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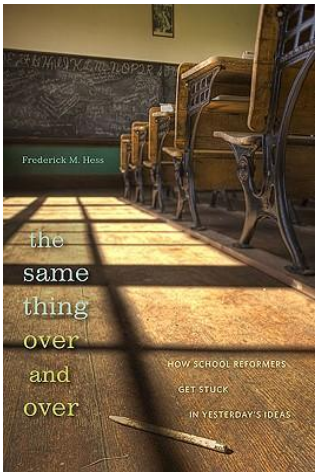
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Hess, Frederick M. (2010) *The Same Thing Over and Over: How School Reformers Get Stuck in Yesterday's Ideas*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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Reviewed by Susan Ohanian
Charlotte, Vermont



Rick Hess's "Straight Up" blog (http://tinyurl.com/yjuh5ys) is one of the more interesting offerings around. Even though I often disagree with his premises – never mind his conclusions – Hess offers a certain caprice that's thought-provoking and even fun. And certainly "fun" does not often come up as a descriptor of advocates on any side of education controversies. Alas, Hess doesn't bring this same quirky intensity to *The Same Thing Over and Over*. For me, his attempt to lay a historical lens over a survey of education reform reads like some leftovers simmering on the back burner without much heat.

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I admired Hess's willingness to say flat out in his blog,[1] "I personally don't feel qualified to judge the quality of the Common Core standards; I don't think standards themselves matter all that much--all the action is in the stuff that follows." Certainly this separates Hess from most other pundits who are so quick to make pronouncements on the Common Core. But Hess isn't nearly so self-effacing in *The Same Thing Over and Over*.



In this volume, he dons the mantle of wise overseer, not admitting insufficient knowledge or lack of on-the-ground experience on any topic but just expecting the reader to believe he's smarter than almost everybody else in the room. After announcing, "I am no historian," **Hess** identifies himself as "political scientist and policy thinker" and proceeds with his overview of the endless debates. He rarely takes issue with old pals. Example: After very briefly summarizing school crisis critiques offered by *A Nation at Risk* and Bill Gates, Hess concludes "This tyranny of sequential orthodoxies yields a conventional wisdom that holds sway until it is displaced by a new conventional wisdom." And he quotes from Chester Finn Jr's 2010 *National Affairs* article "The End of the Education Debate" for the second time in eleven pages.

Since Hess seemed to consider his own self-identification important, I paid special attention to how he identified everybody else in the book. I became aware of how much information such identifiers conceal while reviewing some 700 newspaper articles dealing with Race to the Top and the Common Core State Standards published between mid-May 2009 and mid-July 2010.[2] I zeroed in on how reporters identified "independent experts" they called on for sound bites. After eliminating cites from state education officials, union officials, and politicos, I ended up with 152 outside experts quoted in 414 articles. Of the

[1] Rick Hess, "The Common Core Kool-Aid," *Education Week blog*, Nov. 30, 2012 http://tinyurl.com/cv2n6h8

[2] Susan Ohanian, "'Race to the Top' and the Bill Gates Connection: Who gets to speak about what schools need?" *Extra!* (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting), September 2010 http://fair.org/extra-online-articles/8216race-to-the-top8217-and-the-bill-gates-connection/

23 experts quoted five times or more, 15 had connections with institutions receiving Gates funding and 13 with strong charter advocacy institutions. These "connections" were identified by only two reporters. Most often, outfits like the Fordham Institute, the Cato Institute, American Enterprise, are simply identified as "think tanks," with no clue as to the agendas they push. Spokespeople from New America Foundation, NewSchools Venture Fund, New Leaders for New Schools, Mass Insight and on and on are cited without a hint of a pro-market agenda.

Hess employs pretty much the same obfuscatory technique, citing Teach for America as "today's most promising new teacher recruiting venture" and quoting outfits such as the National Council on Teacher Quality and the New Teacher Project with no indication of who funds them or what they promote.

Hess identifies Benjamin Barber only as "political theorist" and quotes one sentence from Barber as a jumping off point for making a point about Plato's view on education reform, but one has to search the notes in the back of the book to find out that the Barber item comes from *A Passion for Democracy: American Essays*. That is more recognition than most people receive in this book. Bruce Biddle is "scholar," David Berliner "scholar" and "former president of the American Education Research Association."

That's it.

Hess labels Alfie Kohn "popular author" and identifies Patrick Shannon only as "Kohn's colleague." Shannon doesn't even make it into the index. Hess holds up the pair's *Education, Inc.* as reflecting "the established schooling community's determined disinterest in thinking from outside the box." I am familiar with the extensive individual work of both, who collaborated only on this book, and I'd like a look at the box Hess thinks contains either one.

But Hess's putdown of Kohn-Shannon is part of a larger agenda here. For example, here's how Frank Smith is described: "founder of phonics-eschewing 'whole-language' literacy."

That's it.

Diane Ravitch is quoted in two different chapters. Early in the book when calling to question Ravitch's "new vehemence in early 2010," Hess identifies her simply as "historian." Later in the book when he's quoting her earlier comments on "fuzzy math" and the failure of progressive education (from her 2001 book *Left Back: A Century of Battles over School Reform*), Hess provides a more fulsome description: "E. D. Hirsch ally Diane Ravitch, professor of education at New York University, has argued that progressive pedagogy fails in its most basic goal — developing a sound body of knowledge that can serve as a springboard for future intellectual pursuits."

After quoting from Ravitch's 2001 book, Hess continues, "The Hirsch-Ravitch stance has much to recommend it, except the frustrating reality that the push for clear, rigorous, specific standards has repeatedly gotten waylaid by the familiar politics and compromises of universalism, while state bureaucracies and local districts have typically implemented the resulting directives clumsily and without much conviction."

I find it a bit disingenuous for Hess to quote from Ravitch's much earlier book, but she will have to speak for herself on the accuracy of his summary of her current views.

E. D. Hirsch is labeled the "essentialist" and his work "seminal."

John Chubb and Terry Moe are identified as "scholars" who wrote the "seminal" *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*." Hess sprinkles "seminal" in a few more places: Charles Bidwell and John Kasarda are credited with an elegant and seminal article, "Conceptualizing and Measuring the Effects of School and Schooling." And Hess laments the absence from the syllabi of education leadership classes of "seminal thinkers like Michael Porter, Jim Collins, Clayton Christensen, Tom Peters, Peter Drucker, and Warren Bennis."

I wonder if a writer doesn't have some duty to the reader to make things clear. Terry Moe, for example, is a voucher advocate, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, the

recipient of an award from the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation Prize for Excellence in Education. His teacher union bashing book received fulsome endorsements from Joel Klein and Michelle Rhee. But readers are on their own to bring this information to Hess's text.

Similarly, Hess gives Patrick Wolf this identifier: "In a 2005 Brookings Institution volume, University of Arkansas scholar Patrick Wolf…." I'm guessing that "Brookings Institution volume" is meant to offer some oomph here. One has to go to the endnotes to find out this was a chapter, "School Choice and Civic Values," in *Getting Choice Right: Ensuring Equity and Efficiency*, ed. Julian Betts and Tom Loveless. That's it. Perhaps of interest to the reader: this book came out of the Brookings Institution-initiated National Working Commission on School Choice in K-12 Education, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. By the way, Hess, a commission member, also has (with Tom Loveless), a chapter in this Bookings Institution volume.

Hess identifies Jay Greene only as "Patrick Wolf's University of Arkansas colleague." Readers might be interested to know that Wolf holds the 21st Century Endowed Chair in School Choice in the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas and Greene heads that department. Here's how *Arkansas Times* reporter Doug Smith describes the department: "Here in Arkansas, we know the Walton Foundation for giving $300 million to the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. It's said to be the largest private gift ever made to a public university. Conditions were imposed, most visibly the creation of a new department of education reform, which advocates for alternatives to public education, such as charter schools and vouchers. The head of the department, Jay P. Greene, is a nationally prominent voucherist. Who's your sugar daddy?" [3]

Arne Duncan appears in the book only with an "even" or "however" attached:

[3] *Doug Smith, "Waltons bankroll movement to get public money for church school," Arkansas Times*, Sept. 30, 2012 http://www.arktimes.com/arkansas/whos-your-sugar-daddy/Content?oid=1316485

> "…even as U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan traveled the country in 2009 avidly championing the importance of states' adopting common curricular standards. . . .
> "Even U. S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has declared, "I absolutely , fundamentally believe that mayoral control is extraordinarily important…"

President Obama's secretary of education, Arne Duncan, made similar proclamations in 2009 when he declared that we should "reward those teachers and those principals that are making a huge difference in students' lives."

However….

Most astounding is the way Hess identifies Mike Rose: "Mike Rose: Left-leaning education professor, veteran educator, and standards critic." Admittedly this isn't quite as bizarre as the far right *American Thinker* calling David Coleman a neo-Marxist[4] but if Mike Rose is "left-leaning," then we definitely need a recalibration of "center."

Early in the book, Hess identifies Gerald Bracey only as "educational author," citing his remark, "A war is being waged on America's public schools. . . .," as an example of defenders of public schools who "are often vociferous even as they are more than a little vague about just what they are defending." The reader won't find the source of the Bracey quote in this Hess volume, but for the record, it's from a book titled *What You Should Know About the War Against America's Public Schools*,[5] offering 224 pages of specificity.

Remembering some of Bracey's knock-down verbal tussles with Hess, I can't help but think that Hess figured this passing swipe was his chance finally to get in the last word. But I'd like to give that word to Bracey. In delivering the "Charles Degarmo Invited Lecture" to

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[4] M. Catharine Evans, "Globalist in Education Reform Censoring Literary Classics," *The American Thinker*, Dec. 9, 2012. http://tinyurl.com/c3gmunp

[5] Gerald Bracey, Gerald. (2002) *What You Should Know About the War Against America's Public Schools*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

AERA in 2009, Gerald Bracey noted, “People will believe anything you say about public education as long as it’s bad."

About the Reviewer



Susan Ohanian is a longtime teacher and prolific author on education topics. She has maintained a website of resistance since the 2002 passage of NCLB and does not see any reason to take it down. www.susanohanian.org Her articles have appeared in *The Atlantic, Parents, Washington Monthly, The Nation, Phi Delta Kappan, Education Week, Language Arts,* and *American School Board Journal*. In 2003, Ohanian received The National Council of Teachers of English's "NCTE Orwell Award" for her outstanding contributions to the critical analysis of public discourse.

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