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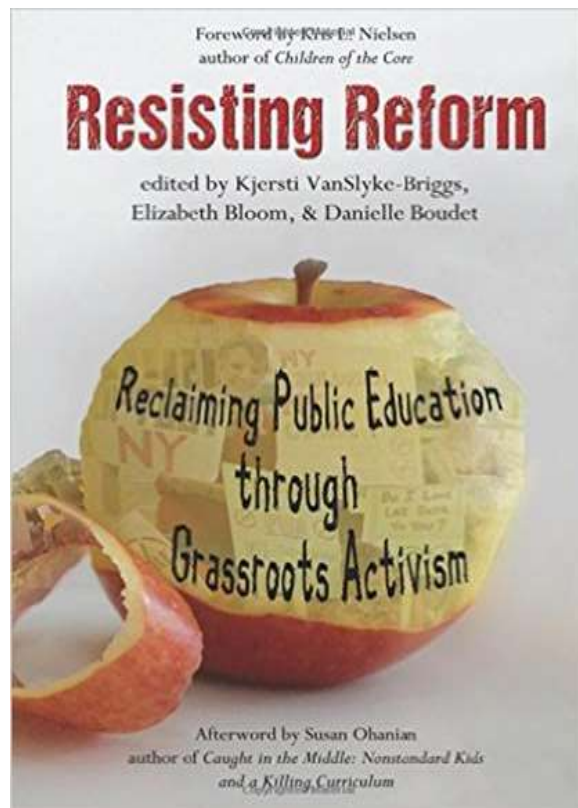
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Individual and community resistance as a response to school reform is a part of a long tradition of educational activism. In *Resisting Reform: Reclaiming Public Education through Grassroots Activism*, editors Kjersti VanSlyke-Briggs, Elizabeth Bloom, and Danielle Boudet provide a compilation of narratives seeking to challenge ideologies and practices that are oppositional to democratic schooling. Much of *Resisting Reform* does not rely heavily from the research on educational policy and reform; rather, the book showcases the movement of educational resistance and the movement's actors as its central priority. Drawing on tenets of voiced research, the book brings "into existence perspectives previously excluded, muted, or silenced by dominant structures and discourses" (Smyth & Hattam, 2001, p. 407). Essentially, the editors offer an edited volume of work highlighting the voices of individuals who have resisted and continue to resist the politicized machine of



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educational reform. By compiling the shared experiences of teachers, administrators, scholars, community members, and parents who seek to reclaim education, *Resisting Reform* crosses the boundaries between educational research, activism, and lived experiences.

The book is purposely organized in an activist framework aligned to moments of reflection and action. To frame the discussion of reflection and action, Kris L. Nielsen's forward offers a brief but moving account of her teaching career and her journey to grassroots activism in education. Nielsen's story of an "awakening" (p. xv) mirrors an entry into educational activism similarly expressed by most contributors in the book. These junctures are marked by an uneasy tension between what advocates feel education should be and what it is. Additionally, Elizabeth Bloom—one of the editors, carries the notion of reflection in the book's introduction by offering a cursory analysis of the reform movement to uncover the question, how did we get here? Bloom is adamant: "every step of this journey has been led by rich corporate donors such as the Gates, Walton, and Broad foundations" (p. 7). Yet, despite the introduction's critical tone, *Resisting Reform* is poised to not only scrutinize the reform movement and corporate interests, but inspire educators and advocates to act.

The editors further ensure that these two processes—reflection and action—work in sync throughout the book's four sections as the reader transitions through phases of advocacy. Each chapter, authored by various educational stakeholders, prompts the reader to consider activism on individual, collective, state, and national fronts. In the end, the reader understands the book's conceptual arrangement to be a full trajectory of grassroots activism. The initial chapters in section one, "One Voice Makes a Difference," challenge a common misconception of advocacy that 'one voice doesn't count'. Instead, the authors insist on

activism as a singular endeavor at its outset. Rightly or wrongly, the text does not offer a blueprint for grassroots activism and the authors of this section convince the reader that one is not required. At its very purest, the contributors claim the impetus for activism is one voice and utilizing that voice "to consider the necessity of our own resistance" (p. 28).

Section two, "Coordinating a Community," builds on the infancy of grassroots activism and offers a collection of narratives focused on coalition building and collective advocacy. Here, the focus shifts from the individual imperative to "activation points" (p. 145) of organizing and mobilizing. If grassroots activism presupposes a peak, then section three would represent such a culmination. The chapters in this section, entitled "Challenging the State," document the experiences of individuals—mostly teachers—entering a political space of state jurisdiction. One clear drawback of the text is clarified in this section since many of the authors solely discuss New York educational policies. Although a few chapters are representative of other geographical areas throughout the book, the editors nor the authors recognize the political reality that state educational policies are framed, regulated, and implemented in different ways; thereby engendering responses of resistance that are distinct and perhaps, contrary in other locales. The book's heavy focus on New York State also limits readers from synthesizing a national story of resistance. Finally, section four represents a reframing of activism that is simultaneously grassroots and digitized. In the age of social media, the Internet, and virtual communities, the chapters of this section, "Putting a Nation on Notice," presents national accounts of grassroots resistance to educational reform as a result of and response to online activism.

While a brief, if not, too short historical context of education reform is provided in the text's introduction, the book

centers on the consequences of reform initiatives beginning with *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). NCLB was enacted under George W. Bush's presidency in 2001 and was designed to increase school accountability. The editors' critiques of NCLB's agenda and the aftermath of the policy's accountability focus to either incentivize or punish schools for their yearly progress is a through line for the rest of the text. The legislation established annual assessments of student performance disaggregated by race, family income, language proficiency, gender, and disability to address achievement gaps; however, the book skims much of these subtexts to scrutinize other points of NCLB. Not surprisingly, ample attention is dedicated to standardization and teacher accountability policies. For example, numerous chapters discuss the tensions of the New York State Education Department's (NYSED) focus on standardized, test driven Annual Professional Performance Reviews (APPR) of teachers and its impact on retention, morale, and professionalization. By closely problematizing school and teacher accountability as well as teacher evaluation systems, it is clear that *Resisting Reform* takes an ideological position to view teaching as a political act. Yet, the book is quite vague about policy alternatives. The emphasis on resistance in governing spaces, even in section three ("Challenging the State") and section four ("Putting a Nation on Notice"), leaves much to be desired to answer the question posed in the introduction—now what? Considering that market-based reforms have become the political and economic undertaking of schools, *Resisting Reform* does not set out to resolve these contemporary challenges or to drive state and federal policy decisions in education. Rather, the text serves to only identify and discuss this reality as it is experienced by those most impacted.

Politically, the text is equally critical of partisan educational policies. *Resisting Reform* mostly focuses on two national

policies—NCLB and *Race to the Top* (RTTT). Since NCLB, *Race to the Top* was announced under the Obama presidency and supported common national standards which, in many ways, compelled states to adopt these standards in return for federal funds (p. 4). Since New York's educational policies aligned much more closely with components of RTTT, several authors outlined the predictable consequences of the legislation: narrowed curriculum, school closings, increased teacher turnover, and organizational dysfunction. Julie Gorlewski, teacher educator, parent, and author of the chapter "Walking the Talk," castigates the overall impact of RTTT asserting that "this legislation has had the worst effects on the nation's most vulnerable families and communities" (p. 199). Importantly, several other contributors throughout the text suggest similar implications about the correlation of poverty and educational outcomes, arguing that poverty, not schools, is the culprit for widespread failure in America's schools prompting state and national reform. By the same token, *Resisting Reform* does not emphasize the connection between poverty and school reform enough nor does it draw heavily from the body of academic research to convincingly support such claims.

What *Resisting Reform* does emphasize, however, is voice. The reader is easily drawn to the stories of resistance written by educators in K-12 and higher education, parents, students, and community activists. The emotional tug of several chapters rests on the author's use of language to convey the heavy handedness of educational reform. To illustrate, one author—a special education teacher and mother—characterized the accountability reform as an "assault on dignity" (p. 55). She goes on to posit that accountability reform endorses a "sweatshop mentality" likened to a "one size fits all evaluative instrument, neglecting to consider students with special needs or disabilities" (p. 55). Although critics might dismiss such

statements and other similar expressions in the book as baseless or opinionated, the main concern of *Resisting Reform* is acknowledging resistance stories and promoting the transformative potential of grassroots activism as a goal to rethink reform. Nowhere is this more prominent than in Ankur Singh's chapter titled, "Compelled to Speak." This chapter tells the story of a high school student in Illinois who created a documentary about his school experiences. His foray into activism began when he refused to take an AP French pilot exam administered by the College Board. Eventually, the online documentary *LISTEN* became Singh's platform to galvanize public attention about schools' overreliance on testing. Given the current curricular innovations of #hiphoped and the most recent pedagogical responses to resistance movements such as #FergusonSyllabus and #FightforDyett on Twitter and other social media platforms, the contributions within the last section of the book reflect the emerging discourse on *hashtivism* or hashtag activism (Stache, 2015). The chapters are intentionally located as resistance crossings between spaces—virtual and real—and between identities—anonymous and public.

Even though one of the volume's strengths is its presentation of stories of resistance that otherwise could be likely glossed over as misplaced opposition and frustration to educational change, it is nonetheless devoid of 'hard' statistics or empirically based research. However, some chapters execute and utilize research much more effectively than others; a noteworthy exception is in section two's "Data-Nonsense." Here the author calls for a more modest reliance on standardized testing and names the national obsession with testing and teacher evaluation systems a "pseudo-precision" (p. 83). Despite the catchy phrasing, the author cites research and grounds the chapter in more empirical, less experiential knowledge. Overall, the book's use of narratives and testimonials to express

its thesis is associated with a style of voiced research that is certainly valuable in bringing personal depth to broader educational issues. That being said, this book is not intended for consumption as informational text or empirical work. Academics and educational researchers might, however, find utility in its pedagogical possibility for a course on teacher education or teaching methods. As a text for student teachers, it serves as an entry into educational policy and for developing critical teacher identities. More so, the informal and conversational writing style, along with the "Points for Discussion" at the end of each section offers an easily digestible teaching tool that can be supplemented alongside theoretical readings or discussions on educational policies.

Taken together, much of the arguments presented in *Resisting Reform* are weakly articulated as policy problems or policy solutions. The robust body of work on educational reform offers much more breadth and depth of the historical, political, and economic context to which readers can understand and interrogate educational policy, school accountability, and the marketization of education as neoliberal politics than is offered in the book (see, e.g., Hoxby, C., Murarka, S., & Kang, J. 2009; Lipman, 2011; Papay, 2010; Ravitch, 2010). At the same time, the narratives of resistance in *Resisting Reform* convey a poignancy and bring a personal lens to the discourse on school reform that is often absent from other endeavors of scholarly research. To note, several contributors emphasize moments defined by personal and ideological shifts upon realizing the evolution of schools as contested territories. In recognizing that activism can be materialized in multiple ways, one teacher activist cautiously stated that "teachers in some districts have been warned or threatened to remain silent about opting out of tests or criticizing aspects of corporate education reform... or the new teacher evaluations" (p. 109). Considering such threats of political immobilization, how

might some teachers or administrators navigate activism when silenced?

Unfortunately, the authors nor the editors explicitly address this dark reality of educational activism.

Finally, in locating education reform initiatives as a response to underperforming schools that often serve children of color and children who live in distressed communities (p. 11), *Resisting Reform* falls short in two ways. First, the book does not engage the racialization of educational reform as a social or cultural project. Secondly, while it can be assumed that the contributors of the text occupy diverse gender, linguistic, racial/ethnic, and/or class positions, *Resisting Reform* does not interrogate or acknowledge the privilege and access associated with resistance. Put simply, who gets to dissent? And whose activism is recognized, valued, and shared as a part of the collective agenda? Perhaps the editors prefer to convey activism as a neutral process; yet, in doing so, the book seemingly treats activism as a democratic privilege—one exercised and employed equally by all.

In her book, *Why Our Schools Are Obsessed with Standardized Testing, but You Don't Have to Be*, Anya Kamenetz (2015) outlines a history of testing and the increased focus placed on standardization. As discussed in *Resisting Reform* and Kamenetz's book, the national opt-out movement was a highly publicized resistance movement. However, a noted difference is that *Resisting Reform* does not mention the key actors of this movement, remaining silent on broader issues of race and class. Interestingly, the opt-out movement was mostly championed by White, middle class parents who ostensibly resisted the consequences of accountability only when high stakes testing affected their children. In the absence of aligning race and class to resisting reform, the book conditions grassroots activism for a White politic. To illustrate, the resistance around the 'charterization' of New Orleans school district, or the firing and replacement

of Black and Latino teachers (p. 266), or more recently, the closing of Dyett High School in Chicago which led to a three-week hunger-strike (Demby, 2015), demonstrates an isolation around the raced and classed blocs of educational activism. It is not enough to profess a call to action to "defend our children's education" (p. 221), but one that mobilizes the collective agency of defending everyone's children.

Those criticisms aside, *Resisting Reform* is unforgiving in its ideological position. The book acknowledges the permanent transformation of education influenced and shaped by politicians, corporate funders, business profiteers, and venture philanthropists who impact educational decisions on various levels. It is no surprise, then, that the contributions in the text are intentionally critical of standardized testing, teacher evaluation policies, standardized curricula, charter schools, and privatization. The narratives in this book call into question the political and economic project that is the "private enterprise" (p. 2) of neoliberalism in education. While the critical work of untangling the neoliberal hold on education requires various ideological and practical resistant strategies; the book's strengths rests in the possibility of hope and change.

Given the purpose of the book as one to "inform and inspire" (p. 12), *Resisting Reform*, accomplishes its goal. The editors' compilation of accounts, stories, and testimonials of resistance represents a method of using counter narratives to situate the lived experience within a useful knowledge base. In turn, readers will not be burdened with academic jargon or urged to read keenly for conceptual or methodological frameworks. The value in these narratives of resistance prompts reformers and other educational leaders to not dismiss or exclude students, teachers, parents, and communities from conversations on educational policy. Presumably, it was the editors' intent to present resistant stories in New York State as the preferred tactic of the book, rather than a

compilation of generalizable narratives of national resistance. Nevertheless, future directions for similar work should include an exploration of resistance in other states and its relation to other educational issues such as zero-tolerance policies, school finance, the inequitable distribution of high quality teachers, or the racial mismatch of teachers and students. Without much fanfare, the contributors of *Resisting Reform* underscore the idea of resistance as a process, not a task.

One author definitively concludes, “There is no job requirement for activism, no quantity that can be imposed” (p. 156) to ensure grassroots success or productivity. It is from this conceptual logic whereby the volume proposes a call to action of any sort of concentrated activism and encourages the practice of resistance as a collective aim to shift future narratives from resistance to victory.

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## About the Reviewer

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