

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

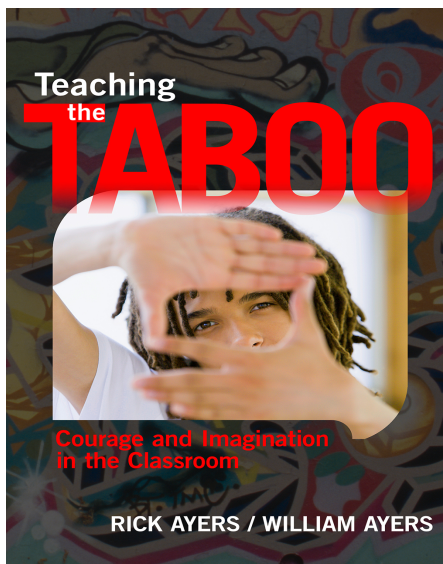
Book Reviews



NANCY SCHNIEDEWIND & MARA SAPON-SHEVIN &
EDUCATIONAL COURAGE
Resisting the Ambush of Public Education

“This book helps us to be audacious in our activism and in our vision.”
—from the Foreword by Deborah Meier

Including essays by Bill Ayers, Alfie Kohn, and Curtis Acosta



The Failure of Corporate School Reform

By Kenneth J. Saltman
(Paradigm Publishers, 2012)

Educational Courage: Resisting the Ambush of Public Education

By Nancy Schniedewind and Mara Sapon-Shevin (Eds.)
(Beacon Press, 2012)

Reviewed by Chris Arthur

Politicians, education policy makers, media pundits and business groups present corporate school reform as either an obvious solution or an experiment worth trying given the 'failure' of public schools to close the achievement gap between groups, raise test scores and prepare students to compete in the global market. Informed by a neoliberal conception of social justice, corporate school reformers argue that all students ought to have an equal opportunity to build up their human capital and become life-long learners, constantly adapting to, anticipating and even shaping the global economy's needs by creating novel technologies (products and processes) that can be commodified, patented and used to attract investment. In this narrative, students' skills, knowledge and behaviors are forms of capital that should be prudently and perpetually improved for the benefit of the individual and nation—a moral imperative that naturalizes the global capitalist economy and depoliticizes corporate reformers' ontological and normative claims (e.g. the individual is a form of malleable capital that must be fitted to the economy's needs). Schools, in this vision, must become entrepreneurial units that can be dissolved and reformed to keep up with the needs of the mercurial global economy, preparing students for an uncertain future. In this context, corporate school reformers present themselves as selling the means (standardized testing, merit pay, charter schools, voucher systems, national curriculum standards, deunionization, privatization and turnaround policies that support the replacement of staff in schools with low test scores) to create an education system that by becoming more equitable, accountable, flexible and innovative can better prepare tomorrow's workforce to compete in the global economy.

Given how effective these arguments have been among education policy makers, and the mandate for the states to make education both more effective and cheaper, Kenneth J. Saltman's *The Failure of Corporate School Reform* and Nancy Schniedewind and Mara Sapon-Shevin's edited book *Educational Courage: Resisting the Ambush of Public Education* could not be timelier. Saltman, Schniedewind and Sapon-Shevin make it clear that corporate school reforms fail on their own terms: they are not more efficient, they do not make schools more accountable, and they do not increase test scores or close

the achievement gap—and worse, they are an attack on our democracy. Corporate school reforms transform schools from public spaces that can be used to analyze and democratize social relations to institutions that reduce critical thinking and action to depoliticized problem solving.

Saltman begins *The Failure of Corporate School Reform* with a broad topological analysis of the groups, individuals and dominant ideological and material interests behind corporate school reform. In the second chapter, he contrasts the reformers' claims about the portfolio model of school reform with the available scholarly research. Saltman first highlights that there is no evidence that the portfolio model, an approach in which the district superintendent acts as an investor who keeps securities (schools) that show gains in student achievement and sells those that do not (Saltman, 2012, p. 38), will increase test scores or close the achievement gap between differently privileged groups. Even worse for corporate reformers, there is mixed to *negative* evidence that the portfolio model's constituent elements (decentralization, charter school creation, school closure, test-based accountability, school turnarounds and merit pay based on test performance) increase test scores or close the achievement gap between groups. Finally, as Saltman cogently argues, the claims that corporate reform will increase efficiency and reduce bureaucracy are demonstrably false. Indeed, the new market bureaucracy is both more opaque and expensive.

In the rest of the book, Saltman moves from an immanent critique to a more radical dismantling of the corporate school reform movement's positivist, neoliberal paradigm. Rather than championing either pole in the debate (the old liberal, state-funded public system versus the new neoliberal, corporatized system) Saltman argues that both systems of schooling have historically depoliticized and justified the conditions that produce inequality while reproducing a stratified workforce for the capitalist economy. Saltman seamlessly interweaves insights and theoretical concepts from Giroux, Zizek, Harvey, and Althusser to argue in clear and accessible language that we need to jettison the paradigm within which both liberals and conservatives argue about school reform.

As Saltman emphasizes throughout, what we know and how we know are never universal 'facts' or processes but the result of historical and ongoing political struggle. Schools, in his opinion, must do more than fill students up with 'neutral' knowledge so they can fit into the world as it is; they must offer students opportunities to subject our collective forms of knowledge and ways of knowing to critical analysis as part of a collective, continuous challenge to unequal political economic relations of power.

The fourth chapter, "Why Democratic Pedagogy is Crucial", and the fifth, "Toward a New Common School Movement", are particularly effective in making the case to liberal fellow travelers that schools ought to be part of a collective effort to democratize our economic and political practices and relations—shifting power from economic and political elites to the public. For Saltman, challenging privatization and standardized tests is only an interim goal;

the ultimate objective is to extend democratic control over the commons (production, culture, nature, geography and biology) for the benefit of the common good. This book should appeal to all who are concerned about the state of our schools and our democracy.

Nancy Schniedewind and Mara Sapon-Shevin's edited book *Educational Courage: Resisting the Ambush of Public Education* is an excellent companion to Saltman's book. Schniedewind and Sapon-Shevin's collection presents inspiring examples of students, teachers, administrators, academics, and parents challenging the ambush on public education and complements Saltman's broader and more radical analysis of corporate school reform. Situating the assault on public education within its post-Fordist context, these essays answer the perennial question: What is to be done?

Educational Courage: Resisting the Ambush of Public Education is split into four parts: the first outlines the privatization initiative since the implementation of No Child Left Behind and lists its negative effects. The second part features voices of resistance, including a chapter by Alfie Kohn, an eleven-year-old who refused to take a state's standardized test, arguing against national standards, and a teacher who quit Teach For America, viewing it as a means to deprofessionalize teaching and attack public education. The third, entitled "Working in the Cracks", presents examples of how teachers and administrators have creatively worked within the confines of the present educational system to widen spaces of limited freedom while protecting and educating their students. A chapter by primary school teacher Felipa Gaudet stands out in this section, offering a deeply touching example of why we must resist high-stakes testing, and highlights one of the book's strengths: its affective appeal through the voices of those children, parents, teachers and administrators who have been directly affected by education reforms. The fourth section provides courageous examples of collective resistance to education privatization, ending with a chapter by Bill Ayers.

Another of the book's strengths is the diversity of voices, strategies and aims it presents. Students and parents resist mandatory high-stakes standardized tests because they destroy children's sense of self, desire to learn and, if mandatory for graduation, their chance at pursuing higher education or employment. Teachers and administrators recount examples in which they resisted corporate school reform, sometimes at the cost of their employment, because they want to provide a space where students can heal, feel valued, connect with others and pursue projects they find meaningful. Still others—Bob Peterson and Bill Ayers—point to the need to look beyond the school, to link education and resistance against corporate school reform with social justice struggles outside the school. Alongside actions aimed at alleviating the pain students feel when they are set up to fail (English Language Learners who must write standardized tests after having only one year of English language schooling, students with learning disabilities, and students whose cultural knowledge is not represented in the tests) and a desire to help students become economically self-sufficient and fit into the world as it is, the book provides voices who

argue, much like Saltman does, that education is a necessary practice for creating a more just world.

These heterogeneous acts of resistance challenge corporate school reform in the name of a 'collective good' that opposes the corporate school reformers' 'collective good': the expansion of perpetual, precarious competition, which supports the marketization of schools and the preparation of students for global economic competition. In contrast, the voices in Schniedewind and Sapon-Shevin's edited collection present the collective good as both synonymous with an ethic of care concerned to alleviate the contextual circumstances of students' lives and as requiring the replacement of unjust, hierarchical economic and political social relations and the practices that sustain them. While different, the notion of a collective good constituting an ethic of care concerned with the alleviation of the social order's ill effects and a more radical notion concerned with replacing capitalism do not have to be mutually exclusive, as Pauline Lipman's call for "nonreformist reforms" makes clear (Lipman, 2011, p. 164). This does not mean, however, that work does not have to be done to bring these two notions together. Certainly, Saltman is correct in his criticism of liberals who believe that corporate school reform is only misguided in its means—leaving untroubled the aims of preparing students to fit into the global economy or transmitting a seemingly universal set of facts and values.

That said, the diversity of problems students face requires a variety of responses, some more pragmatic than radical, and this is where the two books again complement each other well. Saltman outlines the problems confronting us that require radical change while Schniedewind and Sapon-Shevin's edited collection highlights the numerous diverse challenges teachers, students and families face and the heterogeneous micro-political acts of resistance required to combat them. Reading these two books together one can better see that schools ought to provide a space removed from the demands of the world for children to heal, engage with others and learn. However, at the same time, schools must be engaged *with* the world, providing a space where students can learn about and link up with collective struggles outside the school that aim to create a better world. In this, as both books make abundantly clear, corporate school reform has failed on many levels; it falls to us to reimagine and recreate public education for another, more just world.

References

1. Lipman, P. 2011. *The New Political Economy of Urban Education: Neoliberalism, Race, and the Right to the City*. New York: Routledge.
2. Saltman, K. J. 2012. *The Failure of Corporate School Reform*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.

Teaching the Taboo: Courage and Imagination in the Classroom.
By Rick Ayers and William Ayers
(Teachers College Press, 2011)

Reviewed By Betsy Banner

Seasoned teachers, weary from years in classroom trenches and navigating test-this-not-that imperatives, are already acutely familiar with the reality painted by the Ayers brothers in their introduction to their book *Teaching the Taboo: Courage and Imagination in the Classroom* (2011). They write: "While many of us long for teaching as something transcendent and powerful, too often we find ourselves locked in situations that reduce teaching to a kind of glorified clerking, passing along a curriculum of received wisdom and predigested and generally false bits of information"(6). Less familiar to teachers, however, are the seldom-traveled pathways out of this mess. In concise form, Rick and William Ayers offer what could be interpreted as a field guide to help educators find their way into an irreverent (and thus unpopular) teaching space and hold their ground once they have arrived.

Drawing on the educational theories of John Dewey and Martin Haberman, the philosophical frameworks of Michel Foucault, and the liberating teaching practices of Paulo Freire, Ayers and Ayers guide the reader in coming to terms with the reality that our factory-model schools are devolving into prison-model institutions. Along the way, "teaching designed to develop free minds in free people" has become a form of teaching the taboo (37). Timely examples of such teaching are provided, such as one instructor's "curriculum of questioning" centered on the influx of military recruiters in his high school (84). As the multiple realities of living in a nation at war, flaccid employment prospects, and legislation that prioritizes military spending over educational funding all collide, classroom discussion along these lines is urgent.

Teaching the Taboo also includes a personal and self-reflective aspect, when it offers a snapshot of the experiences of a classroom teacher, Malik Dohrn, who happens to be the nephew and son of the two authors, respectively. Dohrn quips about those who actually teach

and those who talk about it: "No offense, but you guys are both in the talk-about-it class" (92). This forces Ayers and Ayers to acknowledge their privileged position as academics in a commodity-based educational system where public school teachers are "near the base of the educational hierarchy, just above the student, who is at the very bottom of the barrel" (96).

"Into the Woods," the curiously titled third chapter, drew me into "Avi's World" (50) and stood out as a highlight of the book. This was exactly the concrete and colorful example of who is teaching the taboo and how they approach the task that I was hoping for. Avi, we learn, is an amazing high school educator who dares to engage students in the "vast expanse of ... what we don't know we don't know" (52). "Into the Woods" is richly laden with examples of questioning privilege and encouraging self-discovery. This chapter alone has enough power to fuel a spirited discussion among educators, and would make a fantastic opener for an education department meeting in need of a few breaths of life.

The authors make some slips, however, in chapters five and eight. Chapter five, "Banned, Suppressed, Bound, and Gagged," which speaks to the enormous power differential inherent in our schools, offers the candid opinion that "teachers are not invited to do missionary work, charity work, among the oppressed in our society . . . we are only useful agents in [students'] educations if we replace charity with solidarity, patronizing with respect" (78). A call along these lines may sound reasonable to higher education researchers, but comes across as patronizing to those immersed on a daily basis in K-12 arenas. Until our nation's schools receive the funding and support they need, the "missionary work" and "charity work" of individual teachers are in themselves acts of transformative teaching that deserve our respect. And later, chapter eight, "Release the Wisdom in the Room: Language and Power" offers a well-developed example of a lesson on the creation of a classroom slang dictionary, including how the teacher became the learner in the process. This intriguing story focused on classroom experience gets overshadowed, however, when the discussion boils over into political theory.

Overall, this text would be good for teacher education seminars and department reads. *Teaching the Taboo: Courage and Imagination in the Classroom* would also be helpful for policy makers, whom Malik Dohrn refers to as "a blank slate" (92). Somehow, getting this engaging text into the hands of those who need it most feels like wishful thinking.



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