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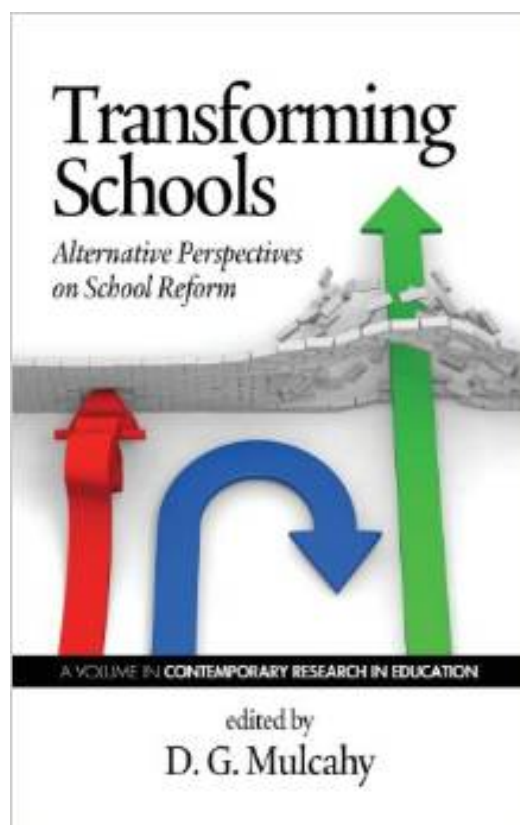
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Few phrases in modern policy discourse have come to be as loaded as “education reform.” Preoccupation with school improvement is nothing new to the United States; the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* catapulted the issue into the spotlight where it has since remained. Since the report the nation has undergone a series of reform efforts; however, most find little to celebrate when examining the results. *Transforming Schools*, edited by D.G. Mulcahy, seeks to do more than add to the litany of criticism regarding standardized tests, and federally sponsored education standards. Rather, the independent works in this volume provide alternatives—actionable ideas and processes that correct fallacies within existing reform efforts and may ultimately prove more successful in improving the quality of public education in the United States.

*Transforming Schools* is a volume in the *Contemporary Research in Education* series. Each of the book’s nine chapters is authored independently; however, all contributors hail from Central Connecticut State University. The cohesion of *Transforming Schools* is commendable. Chapters frequently refer to other sections of the book,



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Reynolds, K. (2015, January 14). Review of *Transforming Schools: Alternative Perspectives on School Reform* by D.G. Mulcahy. *Education Review*, 22.

suggesting that a considerable amount of effort went into the work's content and structure to present variations of a single vision for alternatives to traditional education reforms. Although every chapter differs in focus and methodology, each harkens back to a key principle introduced in the book's introduction: "The economic cost for such action? Not much. The cost in terms of time and effort? Quite a bit. And there lies the problem. It will take much effort and time to bring people together to develop a true long-term plan to improve education on a grand scale" (p. 13). The authors of the works in *Transforming Schools* consistently advocate that school improvement will not come from top down policies accompanied by large sums of cash, but rather from the challenging and time consuming work of teachers and administrators.

Chapter 1, authored by Ronnie Casella and entitled "Transforming Schools: An Introduction" lays the foundation for subsequent chapters by providing an overview of the authors' basic framework. Central to the chapter are two education policy fallacies that explain the ineffectiveness of federal education reform to date. The first fallacy is that increased assessment leads to positive educational outcomes. The problems with excessive standardized testing are twofold: 1) assessments are not the be-all and end-all of education, and 2) standardized assessments have shifted away from *measuring* educational goals to *creating* educational goals. The second fallacy identified is the belief that the detrimental effects of poverty on education can be negated without addressing poverty itself. Thus, the authors of *Transforming Schools* present new ideas for school reform—ideas that are cognizant of the multi-faceted nature of education and also recognize the stark realities of how poverty affects student performance.

"Making Space for Critical Literacy and Not Just Cultural Literacy" (Chapter 2) provides an alternative paradigm for instructors wishing to implement rigorous and meaningful literacy instruction. The chapter opens with an exploration of the interconnectedness of literacy and policy. Depending upon policy initiatives, literacy is a tool

that may be used to “serve the interests of the labor market and the status quo or they [literacy] can allow for the development of personal voice and empowerment” (p. 17). Embracing the latter of these two, author Cara Mulcahy advocates vigorously for the teaching of critical literacy, which focuses upon “social justice, social transformation, development of critical consciousness, and individual and social empowerment” (p. 18-19). Mulcahy embraces the reader’s/writer’s workshop as a valuable method for teaching critical literacy because of the balance of power between teacher and students. She notes that this method of instruction requires teachers to be constantly reflective and self-aware of their own assumptions and biases lest they limit students. For example, teachers should reconsider not allowing certain kinds of literature in their classes. Mulcahy offers her approach in contrast to the functional and skills based approaches that are often used when teaching literacy. Critical literacy forces students to confront social injustice and to recognize the points of view of others, skills that are not measured on standardized tests, but nonetheless are crucial for a successful and fulfilling adult life.

In Chapter 3, “Methods and Mindsets for Creating Eco-Social Community Educators,” James Joss French discusses his experiences in bringing ecojustice principles to a teacher education course. Ecojustice requires the questioning of the dominant market culture and close consideration of the roles of commons and enclosure in one’s daily life. French applies these concepts to teacher education courses by requiring students to learn a skill from a community mentor, examining popular history through multiple lenses, and watching documentaries such as *Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh*. Engaging in these exercises provided students with new insights regarding the separation of modern schools from communities and increased resolve to incorporate more commons based activities into their classrooms, such as community gardening. In the quest for improvement, schools are often increasingly isolated from the communities they serve; ecojustice principles applied to teaching can help combat this isolation.

The achievement gap and its causes are addressed in Chapter 4, “Addressing the Root Causes of the Achievement Gap.” Jacob Werblow and Laura Longo use this chapter to tackle the second policy fallacy addressed in *Transforming Education*’s introduction: that poor school performance due to poverty can be tackled by measures such as increased standardization and accountability. Among the developed nations, the United States has one of the most unequal distributions of income, leading to large gaps in academic achievement by socio-economic status. The chapter’s authors outline some of the key factors associated with poverty that negatively affect students’ academic outcomes, such as food insecurity and environmental pollutants. Using linear regression, Werblow and Longo then examine the correlation between poverty and school performance in Connecticut (N=200). Their analysis reveals that 69% of variance in student test scores can be explained by poverty. Additionally, they note that while there at first appears to be a correlation between race and test scores, this relationship disappears after controlling for poverty. The conclusion is clear: poverty must be adequately addressed if the United States wishes to bolster student achievement. Werblow and Longo provide several suggestions for policy action to this end, including advocacy for racial and socioeconomic integration of towns and consolidation and desegregation of school districts.

Barbara Clark tackles the topic of aesthetic education in Chapter 5, entitled “Breaking the Culture of Silence in Schools: Children’s Voices Revealed Through Moral Imagination.” Clark advocates fiercely for the inclusion of the arts in schools and bemoans their marginalization since the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001. She describes how the arts allow children to critically examine their perceptions of the world and foster a sense of self. Additionally, she cites research establishing that imagination is essential to the development of children’s moral compasses. In practice, Clark demonstrates the value of aesthetic education through a series of workshops with eighteen children identified as “at risk.” In each

workshop, students collectively viewed a piece of art and were asked to respond to it through creative writing, namely poetry. The poems included in the chapter illustrate a plethora of ways in which viewing paintings stimulated children's moral imagination. Some students wrote poems examining their own relationships with other people, while others wrote pieces empathizing with individuals within the paintings. In the chapter's conclusion, Clark celebrates the creative empathy of her students and challenges all educators to use the arts as a means for children to develop both intra- and interpersonally.

Chapter 6, "Toward a More Balanced Assessment Framework," authored by Jesse P. Turner, John D. Foshay, and Ernest Pancsofar addresses the quality of data that is used to evaluate student performance. They note that "the ethical dilemma of the current federal policy [No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top], root exclusively in formal standardized summative measures of learning, presents an unbalanced assessment framework that overlooks the whole child" (p. 107). By focusing so heavily upon these standardized measures, qualitative data from a variety of sources is marginalized and ignored and only an incomplete picture of a child's learning is captured. Personal choice and engagement should be parts of good assessment measures because they allow for a more complete and accurate interpretation of a child's learning. Additionally, data regarding student achievement should be gathered from multiple sources and stakeholders (such as teachers and parents) rather than a single test. These sources could be "learner products, examples of learner's work, homework, teacher-created quizzes, surveys, observational notes, self-assessments, and interest inventories" (p. 110). Using a case study of a theoretical student, Turner, Foshay, and Pancsofar demonstrate how balanced assessment using multiple sources can more effectively address learning difficulties than standardized tests, which often prescribe a cycle of ineffective interventions not individually tailored to students. The chapter concludes with suggestions for how educators might

incorporate balanced assessments into their teaching practices, such as through learner's tic tac toe.

Chapter 7, Kurt Love's "Authenticity and Cooperation as Pathways to School Success," examines the harmful effects of excessive competition in American schools. The positive power of cooperation within schools is also demonstrated through discussions of the Sustainable Farm School (located in West Simsbury, CT) and Finland's public education system. The Sustainable Farm School's curriculum pushes students to work together to examine real world problems, such as access to healthy foods for individuals in poverty. This curriculum pushes students far beyond seeking the traditional "right" answer in a way that is no longer the norm for most of America's public schools. In the push for accountability and increased school performance, public schools have increasingly become run by individuals with little background in education. This has led to the proliferation of charter schools and excessive standardized testing. Love cites research regarding the overall lackluster performance of charter schools, despite their touting of their own successes with students. In contrast to the competitive, accountability driven system of the United States, students in Finland take only one standardized test at the end of their schooling. Additionally, Finland has no charter or private schools; all students attend the nation's public school system, reinforcing the idea of cooperation, which is also emphasized within individual classrooms. Love notes that some researchers dismiss Finland's educational success because of its small and relatively homogenous population. He addresses this by examining Norway, a country with similar demographics to Finland, but whose educational policies more closely resemble the United States with an emphasis on testing and competition. Norway's performance on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is much lower than Finland's, suggesting that an emphasis on cooperation within educational systems may be a more powerful predictor of academic performance than demographic data. Based upon these international comparisons, as well as experiences at the

Sustainable Farm School, Love calls for authentic learning over testing and cooperation over competition.

*Transforming Schools'* penultimate chapter, Ellen Retelle and Mark Cohan's "Social Justice and District Leadership in Public Schools: Guidelines for Practice," provides a narrative of one administrator's social justice oriented practices, as well as highlighting how district leaders can integrate social justice principles into various aspects of their respective school systems. The chapter opens with a narrative of Cohan's oversight of the racial integration of his school district while serving as the superintendent. Cohan notes that perhaps the most important lesson from his story is that "a superintendent wishing to advocate for social justice needs to possess the political savvy and awareness to integrate social justice actions at all levels of the school district" (p. 141). This includes recognizing that some individuals may not appreciate the social justice intent behind a leader's actions; simply having them on board with the actions themselves must sometimes suffice in order to enact meaningful change. Following the narrative, the authors provide specific mention of the importance of social justice for LGBT individuals within schools. The chapter closes with an overview of how school leaders can work to achieve a "comprehensive culture of school improvement" (p. 145) through social justice mindsets and actions. Social justice principles can be applied to many aspects of schools, including instruction, assessment, and curriculum.

*Transforming Schools* closes with Chapter 9, "Theory and Praxis in General Education," authored by editor D. G. Mulcahy. In this chapter, Mulcahy provides an overview of competing ideas regarding what a general (or liberal) education should entail. Classically, school has been a place of theoretical knowledge, with subjects divided and treated separately. In more recent decades, this practice has come under fire for a number of reasons. Some scholars have stressed the need for inclusion of practical educative components that prepare learners for the workforce. Others worry that artificially separating subjects in school prevents

students from being able to make meaningful inferences about the real world. Still others argue that the current model of general education is lacking in enabling students to become compassionate and emotionally stable individuals. To address these concerns, Mulcahy proposes a loose model for general education that addresses four components: “the work demands of living, the recreational demands of living, the practical demands of living, and the philosophical demands of living” (p. 166). He argues that a proper general education prepares students for each kind of demand, and that to do this effectively certain pedagogical shifts must occur. For example, in order to prepare learners for the practical demands of living, more meaningful, hands-on learning experiences must occur outside of the traditional classroom. However, Mulcahy does not provide a curriculum structure or specific recommendations for action; the chapter rather is concerned with “advance[ing] an alternative conception of education that elevates the place of practical knowledge relative to theoretical knowledge” (p. 171).

In summary, *Transforming Schools* as a whole does an excellent job of fulfilling its self-stated purpose of re-evaluating what is traditionally meant by “school reform” and providing a variety of perspectives upon what policies and practices may yield desirable results. Although the topics covered in *Transforming Schools* vary greatly, the importance of genuine, human work is consistently valued over reform strategies that rely on funding or standardized test scores. Although the short length of the book and its chapters prevents a comprehensive treatment of alternative perspectives on school reform, *Transforming Schools* is an excellent read for one wishing to venture away from traditional reform strategies and mindsets. Helpful for students and scholars alike, it provides a great introduction to great ideas.

### About the Reviewer

Katherine Reynolds is a Master's student in Education Policy and Evaluation at the University of Kentucky. Prior to entering graduate school, she



taught middle school science. Her interests include American education reform efforts, with an emphasis on Teach for America, New Leaders for New Schools, and other alternative school certification organizations.




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