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Farr, Steven. (2010) *Teaching as Leadership: The Highly Effective Teacher's Guide To Closing the Achievement Gap*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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Reviewed by Elisa Waingort
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Teaching as Leadership by Steven Farr was not an easy read. It was not an easy read not because it was difficult, or addressed complex ideas, or because it was particularly boring. It was not an easy read because the author's primary purpose is to promote the superiority of the *raison d'être* of Teach for America (TfA). Of course, the fact that Farr variously repeats himself in order to make fairly simple arguments did not endear himself to this reader. In a nutshell, Farr believes that teaching can be reduced to a perfect science that can be successfully replicated by the smartest and the brightest college graduates. And, in his frame of the world, the organization that is doing this job the best job at producing these kinds of teacher is TfA.

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Although it has taken me a long time to pinpoint my discomforts with this book, an article by Alfie Kohn helped to clarify what I believe is the major flaw with Steven Farr's premise. In "Cash Incentives Won't Make Us Healthier" (2009), Alfie discusses the negative effects inherent in juxtaposing traditional and progressive instructional strategies and practices. Kohn claims that if structures that promote a democratic classroom exist side by side other structures that undermine student decision-making and problem solving, such as rewards and punishments, then the latter measures will negate the former. In fact, according to Kohn, the effect is worse than just relying on behavior modification strategies in the classroom. Kohn reiterates what much research has shown to be true: "extrinsic" motivators (to get a reward or avoid a punishment) are much less effective than "intrinsic" motivators (an internal commitment to doing something for its own sake). What's more, the two are often inversely related. According to Kohn, scores of studies confirm that, sooner or later, the more we're rewarded for doing something – at work, at school, or at home -- the more we're apt to lose interest in whatever we had to do to get the reward.

Thus, a study in November's *Developmental Psychology* showed, as did two previous experiments, that children who are rewarded for helping or sharing subsequently become less helpful. Similarly, the more that students are led to focus on getting good grades, the less interesting they come to find the learning itself. They also think less deeply on average than students who aren't graded. (Kohn, 2009)

In his book, Farr describes many examples of what can be categorized as effective instructional and management strategies, such as planning with the end in mind and the importance of building community in the classroom. At the same time, there is a nefarious emphasis on data collection, primarily through testing. This includes public displays (what are now commonly known as data walls) of individual student results. There are many examples given of teachers who despite all odds, (their lack of teaching experience, the previously low scores of their students, few resources, and the like), have turned things around for many of their students. In fact, we are led to believe that they've given all of the children in their classrooms an

incredible boost in their “learning” resulting in the greatest bounty of all: high marks on standardized tests. Except if one reads carefully it is not a particular child’s “learning” but his or her “achievement” that has increased, as measured by increased scores, increased reading levels, increased test marks, increased numbers with their name in the appropriate spot on the data wall.

Teaching as Leadership reduces teaching to a series of steps that can be followed in a guidebook, of sorts, and fuels the double myth that teaching is simply a science and not much education is needed to become a teacher. A hidden message seems to be that those of us who have been educated as teachers have it all wrong. Even though we may have worked tirelessly for years to improve the quality of instruction and to create a positive impact on non-educational factors affecting inner city students in our classrooms, we don’t know what we’re doing. In fact, we’ve failed miserably. The message seems to be that all we need to do is employ Ivy League graduates for a two-year stint in the public schools and things will change for the better.

Although I have not seen *Waiting for Superman*—it has yet to make its debut in Calgary—many of the reviews I’ve read seem to point to the same malaise and solution: the problem is teachers who refuse to go the extra mile and who complain bitterly about everything with the backing of their union. Instead, let’s remake public schools and fire all the teachers, hire TfA mavericks, and our problems will be solved.

The problem with this red cape kind of thinking, as Diane Ravitch (2010) recently pointed out in a “Bridging Differences” post, is that “Teach for America with \$50 million when they add fewer than 10,000 teachers each year—teachers who agree to stay on the job for only two years in a profession that must add at least 300,000 teachers every single year.”

So, you may be asking yourself, why bother to read this book? *Teaching as Leadership* uncovers another piece of the puzzle that helps us understand what is currently happening to public education. The replacement of “public” institutions is being accomplished through short-term solutions, quick fixes, seemingly facile restructuring

ventures, a numbers-tell-the-story mentality, and the deprofessionalizing of teachers and teaching. We need to reclaim our profession and take back our public schools from those that value “achievement” by numbers rather than “learning”. Learning is not a paint by numbers activity. Learning is life-long and enriching. Our children are not machines that need programming. Our children need sustenance and nurturing—two of the elements of good teaching that cannot be reduced to a three-step procedure in a manual. Let’s hope we have the courage to stand up for what’s right before it’s too late.

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