



## education review // reseñas educativas

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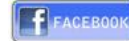
a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

December 23, 2011

ISSN 1094-5296

Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the National Education Policy Center <http://nepc.colorado.edu>

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Sadler, Philip M.; Sonnert, Gerhard; Tai, Robert H. & Klopfenstein, Kristin (2010) *AP: A Critical Examination of the Advanced Placement Program*. Cambridge, MA Harvard Education Press.

Pp. v-290. ISBN 978-1-934742-55-6

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At the onset I must admit I find myself ill suited to make any meaningful comments concerning the value of this book. Not because I am incapable of responding to the book or uncomfortable making judgments on educational research. Rather, my hesitation resides in the fact that this book is clearly written for an audience outside of my communication zone. This book is written from a ‘pragmatic’ policy making perspective, with the intent to provide ‘on the ground advice’ to schools and policy makers that want to implement, expand, or effectively manage Advanced Placement classes (AP classes) as they currently exist. In this sense, the primary focus of this book is on making effective policy decisions concerning

Citation: Wheeler-Bell, Quentin. (2011 December 23) Review of *AP: A Critical Examination of the Advanced Placement Program* by Sadler, Philip M.; Sonnert, Gerhard; Tai, Robert H. & Klopfenstein, Kristin. *Education Review*, 14. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/er.v14.1779>

AP classes in terms of their effectiveness for college readiness (Sadler, Sonnert, Tai, & Klopfenstein, 2010, p. 6). My interests, on the other hand, revolve around deeper educational reforms that expand social justice and educational equality. In this regard, I am concerned with AP classes insofar as they are equitable and advance human flourishing—something this book is not addressing. In addition, I am committed to the ‘critical pedagogical tradition’, which means I am deeply concerned with using education as a means for eliminating unjust social inequalities—another issue not particularly focused on in this book. Because of this gap, the educational questions I find most pertinent are radically different from the questions raised by the authors, and this means that I am commenting on a book far outside of my primary interest—hence, why my comments may not be meaningful to the audience this book is tailored towards.

Despite this gap, I think it is essential for scholars, especially critical scholars, to engage in reasonable deliberation across educational boundaries, even when we fundamentally disagree. This is what this review aims to achieve. However, because of our differences my review will be quite critical. Yet I would like to state beforehand that this book is well researched, nicely organized, and clearly written—something critical scholars can learn from. Nonetheless, I do have major criticisms of this book. However, in critiquing the authors I want to be as fair as possible, so I shall assess this book from premises adopted by the authors. By this I mean the following: in the introduction of the book the authors state their intentions are to address two issues regarding AP classes: *the issues of causality* and *social equity* (Sadler et al., 2010, p. 7). Since this book failed to define either of these terms, my criticism shall focus on the cluster of questions I think should have been raised when considering the relationship between AP classes, social equity, and causality.

To begin with, let’s focus on two particular chapters I found interesting. The first was Tim Lacy’s opening chapter entitled “Examining AP”, which is a brief and insightful history of the College Board Exam and how it has evolved into a big business, which netted a revenue of \$582.9 million in 2006 (Sadler et al., 2010, p. 39). In detailing this history, Lacy explains how AP classes started as a small elite program designed to provide

students with an opportunity to delve into a particular subject matter with more depth, and over time, along with the College Board, AP classes have morphed into a facet of neo-liberalism. As such the College Board has become a 'privatized non-profit' using 'hidden markets' within education to funnel public dollars into private hands (Burch, 2009). The funneling of money is clearly shown in the depressing fact that the College Board executive staff makes an annual income of \$637,757 and each of the thirty-eight vice presidents and senior staff members annual income is \$239,374, as of 2006 (Lacy, 2010). Although Lacy doesn't make this claim, the ridiculous amount of money allocated towards the top executive staff members is clearly unjust and undermines the demands of social equality (Barry, 2005).

While I found this article to be a breath of fresh air, two particular issues could have been addressed to make it stronger. First of all, Lacy makes it appear as if AP classes were initially designed in a just and humanitarian way, but have been 'tainted' by neo-liberalism. While I agree with this critique of neo-liberalism, little attention was given to the fact that AP classes were initially designed with contradictory intentions. For instance, AP classes were intended to expand a 'humanistic education' but such expansion was primarily designed to benefit the existing privileged class of American society. Therefore, even the initial implementation of AP classes did not embody the values of social equality. Secondly, the early humanist education, even beyond AP classes, did not completely align with democratic values (Labaree, 1992). While it is true that part of the early school curriculum was progressive, and aspects did advance social equality, many aspects of the early humanistic education were designed to reproduce race, class and gender relationships (Kliebard, 2004). Therefore, to assume the earlier humanist vision of education is 'tainted' by neo-liberalism is only part of the story; the other part would be to describe the problematic nature of the earlier humanist visions itself—which still is problematic today. Bringing these issues to the forefront would add more depth to this piece, primarily because it would turn the reader's attention back to fundamental educational questions concerning the content of the AP curriculum; like: *what and whose knowledge should be taught in AP classes in order to advance social equality?* (Apple, 2000)

The other article I found interesting was Klopfenstein and Thomas's (2010) pieces entitled "Evaluating the Policies of States and Colleges". This article was interesting because the authors asked questions beyond: are AP classes a reliable measure for college success in the Science Technology Engineering Mathematics (STEM) fields? In doing so, they probed into essential policy questions, such as: weighing the public and private benefits gained from AP classes; asking us to think about trade-offs in resources allocated to AP classes compared to other educational needs; and how do we access the value of AP classes to society at large. In addition to raising these questions, Klopfenstein and Thomas insightfully brought to light the complications of implementing AP classes when considering the effect such classes have on other resources needed to effectively run a school. In particular, they draw attention to an insightful and often overlooked policy question concerning 'the educational cost in taking talented students away from other classes and placing them in AP classes'. This question is essential because it broadens our conception of social equality to consider: what type of school environment is needed to support social equality? (Bryk & Schneider, 2005)

Beyond Lacy, Klopfenstein and Thomas's chapters, much of this book took an uncritical perspective on the relationship between AP classes, social equality, and causality. Many of the claims made were conceptually interesting from the perspective of *causality*; but many claims were unwarranted assumptions in regards to the social equity of AP classes. In particular, many articles simply presupposed that AP classes were beneficial for social equality. For instance, a common assumption in this book was that AP classes contribute to social equality, thus the only issues policy-makers should be concerned with are ways to adjust the content of AP class, and the corresponding testing measurements, to ensure there is a positive correlation between a student's success in AP classes and their success in corresponding college classes.

The problem with this assumption is that it presupposes the questions needing investigation, which is: how do AP classes contribute to social equality? And, why? To explain why these questions are important let me address three particular issues I wished the book addressed, which

would have shed more light on the issues of social equality and causality. These issues are: *the issues of diversity in the STEM fields; the relationship between AP classes and education as a positional good; the content of AP classes*. One major shortcoming of this book is the lack of attention given to the *issue of diversity within the STEM fields*. With the emphasis on increasing recruitment and retention of women and minorities within the STEM fields, there was no chapter solely devoted to this issue. In turn, no attention was given to policies that could be implemented to use AP classes to increase diversity within the STEM fields. To the author's credit, statistical attention was given to the percentage of individuals from 'disadvantaged' backgrounds who take AP classes, as well as the probability of individuals remaining in the STEM fields after taking AP classes (Sadler et al., 2010, pp. 139-167). Thus, one could deduce the probability of AP classes being used as a means to recruit and retain 'disadvantaged' groups in STEM fields. However, considering the importance of diversity within the STEM fields, the reader should not have to make this deduction; especially considering one focus of this book is social equality. The book should have at least one chapter devoted to this issue.

The other issues I wish was addressed is the problem of *education being a 'positional good'*. A positional good is something that is good only because it gives one a position over another, when competing for some finite good (Hirsch, 1999). For instance, college degrees are positional goods in the sense that the value of the degree is derived from its ability to position oneself above others in competing for a finite good—typically a position in the labor market. The issue of education as a positional good is important insofar as it might assist in explaining the causal factors behind the increased enrolled in AP classes. For instance, if more individuals are taking AP classes to gain a competitive advantage when applying to colleges—and thus have less of an intrinsic interest in the subject—then it would seem logical that fewer people would matriculate to college degrees around the AP subject taken in high school. This would seem logical because more people are taking AP classes for the positional value gained by taking an AP class, rather than the desire to learn about what is taught in the class.

Let me state this differently. As the Sadler (2010) note, AP exam-takers have had an annual growth of 9.3% over the last decade. However, they fail to provide any explanation as to why AP classes have seen this growth. The idea of education as a positional good, on the other hand, provides one theoretical explanation for such doubling, which is: as more pressure is placed upon education to be a key means to distribute finite resources, like job opportunities, the more incentives individuals have to use education as ‘convergent strategies’, wherein students take AP classes primarily as a means to gain the ‘educational capital’ needed to compete for a position to get into college (Bourdieu, 1984; Green, Ericson, & Seidman, 1980). It would have been interesting to know: if students have an increased incentive to use such classes to gain a ‘leg up’ in the educational race? And if so, what impact does this have on college readiness?

In addition, such evidence would also illuminate the difficulties policy-makers might encounter when using AP classes to advance social equality. For instance, when considering education as a positional good one might rethink the connection between social equality and AP classes in the following respect: if more pressure is placed upon students to acquire grades and credentials to separate themselves from other students, then there is less of an incentive to 1) learn these skills for their humanistic value and 2) pursue a college degree pertaining to the AP subject. If either of these statements is true then policy-makers would need to ask: do AP classes really *reduce* inequalities or simply *reproduce* existing inequalities? And, how likely is it that AP classes will increase the incentives for students to enter into the STEM fields? Finally, my last issue with the book is the lack of attention given to *the content of AP classes* itself. While the book did draw attention to the connection between schools and larger social problems, it overlooked the connection between larger social problems and the content of AP classes (Apple, 1995, 2000). Attending to the content of the curriculum is essential because it requires asking a deeper educational question such as: what should the curriculum look like if we value social equality? While this book slightly touches upon content, it does so in a limiting manner; only asking if content of AP classes matches the content of college’s course in the same

subject. Hence, they neglect to consider ‘who and what knowledge is of most worth in AP classes?’

While my criticism may seem sharp, I stated at the onset this book probably was not tailored toward my particular research interests. Nonetheless, while this book may be quite useful for the audience it aims to serve, I personally think it could have provided much more to students, parents, and policy-makers to better understand the complexities of using AP classes to advance social equality. While the writing was clear and the book well-organized, I found the content somewhat disappointing. Primarily because I think it behooves us as educational scholars to ensure we are constantly refocusing the educational debate around *the purpose of education within a democratic society*, rather than presupposing such purpose (Gutman, 1999). Focusing on this issue is essential because if we lose sight of the connection between social equality and a democratic education, we will always fall short of implementing policies that are truly just and advance social equality.

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Currently I am a PhD student at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. My areas of interest are normative theory, critical theory, and critical pedagogy. My dissertation is entitled “Human Flourishing the Normative Foundation of Critical Pedagogy.”

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