

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**James Nehring.** *The Practice of School Reform: Lessons from Two Centuries.* Albany: SUNY Press, 2009. xi + 140 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4384-2845-1; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4384-2846-8.



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One of the challenges associated with school reform is effective transformation, from a current schooling situation to a desired state based on well-defined educational goals. In *The Practice of School Reform*, James Nehring posits that a gap in American public education needs to be filled by “thoughtful schooling” or “thoughtful school practice.” He explains thoughtful school practice as “the regular habit of asking good questions about what we are doing and why” among school stakeholders (p. 1). In the book, Nehring examines the forces that stand in the way of thoughtful schooling; explains the origins, behavior, and full dimension of these forces by showing them in five representative cases drawn from the past and present; and offers practical suggestions to educators who wish to bring about positive change. The book flows from an empirical historical research framework, without favoring any theory, and Nehring depicts emerging themes for the study as reflections.

Nehring argues that these forces against thoughtful schooling are a form of conspiracy, which is pervasive in the United States and latent to the nation’s citizenry. These conspirators are dominant in the nation’s cultural traits but unknown to its members. These arguments may lead to the development of educators’ consciousness on some of the implicit forces resisting educational

change. Nehring lists six conspirators against thoughtful schooling. First, there is the manufacturing metaphor, equating school to a factory transforming raw materials (students) into finished products (graduates), all in a uniform process. Second, a fear factor makes most educators or educational practitioners conservative, taking pragmatic steps to educational change. Third, educational policy is created at “the top.” Consequently, there is “the tendency to impose plans that look great from above but that make little sense at ground level,” especially in curriculum and assessment (p. 54). Fourth, Nehring introduces what he calls the “grand interlock”: “the tendency of the system to crush promising innovation,” which is the result of inadequate societal support for educational change (p. 79). Fifth, schools appease the masses, without proper consideration to specific school goals. Finally, generosity and justice are absent from the K-12 school system. Instead, there is a tendency to favor certain individuals or groups at the expense of others, even though schools exist in a democratic society.

The author analyzes five schools in different historical periods to depict the conspirators that thwart educational change. He identifies three scenarios (classroom encounters, teacher talk, and public engagement) for each conspirator and discusses how educators can re-

spond to the situation. Nehring cites empirical evidence, personal experience, stories from the historical records of each school, and lived accounts from contemporary school reform initiatives. The five schools and corresponding conspirators that he analyzes are: Bronson Alcott's Temple School (Boston, Massachusetts) in the 1830s (the fear factor); Quincy, Massachusetts, schools in the 1870s-80s (the manufacturing metaphor); Beaver Country Day School (Boston) in the 1920s (the politics of appeasement); his own personal experience and those of other teachers in Bethlehem Lab School (Delmar, New York) in the early 1990s (the grand interlock); and the Charter Essential School (at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts) in the late 1990s (the view from the top). The sixth conspirator (the failure of generosity and justice) pervades all five schools. These schools developed in different historical periods, and Nehring identifies how educators resisted the conspirators in their contemporary society. This discussion likewise may be beneficial to current educators. Nehring depicts what others have done, and what needs to be avoided but also what could be replicated. His conviction is that if teachers succeeded in addressing these conspirators in the past, then we, too, can succeed, as teachers, in our quest toward thoughtful schooling in American public education today.

Nehring acknowledges that these conspirators or emerging themes are limited to the five schools selected for his study and that five other schools might yield five different themes or different conspirators (p. 8). However, he does not state why he selected these schools, which may prompt another study with different approaches and perhaps different conclusions. Yet he does point out that the conspirators represent dominant cultural traits prevalent in American society, and suggests that recessive cultural traits and their origins in society may be subjected to further study.

In the introduction, Nehring argues that the main limitation to thoughtful schooling is insufficient time for children at school, stating that "the public institution purporting to develop the life of the mind offers so little time to think" (p. 1). He furthers his argument by attributing this problem to the culture of school, which is a miniature representation of U.S. society. Therefore, time is not a direct function of the school culture; it is a subset of school culture in school organization. In other words, his observation should proceed from societal reflection on the conspirators and later links to school organization. Although he states that time is "an important factor in our school organization," I opine that the problem goes beyond insufficient time in schools (p. 18).

Lastly, this book depicts a conspiracy theory explaining inherent challenges confronting American schools in regard to habits of inquiry and reflection. Thus, Nehring has charged us, as educators, to overcome these challenges as part of the desire for progressing toward thoughtful school practice. His argument shows how teachers in the five schools resisted the predominant and traditional school practices and transformed schools into spaces where thoughtful teaching and learning happens. Nehring's empirical evidence or facts indicate that all teachers and staff change the school system for a short period, but such changes could not be sustained for a long time. Therefore, to enhance educational sustainability in American society, he suggests that every educator work toward a personal transformation. The result is "a deep awareness of the culturally embedded habits that work against thoughtful schooling, a deliberate commitment to personal transformation of one's own habits, and an active, strategic agenda for change within the system" (pp. 119-120). This position represents an important contribution to the body of knowledge in the history of school reform.

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