



***So Much Reform, So Little Change:
The Persistence of Failure in Urban Schools***
By Charles M. Payne

Boston: Harvard Education Press, 2008. 300 pps., \$26.95.

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In a political and economic climate that incentivizes discourses of success, Charles M. Payne has written a deeply moving and much needed book about failure. And not only failure, but the endemic, rooted, “pathological” nature of failure in our nation’s most beleaguered and lowest-performing urban schools. Payne’s work with urban schools and school communities, including teaching, combined with over two decades as a closely connected, critical observer of Chicago school reform, uniquely positions him to assert how “most discussion of educational policy and practice is dangerously disconnected from the daily realities of urban schools, especially the bottom-tier schools; most discussion fails to appreciate the intertwined and overdetermined nature of the causes of failure” (p. 5). Impressively, *So Much Reform, So Little Change: The Persistence of Failure in Urban Schools* conveys a contagious sense of guarded optimism. Analyzing the challenges faced by students and teachers is pragmatic work. Payne argues that while the world may yearn for pithy success stories and “Big Magic,” real change will turn on reformers and policymakers’ ability to deeply appreciate the complex factors that lead to and powerfully reinforce inequity and stalemated educational achievement.

So Much Reform, So Little Change takes a social science approach with the school institution as its level of analysis. The discussion involves the community contexts, the spaces inhabited characteristically by teachers or students, the large public bureaucracies of urban school systems, and the policy debate, but always returns to the school as organizational context. Payne draws on a crosscutting synthesis of research from sociology, psychology, economics and structural accounts of race and class, as well as extended vignettes, interview narratives and a breadth of personal experience. Through his association with various school reform initiatives, a portion of the work is practitioner research, and his writing illuminates the personal and social experiences of individual students and teachers in low-performing schools, creating space for their unique voices and perspectives. *So Much Reform, So Little Change* tells the story of national school reform over the last half century, but does so through distinct theoretical and practice-based lenses.

For Payne, the failure of such a large percentage of urban school reforms is hardly surprising. Surprising, rather, has been the inability of reformers and policymakers to learn from their mistakes, such that “the essential problem in our schools isn’t children learning; it is adult learning” (p. 179). Educational practitioners and researchers have generated significant bodies of knowledge, but communities of practice and the body politic have not *learned* from this experience; the mistakes are repeated and “research on educational reform often rediscovers the wheel” (Muncey & McQuillen, 1996, as cited in Payne, 2010, p. 182). *So Much Reform, So Little Change* looks through a pseudo-clinical psychosocial lens at the school as an organizational entity—one which is pathologically diseased, an infected organ afflicted by the larger syndromes of

poverty, racism, weak social capital and provincial, privatized public interests. School communities, reformers and policymakers alike show an inability to access and implement relevant understandings “in part because the same dysfunctional social arrangements that do so much to cause failure also do a great deal to obscure its origins. The process mystifies itself” (p. 5).

The disease manifests itself in schools in forms of demoralization and irrationality. Payne urges “change agents” to think not of schools as healthy, rational organizations, where logical outcomes can be reliably predicted; rather they should “proceed as if operating in a place suffering from collective depression” (p. 31). Starting with this central thesis, each chapter sequentially addresses the multiple, overlapping spheres that coexist within and strongly influence the social context of the urban school. This “collective depression” is seen to 1) be mutual with the demoralization of the school as an organization; 2) manifest in the irrationality of the collective action of the school; 3) degrade the professional culture of teachers and the academic life of students; 4) generate from and reinforce patterns of racism; 5) be enmeshed within the bureaucratic imbroglio of central district offices; 6) derail poorly implemented reform efforts; and 7) suffer from overly entrenched and reductionist political ideologies. *So Much Reform, So Little Change* demystifies the “*unforgivingly complex*” realities of schooling (Cochran-Smith, 2003, p. 4). Conceptual formulations like the “Principle of Negative Interpretation,” “Ingroup Virtue-Outgroup Vice,” “Happy Talk,” the “Corridor Principle,” the “Competitive Admission of Failure,” and the “Master Narrative” help readers understand the normalizing emotional and social reality of urban schools. Five decision-making heuristics show how an organizational irrationality with respect to “official institutional goals” can also be highly intuitive on a personal level, considering the narratives of poverty, race and low expectations that influence the “lived history” of students and teachers (p. 65). *So Much Reform, So Little Change* speaks powerfully from a deep and caring understanding of and directly to an urgent desire to redress the ills within the lifeworld of urban schools. The extensive vignettes, the balanced portrait of students, teachers, administrators and communities, and Payne’s thoughtful insight all testify to his knowledge of schools as communities of hope and belief, great ideas and deep feelings, but also of chronic despair and endemic frustration.

Not bogged down by reductionist ideologies, Payne speaks across the aisles from practitioner to researcher, reformer to central office administrator, progressive to conservative in language that is frank and critical, deeply intellectual and passionate. Payne appreciates the weight of burdens placed upon teachers in high-need schools, such as pockets of disengaged or openly confrontational parents, but notes “that there is a great deal schools can do, even in the face of parents who do not cooperate, and that what they can do is potent enough to dramatically change the lives of most children” (p. 200). “Resistant” teachers and “corrupt” administrators are called to task alongside a condemnation of the contempt for “school people” often tacitly condoned in research and policy circles—a viewpoint paralleled with racist assumptions about the predominantly Black and Latino students they serve. In *So Much Reform, So Little Change*, no one is off the hook. The message is not rose-tinted, nor is it defeated. Payne shares a portion of the great wealth of information that has been generated about educational reform, stories of what works and what leads to failure. Failure is not rooted in a lack of knowledge, but in the unwillingness or inability of people to see beyond the ideological divide. As Payne observes how individuals in schools are variously invested in failure and how reformers are equally narrowly invested in their own political ends, so Paulo Freire writes:

Many political and educational plans have failed because their authors designed them according to their own personal views of reality, never once taking into account (except as mere objects of their action) the *men-in-a-situation* towards whom their program was ostensibly directed. (Freire, 1970, p. 94)

Payne recommends that well-intentioned reformers “ruggedize” their efforts against failure, and provides outlines and examples that may be of help in planning for implementation. He is centrally concerned with detailed realities of the *how* as well as the *what* of urban schooling and calls for restoring a realistic balance to the discussion of school reform. While the world of teaching is complex, simple truths faithfully and consistently applied will still yield powerful results for individual children and families, and true teaching is understood to be the work of the heart as well as the head.

For anyone looking to learn more about the nature of the urban schooling or the legacy of American school reform over the last half century, *So Much Reform, So Little Change* is a unique resource—rich, detailed and compelling. For the critical reader, the text should be highly generative. Choosing the school as a frame allows Payne to draw attention to the intransient, structural nature of the organization, but also limits the extent of his probe into the rootedness of inequality beyond the school’s walls. There is an organizational inertia to the failure of urban schools, but a “collective depression” doesn’t simply well from the character of schools themselves, rather emerging as a refraction of the conflict of a wider lack of articulation between the needs, values and priorities of urban communities and the allocation of resources and opportunity within American society. Payne is certainly well aware of these broader contexts and the questions they raise, but doesn’t situate his authorship as a staunch defense of a unitary or proprietary analysis. The fact that *So Much Reform, So Little Change* includes so much data in the form of qualitative excerpts, quantitative statistics and sociological and educational theory allows the reader to interact with the book, raising as many questions as it seeks to answer. This is a work that not only sends a message, but that invites us all into a larger conversation, one with undeniably critical ramifications for the health of our nation and the lives of its most underserved children.

References

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