



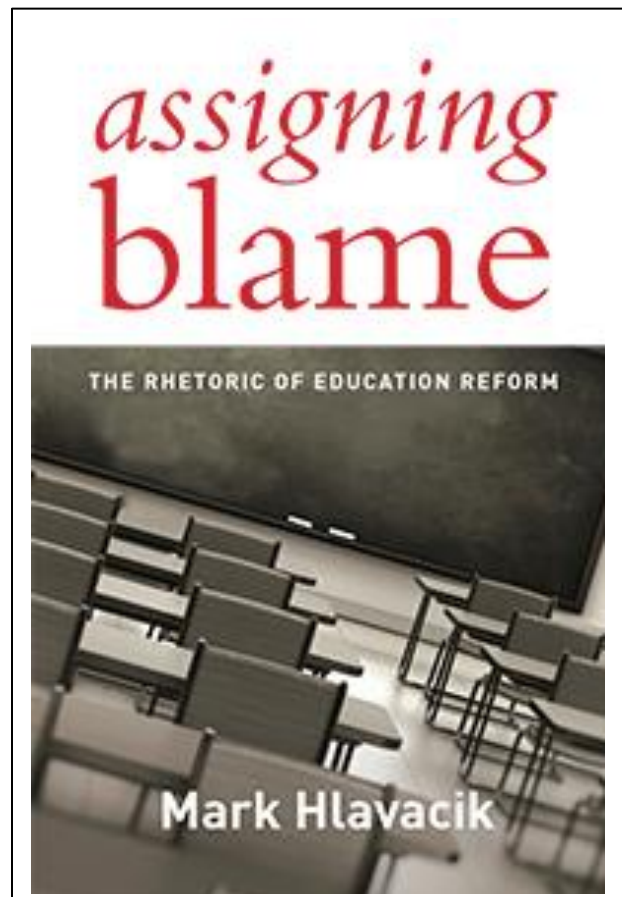
Hlavacik, M. (2016). *Assigning Blame: The Rhetoric of Educational Reform*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

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Mark Hlavacik's *Assigning Blame: The Rhetoric of Education Reform* (2016) emphasizes the role of culpability in five public persuasions since the establishment of the United States Department of Education (ED) in 1979. That year, President Jimmy Carter replaced the Education Office with a national department and, in doing so, school policy gained a new federal significance and demanded more intentional, nationwide deliberation. Tracing the consistent education reforms that followed, Hlavacik identifies blame as the principal stimulus utilized by change advocates. A professor at the University of North Texas in Denton and specializing in public address and rhetorical criticism, the author's interest in blame rhetoric comes to life in this text, as he not only interprets but challenges each persuader. Hlavacik's meticulously detailed analysis, personal opinion, and use of ancient philosophical theory, combine to demonstrate how blame and rhetoric have played a pivotal role in the manipulation of educational dogma. At the same time, he educates readers about



covert forms of public blaming and the influences that it can have on policy.

The five most significant public persuasions since the beginning of ED, as identified by the author, provide the framework for the volume: Milton Friedman's Broadcast, "What's Wrong with Our Schools" (1980); the National Committee of Education Excellence's report, "A Nation at Risk" (1983); Johnathon Kozol's book, *Savage Inequalities* (1991); the implementation of the No Child Left Behind act (2001); and finally, Diane Ravitch's critique of NCLB (2010). The author argues that in each instance, public blame was strategically used to roster followers in the attempt to redirect policy.

First, in 1980, University of Chicago economist, Milton Friedman, hosted a Public Broadcasting Services radio broadcast, *Free to Choose*, that addressed various issues pertinent to the American people. In one of his 10 hour-long segments, "What's Wrong with Our Schools?" he advocated for parent-controlled vouchers and the relocation of public funding in order to create an educational market system. In his book, Hlavacik proposes that Friedman pursued public support by identifying teachers and school administrators as "an oppressive bureaucracy running the public schools (p. 21)". Next, a 1983 NCEE report, intended to support the reduction of federal involvement in schooling, ended up identifying the United States as a "Nation at Risk" desperately in need of government led, school reform. Essentially, the NCEE blamed the system itself for the dire realities of schooling. Almost a decade later, Jonathon Kozol, author of *Savage Inequalities* (1991), used vivid and disturbing depictions of East St. Louis schools in an attempt to blame segregation for failing, inner-city schools. Finally, conservative thinker Diane Ravitch makes a public transformation from No Child Left Behind (NCLB) supporter to disparager. While NCLB (2001) was intended to improve educational equity by increasing funding and accountability, in 2010, Ravitch, along with

other disbelievers, accused the act of intensifying the problems. *Assigning Blame* outlines the use of public blame as the principal proponent of each of these thrusts towards education reform.

The book begins and ends with a rich definition of "public blame". According to Hlavacik, blame goes beyond simply assigning culpability. Public blame is both deliberate and purposeful. Those seeking to apply it, require civil agreement about where it should be placed, as well as its implications. The author argues that public blame is a strategic instrument intentionally employed by the theorist to alter agency.

...acts of blame fit their social context and how they try to exert pressure on that context, especially as they rearrange the power to act, that is, as they rearrange agency (p. 11).

Hlavacik's interpretations can be seen as destructive, suggesting that each argument centered only on public blame without acknowledging the possibility that the theorists had any positive intentions in seeking reform. Blame, according to the author, is the primary focus of Milton Friedman, David Kozol and Diane Ravitch's pleas, instead of their calls to action and theories of change. Hlavacik explains that,

(r)endered dramatically in Kozol's captivating prose, aesthetic and historical differences between wealthy and poor neighbourhoods become the basis for his readers' judgements of Chicago and New York (p. 87).

In a later chapter, he interprets Ravitch's actions as intentionally cunning:

Thus, by denouncing her former advocacy for NCLB, Ravitch was not detracting from her ethos, but actually enhancing it. Able to see her

‘way through the blind assumptions of ideology and politics. (p. 129).

In the text, policy advocates are separated from any genuine concern for school improvement. Instead, they are identified as premeditative and calculated word-smiths, exploiting a susceptible public. A skeptical reader may find this overly pessimistic, and may lead to the decision that the author lacks reason and credibility, therefore weakening his argument. On the other hand, a more malleable reader may internalize this theory and lose faith in policy and policy makers.

In general, Hlavacik supports the use of public blame and rhetoric. Within the text, he explains his own participation in public blaming, in an attempt to enlist and gain the trust of educational professionals. He clarifies that he is neither suggesting that blame is inherently wrong nor that it should be eliminated from policy discourse. Instead, the author attempts to identify how this tactic has historically been misused, and consequently, he advocates for fewer and more thoughtful acts of public blame:

Blame is a relatively extreme rhetorical tactic. In addition to using blame less frequently, public deliberation benefits when its participants take care to use blame proportionately (p. 163).

Unfortunately, while he generally touches on the option of praise as an alternative for advocates to use in place of blame, Hlavacik does not specifically suggest other approaches for any of his five examples, nor does he constructively critique the blaming outlined in each chapter. Had Hlavacik provided a richer critique rather than simply identifying the rhetorical acts in each example, the reader may be able to better understand his meaning of appropriate or “thoughtful” implementation.

In Hlavacik’s introduction, he announces his intention to persuade scholars and educational professionals, while in his

conclusions, he speaks directly to “researchers, principals, teachers, parents, students, and the average citizen” (p. 170). Surprisingly, Hlavacik is able to satisfy both of these audiences, but in distinctive ways. On the one hand, speaking as an expert and villainizing the blamers, Hlavacik may rally average citizens to view policy pushers with scrutiny, using blame as a persuasive technique. On the other hand, this text is also a valuable read for scholars and wide-ranging policy professionals, as it contains wealth of valuable knowledge and insight about the use of blame rhetoric in general. Hlavacik references Aristotle’s *Sophistical Refutations* (deceivably unsound arguments), and *Ad hominem* (attacking the speaker instead of the argument), as well as sophist Gorgias of Leontini and his interpretation of rhetoric in his 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE story, *Helen of Troy*. The author also teaches about the power of persuasion, referencing the NCLB act, the intense practice of scapegoating, and what he calls the “paradox of public blame”:

On the one hand, public blame expresses and therefore relies upon a great deal of civic faith...on the other hand, public blame is often perceived as a sign that the deliberation in which it appears has lost credibility (p. 144).

This knowledge can be used by scholars as critiquing, teaching and implementing tools. It might be valuable to policy makers seeking to learn how to rally support. Yet *Assigning Blame* might also be viewed as a call to action for teachers, principals and average citizens to respond more critically to policy rhetoric. This is important because a critical society may demand more legitimate leadership.

In order to support his blame theory, Hlavacik combines his analyses of modern day samples with the lessons of ancient philosophers such as Aristotle in a language that is both poetic and sophisticated. At times, this style is riveting. He uses metaphors to

paint colourful scenes that bring policy talk to life, such as referring to blame as “reform’s discursive fountain of youth” (p. 17).

However, Hlavacik’s complex verbiage and word choice, more suited to scholars and philosophers, arguably threatens his connection to a general audience. For example, while interpreting the host of PBS’s episode “What’s wrong with our schools?” Hlavacik writes:

(a)lthough a dearth of enthusiastic scholasticism in the early morning of an average weekday might be understandable at any school, Friedman’s narration enlists the banality of the scene in his budding diatribe against bureaucracy (p. 26).

Overly sophisticated language like this may hinder the relatability of the text and perhaps distance the author from some of his audience.

In order to prove that public blame is both intentional and necessary to convince people to support policy change, Hlavacik scrutinizes Friedman’s, Kozol’s, and Ravitch’s words and actions as well as challenges the motives of the NCLB act and the NCEE. He does this by thoroughly investigating each theory, then interjecting personal and evaluative analysis. By positioning himself as an expert in the field, Hlavacik makes a persuasive plea to his “average citizens” audience. For example, in his investigation of Milton Friedman’s radio talk show, Hlavacik suggests that the host used pronouns deliberately to lay blame. “Whatever group Gee meant to enlist, Friedman, as narrator ensures that ‘we’ reinforces a universal opposition between bureaucrats and parents” (p. 31). The author combs through the pleas of the National Commission of Excellence in Education, Johnathan Rozol, Diane Ravitch and those who initiated No Child Left Behind policies with equal reflection. He suggests that Ravitch tactically excused herself from previously supporting NCLB by branding it as

a “deceptive law (p. 129)”. On the other end, Hlavacik claims that through measures such as standardized testing and teacher accountability, NCLB not only blamed educators but scapegoated them, engaging in what he calls, “ritualized public blaming”.

*Assigning Blame* maintains that each theorist used blame, rhetoric, and in extreme cases, scapegoating, in order to support change. It also alludes to other important components in each argument, such as fear, without adequately acknowledging their impact. For example, in the case of Kozol’s depiction of East St Louis and the need for desegregation, Hlavacik suggests that Kozol attempts to rally support through the use of fear. Emphasizing a disturbing section of Kozol’s book, *Savage Inequalities* (1988), Hlavacik reminds the reader that

Serena’s story is shocking evidence of the violence and desperation of life in East St. Louis, but also a stark warning about the dangers that integrating children would face (p. 90).

He does not extrapolate about the impact of this approach, which is perhaps as prominent in his argument as blame. Similarly, the NCEE’s study, *A Nation at Risk*, presents an alarmingly stark depiction of the school system, yet the author solely recognizes NCEE’s use of blame, and not fear, as an influential tactic. A more complete analysis would include a discussion of fear mongering and its potentially harmful effects.

Overall, *Assigning Blame: The Rhetoric of Educational Reform*, is aligned with other texts that outline the way in which public blame and rhetoric have historically impacted policy discourse. In her book, *The Policy Paradox* (2011), Deborah Stone identifies similar political persuasions through the use of irony and language. Like Hlavacik, Stone warns readers to be cautious of rhetoric, and both authors urge civilians to be critical about how they interpret reform. Hlavacik emphasizes the

use of blame as a motivating factor for policy change. However, the author's argument may be more complete if he examined and addressed the intricate ways in which public opinion informs political action. Nevertheless, in this solid lesson on the history and art of

public blaming, Hlavacik tells a unique and cautionary tale that warns teachers, principals and average citizens to be weary of policy rhetoric and to critically analyze the information that they receive.


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## About the Reviewer


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