



education review // reseñas educativas

editors: gene v glass gustavo e. fischman melissa cast-brede

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

October 5, 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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Hess, Frederick M. (2010). *The Same Thing Over and Over: How School Reformers Get Stuck In Yesterday's Ideas*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Pp. 304 ISBN: 9780674055827

Reviewed by Gary Hartzell
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The Same Thing Over and Over is an important, difficult book. It's important because it strikes the core problem in educational reform; difficult because it is content-rich and its best arguments deal in possibilities rather than prescriptions. As such, it is deeply thought-provoking and entices readers to reflect and respond.

Hess argues that the core educational reform problem is in the nature of the effort itself: repeated attempts to improve a fundamentally outdated outmoded structure. Rather than explore and develop new structures, reformers pour their faith and resources into making the existing structure more effective. "They tend to color safely within the lines – largely," he says, "because those lines are so taken for granted that would-be reformers don't realize

Citation: Hartzell, Gary. (2011 October 5) Review of *The Same Thing Over and Over* by Frederick M. Hess. *Education Review*, 14. Retrieved [Date] from <http://www.edrev.info/reviews/rev1117.pdf>

there is an alternative” (p. 10). This conceptual constraint renders reformers prisoners of the past. Simultaneously, rather than entertain a multiplicity of approaches, reformers most often commit to a particular approach and advocate it to the disadvantage, if not the exclusion, of others. As a whole, reformers seek some “one best way” that promises to fix a flawed system and achieve our national goal of universal education, however we may define it. They are doomed to disappointment.

Hess is persuasive when he argues for open mindedness in school reform. He interestingly and comprehensively describes and demonstrates its absence in movements that have burst upon and then faded from the educational scene over the last century and more. In the process, especially well done for a book this short, he addresses and assesses what American schools have tried to be and what they’ve actually been. He’s at his most persuasive when he argues for divergent thinking and a diversity of approaches; less when he presses for particular solutions.

Most of the book’s content is well-explored territory. Works like Tyack’s and Cuban’s *Tinkering Toward Utopia* (1995), and Ravitch’s and Vinovski’s *Learning from the Past* (1995) assayed much the same material – not discussing, of course, the failures of the ensuing decade that were yet to be endured. Hess, however, more deeply penetrates the foundation of the problem than these earlier examinations. He calls for an institutional rather than organizational re-evaluation, arguing that the notion of a “public education” has been absorbed in the notion of the traditional “public school.” “Rethinking today’s arrangements starts not by embracing this or that new measure, but by revisiting our notions of what schooling is and should look like. Schools look the way they do because of long ago agendas, inertia, and efforts to meet the challenges of earlier eras” (p. 212). Providing “universal education” rests on diverse and dynamic frameworks, not in static uniformity. The more realistic and effective way to address the public education challenge is through environmentally-driven solutions; that is, through delivery systems that fit the needs of given students in a given place at a given time. In this context, “place” defines a much broader demographic than just location, embracing all the geographic, age, gender, ethnic, sociological, psychological, intellectual, and

economic dimensions that shape a student's life. A given structure in a specific area might involve a wide variety of instructional methods delivered simultaneously from a wide variety of sources, and different structures in different areas might vary greatly across the national landscape. They would, however, all pursue the national goal of providing universal education to the populace.

While this is a monumentally complex approach, posing inestimable evaluation challenges and requiring a local sentence and authority that undoubtedly would be difficult to create and sustain, it bears a powerful logic. Having served as an educator in beach-front California and in Omaha, Nebraska, and having worked with school systems in places as different from one another as rural Alaska, Hawai'i, Oregon, Texas, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, New York, and Florida, Hess's notion that one size does not fit all resonates with me.

So, too, does his analysis of the rhetorical wastefulness inherent in so much current educational discussion. Effectively confronting education's distressed state requires substantive debate focus, which is difficult enough, but too often conflict resolution is obstructed when opponents respond affectively, labeling proposals as "assaults" or "attacks" on traditional values or familiar organizations. As Hess argues, any set of "ideas may or may not be good ones, but the notion that they constitute an assault on public school raises an insuperable barrier to reimagining how to answer the challenges of a new century" (p. 6).

Hess's work is also valuable because he doesn't soft-pedal the level of conflict that will have to be endured to realize true reform. He identifies unpleasant but inevitable realities with which would-be reformers must deal. Two stand out: First, it will be crucial to distinguish "between what all students need to learn and what some – but not all – need to learn" (p. 205). Second, any meaningful excellence standard necessarily means that some students will fall short. These are hot philosophical and political issues that people will feel passionately about.

The book is not without weaknesses. Its length prohibits some in-depth discussion that would possibly strengthen arguments. The implications arising from the growing role

and demands of special education seem under-examined. So do those flowing from federal and state government mandates that have made schools the vehicles of choice for many non-academic social-improvement purposes, although Hess makes the clear and strong point that “the price for asking anyone ... to do lots of different things is that they will tend not to do them well” (p. 37). Hess’s belief in the power of technology seems overstated given the research showing the importance of human interaction in children’s lives.

But these items and others neither undercut nor overpower Hess’s essential message: The very nature of schooling needs to be rethought in light of twenty-first century realities. The book is useful and disturbing, which is both its purpose and its value.

References

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About the Reviewer

Gary Hartzell is a Professor Emeritus, Department of Educational Administration and Supervision, University of Nebraska at Omaha. His research interests center on schools as work places for adults, with particular attention given to work place relationships. He is the author of *Building Influence for the School Librarian* (Linworth, 2004), the lead author of *New Voices in the Field: The Work Lives of First-Year Assistant Principals* (Corwin Press, 1995), and many articles on school administration practices, school librarians, and workplace relationships.

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