past. Far too commonly, the rhetoric of reform today refers to students as “units” rather than as individuals; it refers to “inputs” rather than to lessons, knowledge, or thinking; it refers to meeting standards rather than learning. Influential conservative columnist George Will recently discussed “the correlation between financial inputs and cognitive outputs in education” (Will, 2008, para 6). Such rhetoric not only ignores the human aspects of schooling, it glorifies the business model as *the* only model; business is, according to this logic, the only paradigm by which we should judge schools and educational success. Even those within the paradigm admit that such an analogy has become commonplace. Take, for example, a recent article from *The National Review*:

> What would you think if you opened the *Wall Street Journal* to find an op-ed arguing that money managers should not be measured against performance benchmarks like the S&P? Further, the author argues, managers should not have to report performance figures to clients at all because it deters otherwise hardworking people from the profession because

> they believe that money management cannot be distilled into a quantitative measure…but change “money managers” to “public-school teachers” in the above hypothetical and you have the very real op-ed…Though the money-manager hypothetical may seem outlandish, respected people make such arguments about public schools every day. (Greene & Winters, 2006,para 1-2, 9)

Though popular in a society that has willingly bought into the marketing and consumerism promoted by big business, the discourse of business and consumerism is largely historically laudatory; it ignores the many failures of industrialization and laissez-faire consumerist capitalism. Most notably, the current rhetoric/discourse highlights the benefits of competition while ignoring, in the past (and today) the victims of competition. Highlighting competition and meritocracy, the rhetoric of school reform presents a rosy—and unrealistic—picture of the benefits of privatizing (or at a minimum appropriating a business model for public education). Even ignoring the inevitable ‘losers’ in this (re)new(ed) educational model, with the "standards" and "back to basics movement," comes the increasing danger of creating a new generation of consumers rather than a new generation of critical thinkers. By buying into the business-marketing rhetoric of school reform, we are in danger of returning to an idyllic past that never existed.

Metaphors We Live By—Education as Business

Part of the problem progressives and conservatives face is an inability to seriously reflect on the language we use and how it impacts our thinking. Despite the early work by psychologists like Vygotsky (1962), and later work by linguists like Gee (1996) and cognitive scientists like Lakoff (1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), we seem to forget—or not even acknowledge in the

first place—how the language we use influences and structures thought. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) did some early work on how we think in terms of metaphors. They explained that, "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (p. 5).

We have been caught in a trap of conceptualizing education metaphorically as a business. Lakoff and Johnson (1999) explain that

> In this metaphor, students are consumers, their education is a product, and teachers are labor resources. Knowledge then becomes a commodity, a thing with market value that can be passed from teacher to student. Test scores measure the quality of the product. Better schools are the ones with higher overall test scores. Productivity is the measure of test scores per dollar spent. Rational-choice theory imposes a cost-benefit analysis in which productivity is to be maximized. Consumers should be getting the "best education" for their dollar. (p. 532)

However, many people involved with business recognize that this metaphor does not represent every type of business. For instance, not every business owner focuses *solely* on profit or productivity. Further, nearly every educator—even those who find themselves inadvertently using the language that perpetuates it—recognizes some of the shortcomings of this metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson (1999) go on to explain that,

> this metaphor stresses efficiency and product quality above all else. In doing so, it hides the realities of education. Education is not a thing; it's an activity. Knowledge is not literally transmitted from teacher to student, and education is not merely the acquisition of particular bits of knowledge. Through education, students who work at it become something different.

> This metaphor ignores the student's role, the student's upbringing, and culture at large. It ignores the nurturing role of educators, which often can only be very labor-intensive. And it ignores the overall social necessity for an ongoing, maintained class of education professionals are appropriately reimbursed for the immense amount they contribute to society. (p. 532)

But it is not enough to simply acknowledge how we conceptualize education metaphorically as a business. We need to begin reframing how we think and therefore talk about education.

Reframing the Debate

While Lakoff's early work focused on linguistics and cognitive science, he has spent the past few years working on the language of politics and the concept of "frames." Frames are mental structures we use to both create and to understand reality (Lakoff, 2006a). While Lakoff argues that frames have an "enormous bearing" on politics (p. 25), we believe that they have an equal impact on education and school reform—which are in themselves inherently political. Lakoff states that "frames facilitate our most basic ideas and concepts, they shape the way we reason, and they even impact how we perceive and how we act. For the most part, our use of frames is unconscious and automatic—we use them without realizing it" (p. 25). Further, "frames not only define issues, problems, causes, and solutions; they also hide relevant issues and causes" (p. 35). Lakoff's work has shown how we think in terms of frames and metaphors.

Regarding politics, Lakoff illustrates how conservatives "have managed to dominate the framing of issues and have profoundly changed American politics in the process" (p. 28). While it would be convenient—and not inherently inaccurate—to situate school reform in a progressive vs. conservative debate, the history and rhetoric of school reform is more complicated. While

business minded professionals might have developed the frames we use to understand education (as a business), progressives have equally helped perpetuate the rhetoric of school reform.

Implications

We posit that educators need to go on the offensive to take charge of the debate and thus become more influential in shaping educational policy. Too often, educators react to changes in policy and educational reform rather than being at the forefront of change (Fullan, 2003, 2006). Their voices have largely remained silenced. The first step to gaining influence and winning over a skeptical public, we argue, is reshaping the debate itself through the language we use to describe it. Lakoff (2006b) reminds us that, "language can be used to reframe a situation" (p. 11). Thus, we must first reframe the debate by taking control of the rhetoric used to describe the situation and possibilities for changing it.

Toward this end, we believe that schools are not "failing," but rather performing admirably in difficult (e.g., underfunded, overcrowded) times. Students are not numbers or 'units' whose performance can be easily quantified ; rather, students are our sons and daughters—individuals—who deserve individual judgment and assessment. Similarly, schools are not factories that benefit from complete standardization and interchangeable parts; they are each unique institutions with their own character, purpose, and clientele. Teachers are not, nor ever have been, against "accountability"; rather, they know accountability is best measured through a variety of sources. K-12 teachers are not "in the trenches"; they are in classrooms full of our most valuable commodity: young and impressionable minds. Schools are not places full of violence; they are, by all standards, safer than almost all other environments. Teachers are not semi-skilled laborers (e.g., "anyone who can, does..."); they are highly trained professionals.

"Testing" and assessment do not mean fill-in-the-bubble sheets; they mean using a variety of resources and techniques to find out how well our students are doing. "Standards-based" does not mean teaching to a litany of terms, events, and facts; it means teaching students how to think and analyze information.

Reshaping the rhetoric of school reform will not be an easy task. Nonetheless, history shows the necessity of taking charge of the rhetoric of a debate in order to gain an advantage. Thus for true change to be possible, for educators to have the voice that they deserve in the debate, we must first take control of the language of the debate itself.

A critical, but nonetheless overlooked, area for gaining a voice in the debate is to develop a vocabulary that can both help educators clearly and coherently elucidate their position and play a role in shaping the debate itself. Words and names are important; they shape ideas, identity, position/place, and possibility. Words are, Vygotsky (1962, 1978) showed, tantamount to shaping possibility.

This is not to say that teachers—individually or even via teachers' unions—ought to 'go it alone.' Rather, we propose that there needs to be more unity and cooperation among all like-minded educators, from teachers, to principals, to administrators, to teacher educators, to local and state-level policy-makers. The power to have a strong voice in the debates on educational reform requires such unity of purpose and voice: "to cultivate new deep frames requires going on the offense with your values and principles, repeating them over and over and over... and it must be done by many organizations working in concert across issue areas" (Lakoff, 2006a, p. 31).

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