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The Rhetoric and Reality of Standards-Based School Reform

MICHAEL W. APPLE


It is now becoming even more clear that the political center has increasingly moved to the Right in most areas of social policy, including education. Evidence of this is not hard to find. For instance, the Brookings Institution—for many years the bastion of centrist-to-liberal Democratic Party politics—has been publishing books on education that would have been seen as more than a little conservative in previous decades. Examples include Diane Ravitch’s (1995) book on national standards and now David Kearns and James Harvey’s A Legacy of Learning. An indication of the move to the Right is not simply that the Kearney and Harvey book is unabashedly and largely uncritically in favor of standards but the fact that the Foreword was written by former president George Bush. Kearns is, of course, the former CEO of Xerox and the deputy secretary of education in the Bush administration. Harvey worked for the Carter administration but was also one of those involved in developing A Nation at Risk (1983), in my and many others’ opinion a lamentable document. The authors have chosen to let Kearns’s voice dominate the volume.

A Legacy of Learning is a book that should be read for a number of reasons. First, like Ravitch’s book before it, it is extremely well written, crafted in a way that could serve as a model of how political language that seems inclusive can be employed in attempts to mobilize a wide range of people.
Second, and again like Ravitch’s volume, because of the way it is written, it is possible to miss some of its more conservative claims. And, third, its rhetorical strategies may make us forget what we know about what works and what does not. Such rhetorical forms can lead to a neglect both of the ways policies such as the seemingly never ending search for “higher standards” are connected to other even less democratic proposals for school reform and, unfortunately, how they often seem to work in negative ways in the real world of real schools in a variety of nations.

Let me say that this is a contradictory volume. There clearly are elements of good sense in this book, but they often sit side by side with positions that fly in the face of the logic of some of the authors’ own assertions. Kearns uses his experience as a “reformer” within the corporate sector to organize his arguments, but he is very much against Taylorism and similar top-down strategies—surely a sign that he is thoughtful. At the same time, he thinks that the Coalition for Essential Schools, James Comer’s School Development Program, and Debbie Meier’s work are fine ideas, but he also likes the E. D. Hirsch-inspired Core Knowledge Schools and the Edison Project. These latter two leave much to be desired, and the only similarity between the former and latter parts of this list is that they all are about schools. He likes charter schools as well but seems not to be familiar with the ongoing research by Amy Stuart Wells and others that raises some very serious cautions about the social and educational effects of charter schools (Wells, Lopez, Scott, & Holme, 1999). In A Legacy of Learning, he minimizes his support for school choice and marketization, but he has been closely associated with positions coming out of the Hudson Institute, a rightist think tank whose history of support of these and similar policies is also very clear.

For Kearns, the way to solve all of the problems our schools now face is to bring the lessons he learned from his years as an executive of a major corporation to bear on our educational system. Much of the volume is based on telling the stories of what he learned, showing how these lessons helped transform the corporate sector, and then arguing that only by importing these procedures and models into the education sector can we become more effective and efficient. I don’t want to dismiss these points. However, I do want to raise some questions about them. You will forgive me, I hope, if I speak very bluntly.

It is possible to argue on the grounds of efficiency that corporate models should dominate our societies. After all, they do allow for choice. Yet, to valorize this vision of democracy as the correct one forgets one simple but crucial point. Most major corporations are anything but democratic. In many ways, they are considerably more authoritarian than is admitted openly. Thus, jobs are cut ruthlessly. Profits are much more important than the lives,
hopes, and well-being of employees who have given their working lives to these organizations. In general, no level of profit ever makes these jobs secure; profit must be constantly increased, no matter what the cost to families and employees. One must question if this is the ethic we should be introducing as the model for our public institutions and our children. The lessons of “lean and mean” unfortunately often form a couplet. Both terms are usually given equal weight, as the lost lives and hopes of millions of working people and their families and communities can testify. Do not read this as a simplistic rejection of all forms of economic reasoning and organization. However, it is absolutely crucial that we look directly and honestly at what these models actually do to a large portion of the people whose lives are caught up in them. Such honesty may be painful, but it is necessary.

Given these contradictory impulses, where does this book sit in the current political terrain on educational reform? In a number of books and in previous articles in this journal, I have detailed how a “new” set of compromises, a new alliance and new power bloc, have been formed that have increasing influence in education and all things social. This power bloc combines multiple fractions of capital who are committed to neoliberal marketized solutions to educational problems and to bringing corporate models into the heart of education; neoconservative intellectuals who want a “return” to higher standards and a “common culture”; authoritarian populist religious conservatives who are deeply worried about secularity and the preservation of their own traditions; and particular fractions of the professionally oriented new middle class who are committed to the ideology and techniques of accountability, measurement, and “management.” Although there are clear tensions and conflicts within this alliance, in general its overall aims are in providing the educational conditions believed necessary both for increasing international competitiveness, profit, and discipline and for returning us to a romanticized past of the “ideal” home, family, and school (Apple, 1996, 2000, 2001).

Behind all educational proposals are visions of a just society and a good student. The most powerful groups within the new alliance are neoliberals and neoconservatives, and the reforms that they tend to propose construct the just society and the good student in particular ways. Although there are differences between the two groups, in the real world of educational policy they tend to combine their efforts on connecting schools to the economy and restoring “standards” and discipline to schools. An understanding of neoliberalism itself will help us see why their emphasis on the economy can easily be attached to the neconservative focus on a restoration of “real” knowledge, high standards, and discipline and to managerialism’s call for tighter control.
Although the defining characteristic of neoliberalism is largely based on the central tenets of classical liberalism, in particular classic economic liberalism, there are crucial differences between classical liberalism and neoliberalism. These differences are absolutely essential in understanding the politics of education and the transformations education is currently undergoing. Olssen (1996) clearly detailed these differences in the following passage. It is worth quoting in its entirety.

Whereas classical liberalism represents a negative conception of state power in that the individual was to be taken as an object to be freed from the interventions of the state, neo-liberalism has come to represent a positive conception of the state’s role in creating the appropriate market by providing the conditions, laws and institutions necessary for its operation. In classical liberalism, the individual is characterized as having an autonomous human nature and can practice freedom. In neo-liberalism the state seeks to create an individual who is an enterprising and competitive entrepreneur. In the classical model the theoretical aim of the state was to limit and minimize its role based on postulates which included universal egoism (the self-interested individual); invisible hand theory which dictated that the interests of the individual were also the interests of the society as a whole; and the political maxim of laissez-faire. In the shift from classical liberalism to neo-liberalism, then, there is a further element added, for such a shift involves a change in subject position from “homo economicus,” who naturally behaves out of self-interest and is relatively detached from the state, to “manipulatable man,” who is created by the state and who is continually encouraged to be “perpetually responsive.” It is not that the conception of the self-interested subject is replaced or done away with by the new ideals of “neo-liberalism,” but that in an age of universal welfare, the perceived possibilities of slothful indolence create necessities for new forms of vigilance, surveillance, “performance appraisal” and of forms of control generally. In this model the state has taken it upon itself to keep us all up to the mark. The state will see to it that each one makes a “continual enterprise of ourselves” . . . in what seems to be a process of “governing without governing.” (p. 340)

When examined closely, it is exactly this combination that stands behind some of the key components of A Legacy of Learning. What do we know about its effects when this combination is applied to schools? The results of research in England on the effects of policies that are strikingly similar to those proposed by Kearns and Harvey document how the state does indeed do this, enhancing that odd combination of marketized individualism and control through constant and comparative public assessment.

In England, standards, curricula, and testing are all “aligned.” The results of each school are constantly made public. Widely publicized “league tables” determine a school’s relative value in the educational marketplace. Only
those schools with rising performance indicators are worthy. And only those students who can “make a continual enterprise of themselves” can keep such schools going in the “correct” direction. As I’ve documented in earlier essays in this journal, the research clearly shows that powerfully differential effects in terms of race, class, and gender are produced by this combination of neoliberal and neoconservative reforms (Ball, Bowe, & Gewirtz, 1994; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Whitty, Power, & Halpin, 1998). Yet, the effects are seen also in terms of what this combination does for the educators who must put the policies into practice themselves. Let me say more about this.

I mentioned earlier that there are connections between at least two dynamics operating in neoliberal reforms, “free” markets and increased surveillance. This can be seen in the fact that in many contexts, marketization and the use of corporate-inspired models have consistently been accompanied by a set of particular policies for “producers,” for those professionals working within education. These policies have been strongly regulatory. As in the case of the linkage between national tests and performance indicators published as league tables, they have been organized around a concern for external supervision, regulation, and external judgment of performance. This concern for external supervision and regulation is not only connected with a strong mistrust of producers (e.g., teachers) and to the need for ensuring that people continually make enterprises out of themselves. It is also clearly linked both to the neoconservative sense of a need to return to a lost past of high standards, discipline, and real knowledge and to the professional middle class’s own ability to carve out a sphere of authority within the state for its own commitment to management techniques, efficiency, and control.

There has been a shift in the relationship between the state and professionals. In essence, the move toward a small strong state that is increasingly guided by market needs seems inevitably to bring with it reduced professional power and status (Menter, Muschchamp, Nicholl, Ozga, & Pollard, 1997, p. 57). Managerialism takes center stage here.

Managerialism is largely charged with “bringing about the cultural transformation that shifts professional identities in order to make them more responsive to client demand and external judgement” (Menter et al., 1997, p. 9). It aims to justify and to have people internalize fundamental alterations in professional practices. It both harnesses energy and discourages dissent.

As we have seen time and again, there is no necessary contradiction between a general set of marketizing and deregulating interests and processes—such as voucher and choice plans—and a set of enhanced regulatory processes—such as plans for national or state curricula, national or state standards, and national or state testing. “The regulatory form permits the state to maintain
‘steerage’ over the aims and processes of education from within the market mechanism” (Menter et al., 1997, p. 24). Such steerage has often been vested in such things as national standards, national curricula, and national testing. Forms of all of these are being pushed for in the United States currently, are the subject of considerable controversy, and are among the central organizing components that stand behind Kearns and Harvey’s arguments.

I have argued elsewhere that, paradoxically, a national or state curriculum, and especially a national or state testing program, are the first and most essential steps toward increased marketization. They actually provide the mechanisms for comparative data that consumers need to make markets work as markets (Apple, 1996). Without these mechanisms, there is no comparative base of information for choice. Yet, we do not have to argue about these regulatory forms in a vacuum; they, too, have been instituted in England. Once again, there is important research available that can and should make us duly cautious in going down this path.

One might want to claim that a set of national or state standards, national or state curricula, and national or state tests would provide the conditions for “thick morality.” After all, such regulatory reforms are supposedly based on shared values and common sentiments that also create social spaces in which common issues of concern can be debated and made subject to moral interrogation (Ball et al., 1994, p. 23). Yet, what counts as the “common,” and how and by whom it is actually determined, is rather more thin than thick.

Kearns and Harvey suggest that even with strong standards and a rigorous set of performance indicators, we should not worry about local autonomy and local discussions about what should be taught and how it should be taught. After all, such combinations have been used quite successfully in the corporate sector. On the face of it, the data from England do seem to confirm this. For instance, it is the case that although the national curriculum now so solidly in place in England and Wales is clearly prescriptive, it has not always proven to be the kind of straight jacket it has often been made out to be. As a number of researchers have documented, it is not only possible that policies and legislative mandates are interpreted and adapted, but it seems inevitable. Thus, the national curriculum is “not so much being ‘implemented’ in schools as being ‘recreated,’ not so much ‘reproduced,’ as ‘produced’” (Power, Halpin, & Fitz, 1994, p. 38).

However, this general description may be just a bit too romantic. None of this occurs at a level playing field. There are very real differences in power in one’s ability to influence, mediate, transform, or reject a policy or a regulatory process. Granted, it is important to recognize that a “state control model”—with its assumption of top-down linearity—is much too simplistic and that the possibility of human agency and influence is always there.
However, having said this, this should not imply that such agency and influence will be powerful (Ranson, 1995, p. 437).

The case of national curriculum and national testing in England and Wales documents this. It was the case that the national curriculum and national attainment targets (standards) that were legislated there were indeed struggled over. They were originally too detailed and too specific, and hence they were subject to major transformations at the national, community, school, and then classroom levels. However, even though the national curriculum was subject to conflict, mediation, and some transformation of its content, organization, and its invasive and immensely time-consuming forms of evaluation, its utter power is demonstrated in its radical reconfiguration of the very process of knowledge selection, organization, and assessment. It changed the entire terrain of education radically. Its subject divisions “provide more constraint than scope for discretion.” The “standard attainment targets” that have been mandated cement these constraints in place. “The imposition of national testing locks the . . . curriculum in place as the dominant framework of teachers’ work whatever opportunities teachers may take to evade or reshape it” (Richard Hatcher and Barry Troyna, quoted in Ranson, 1995, p. 438). In the words of one of the most insightful researchers of what happened to local autonomy and to teachers and administrators at these local schools, it is clear that “state control has the upper hand” (Ranson, 1995, p. 438).

Let me say a bit more about this. In England, the national standards and curricula and the national tests did generate conflict about issues. They did partly lead to the creation of social spaces for moral questions to get asked. (Of course, these moral questions had been asked all along by dispossessed groups.) Thus, it was clear to many people that the creation of mandatory and reductive tests that emphasized memory and decontextualized abstraction pulled the national curriculum and standards in a particular direction—that of encouraging a selective educational market in which more affluent students and elite schools with a wide range of resources would be well (if narrowly) served (O’Hear, 1994, p. 66). Diverse groups of people argued that such reductive, detailed, and simplistic paper-and-pencil tests “had the potential to do enormous damage,” a situation that was made even worse because the tests were so onerous in terms of time and record keeping (O’Hear, 1994, pp. 55-56). Teachers had a good deal of support when as a group they decided to boycott the administration of the test in a remarkable act of public protest. This also led to serious questioning of the national curriculum. Although the curriculum is still inherently problematic and the assessment system does still contain numerous dangerous and onerous elements within it, organized activity against them did have an impact (O’Hear, 1994, pp. 56-57).
Yet, unfortunately, the story does not end there. By the mid-1990s, even with the government’s partial retreat on such regulatory forms as its program of constant and reductive testing of whether its standards had been met, it had become clearer by the year that the development of testing and the specification of content had been “hijacked” by those who were ideologically committed to traditional pedagogies and to the idea of more rigorous selection. The residual effects are both material and ideological. They include a continuing emphasis on trying to provide the “rigor [that is] missing in the practice of most teachers, . . . judging progress solely by what is testable in tests of this kind” and the development of a “very hostile view of the accountability of teachers” that was seen as “part of a wider thrust of policy to take away professional control of public services and establish so called consumer control through a market structure” (O’Hear, 1994, pp. 65-68).

Of course, there are some positive moments in the urge to make public institutions such as schools more responsive to communities. Yet, behind the move toward “consumer control” were some much less democratic tendencies. The authors of an extremely thorough review of recent assessment programs instituted in England and Wales provide a summary of what has happened. Gipps and Murphy (1994) argued that it has become increasingly obvious that the assessment program attached to the national standards and curriculum is more and more dominated by traditional models of testing and the assumptions about teaching and learning that lie behind them. At the same time, equity issues about class, race, gender, and “ability” are becoming much less visible (p. 209). In the calculus of values now in place in the regulatory state, efficiency, speed, and cost control replace more substantive concerns about social and educational justice. The pressure to get tests in place rapidly has meant that

the speed of test development is so great, and the curriculum and assessment changes so regular, that [there is] little time to carry out detailed analyses and trialing to ensure that the tests are as fair as possible to all groups. (Gipps & Murphy, 1994, p. 209)

The conditions for “thin morality”—in which the competitive individual of the market dominates and social justice will somehow take care of itself—are reproduced here. The combination of the neoliberal market and the regulatory state, then, does indeed “work.” However, it works in ways in which the metaphors of free market, merit, higher standards, and effort hide the differential reality that is produced. “Standards” led to even more testing. And “the tail of the test wagged the dog of the teacher and the curriculum.” Testing became a substitute for crucial deliberations of where we are going and why, about whose knowledge we should teach, and about who should decide.
Poorer children suffered even more in the long run. The possibility that these will be the effects of our move toward “higher standards” must be taken very seriously by anyone who believes that this provides the answer to issues of inequity in education.

This is a point that is made even more powerfully in McNeil’s (2000) recent account of the negative effects in the United States when this combination has been put into practice. As McNeil has shown, there can be and are quite damaging effects at the level of the school—especially on those schools that are actually succeeding in connecting curricula and teaching to the realities of students’ cultures, backgrounds, and economic conditions. Rather than moving toward a set of policies that can destroy the gains in schools that actually work, it is wiser to focus on exactly these schools and to think more seriously about what they are doing. What we may find is that more democratic and more socially and pedagogically critical approaches have much more to offer than those coming from the impulses of standardization and managerialism (see Apple & Beane, 1995).

Given the growing body of evidence that these effects seem to be consistently produced in a number of countries, this makes it imperative that we maintain a critical distance from proposals that sound so good in theory but have effects that are more than a little worrisome. What does this mean for A Legacy of Learning? Kearns and Harvey have written an engaging book. They have demonstrated how one might write in a way that justifies school reform to a broad array of people. In this, we have much to learn from them. However, in terms of their specific suggestions, what seems “right” (and I very much mean this play on words) may also have elements that are very wrong. A legacy of learning ultimately once again may turn out to be a legacy of testing and inequality. Although I cannot imagine not wanting to have high standards in our teaching and our curricula, without a much more nuanced and thorough understanding of what has happened in all too many places, we may be once again wind up substituting rhetorical flourishes for reasoned moral and educational deliberation.

REFERENCES


