

The Missing Narrative; Understanding the difference between Education "Reform" and "Innovation"

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Today in education two dominant education paradigms compete for political attention, resources, and people. To better answer the question of how to proceed in improving learning for everyone, this analysis examines the disparities between these opposing viewpoints. The accompanying charts identify the two distinct paradigms - “reformers” and “innovators.”

Reformers tend to accept the traditional methodologies and underlying assumptions of education, and advocate for change that supports these understandings. They commonly assume that what can be measured has the most value and promote high-stakes testing, performance pay, and a nationalized curriculum and assessment tool for every student. The leaders include George W. Bush Jr. and No Child Left Behind; Harold McGraw III, CEO of McGraw Hill publishers of twenty-six state standardized tests, Michelle Rhee, CEO of Students First and proponent of teacher pay based on test scores, Wendy Kopp, CEO of Teach for America – a for-profit six week teacher training program, and Arnie Duncan, Secretary of Education with the Race to the Top initiative.

Innovators tend to question the purposes and underlying assumptions of education that drive the current system. They seek answers to promoting all levels of diversity including diversity of ideas; they work to address the inequities and create equality in opportunity; they champion educator autonomy, student empowerment, and parent engagement; they promote learner-driven education and the un-measurable qualities of passion, creativity, imagination, and collaboration. Innovators represent a varied assortment of perspectives, and while some have committed themselves to creating alternatives in education, others have dedicated themselves to reducing childhood poverty. The long history of innovation includes those well-known leaders recognized in the education world. They include Rudolf Steiner founder of Waldorf Education, Maria Montessori, founder of Montessori Schools; Lyndon B. Johnson led the War on Poverty and the original Elementary Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965; [Sir Ken Robinson](#) author and lecturer on creativity and innovation; [Deborah Meier](#) known for her leadership in democratically run public urban schools, [Howard Gardner](#), for his theory of multiple intelligences, and [Daniel Goleman](#) and his work on Emotional Intelligence .

In examining these differences, this analysis compares reformers and innovators across the following categories:

Purpose – Central motivation

Values – Underlying common beliefs

Goals – The desired result that validates their values and purpose

Policies – Legislative actions taken to achieve those goals

Practices – The application of the values, goals, and policies

The education of our children shapes society today and well into the future. Responsibility requires us to explore *who* is doing the shaping, for what *purpose*, and through what *means*. Education can lead a child in many paths and can also transform a society in many directions.

<i>Education Purpose</i>	
Reformers	Innovators
Educate to shape students to the world	Educate students to shape the world

<i>Education Values</i>	
Reformers	Innovators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The desire to direct people's ideas and behavior • Centralized - authority is concentrated • Hierarchical – power and responsibility is ranked and increases at the top • Conformity to (predetermined) expectations • Standardization • Market oriented perspective – institutional approach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The desire to ensure freedom of thought and ideas • Decentralized - authority is dispersed • Egalitarian – power and responsibility is shared • Liberation from political, social, and economic constructs • Diversity • Human perspective – personalized (cognitive, psychomotor, social/emotional)

Education Goals

Reformers	Innovators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create punishments and incentives that <u>enforce</u> compliance throughout the system, manage teachers, students, and parents • Expand Federal involvement, grow U.S and state departments, grant Mayoral control; federal and state grant monies conditioned on adherence to federal and state requirements • Reinforce predetermined common definitions of performance and growth, impose those criteria from policy to practice, adjust variables and demand equality in outcomes regardless of inequalities in resources and opportunities • Narrow objectives to completely align instruction, curriculum, and assessments to the prescribed standards and common performance objectives of students and teachers in all subjects from preschool through college • Identify deficits in achievement and address those gaps through expectations, uniform curriculum, standardized tests, performance evaluation tools, and punishments and incentives • Capitalize on education market opportunities, create new product lines, expand new business, and increase revenues and profit margins for corporations and revenue generating non-profits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand student and parental rights, promote diversity, and engender personal reflection and responsibility • Rely on proven scientifically valid research, reduce standardized testing, engage local communities, model critical thinking and create safe, trusting cultures for learners and professionals to experiment and take risks • Think beyond the standard parameters-- promote wonder, question norms, imagine possibilities, experiment, solve problems, debate ideas, challenge solutions, create, reflect and refine • Broad mission to expand and enrich the learning and educational <u>opportunities</u> of each child. Student learners are complex and unique: to optimize capabilities, education is personalized rather than standardized • Build on student strengths. Mitigate barriers to advancement such as poverty by targeting state and federal resources towards prevention and early intervention • Balance political, economic, and social trends with the rights of the individual and the interests of the community. Ensure public education dollars are spent for the benefit of the public

Education Policies

Reformers	Innovators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct outcomes – Increase tools for monitoring, scoring, rewarding, and punishing • Centralized - Education guided by politicians, evaluated by test publishers, enforced through government agencies and for the benefit of private corporations. (2002 NCLB, Race to the Top, Common Core) • Hierarchical - Top down decision making where accountability is imposed and responsibility assigned without authority. (Adequate Yearly Progress, (AYP), conditional waivers for NCLB, performance pay/merit pay for teachers, retention and exit exams for students. Hedge Fund charters and private Education Management Organizations (EMOs) takeover schools that serve low-income students.) Under the model of reform, students, educators and schools serve test corporations, and state and federal mandates • Conformity - Compliance is rewarded and non-conformity punished. Achievement objectives are prescribed, knowledge is defined, measurable indicators determined, and matters of consequence enforced. (High-stakes include turnaround, firing, pay freezes, lower learning tracks for students of color and low-income and higher learning tracks for students of privilege) • Standardization and uniformity - Impose a nationalized curriculum (Common Core) and mass standardized testing: state tests, MAPS, PISA, TIMMS, NAEP, SMARTER and PARCC. Revise standards, re-align curriculum and re-write the measurement and curriculum tools creating an education monopoly for corporate publishers. Utilize virtual and online products to educate a faster and cheaper monoculture • Market oriented perspective - Free market principles such as privatization and profit models are expected to improve the system. Examples include revenue generating alternative teacher training programs (TFA), for-profit online education, virtual learning, text book and testing monopolies, and consulting industries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote Freedom - Expand opportunities and resources with multiple pathways to success • Decentralized - Education guided by the individual student, their parents, and professional educators (1965, ESEA, staff development, library and media services, targeted resources to children at-risk.) • Egalitarian – Accountability is derived from within and carries both responsibility and authority. (Schools reflect a democratic system of governance, real-world assessments, family partnerships, citizen elected school boards/ community based decision making, accreditation, and individualized school improvement plans specific to their strengths and needs.) Under the model of innovation, state and federal agencies serve the individual student diverse communities and the public education trust • Liberation – Remove barriers to learning and advancement. Strong voice of parents, teachers, and students. (Desegregation, IDEA, Civil Rights Act of 1964, GI Bill, Pell Grant, Equal Protection Act, Increased access to higher education, scholarships, free and reduced lunch programs, public libraries, civic engagement, and counseling services) • Diversity - Protection of the differences of individuals and communities. Innovators work to eliminate practices of discrimination and exploitation and remove system inequities. Critically-thinking citizens engaged in leading, questioning, investigating, filtering and challenging systems ensure a vast culture of ideas, values, expression, experience, leadership, and innovation • Human perspective - Allows each student an opportunity to realize his or her talents, interests, and dreams. Social/emotional development, art, music, PE, vocational experiences, apprenticeships, and mentoring. Educational investments ensure public dollars remain in public schools with public oversight for the benefit of students

<i>Education Practices</i>	
Reformers	Innovators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power and control is concentrated on those with current power and control – government and corporations • Knowledge is prescribed and intended outcomes are pre-determined. Districts, schools and administrators align curriculum, instruction, tests, report cards, parent communication and school policies to meet federal, state and district reporting and accountability mandates. Reformers define education in terms of "what students know" • Standards-based: rigid and uniform approach to instruction. Content is divided into subjects and learning activities are tied to short term measured outcomes. Students are sorted by age and address. Students develop in the same way at the same time along grade level tracks • One-size fits all - Every school, classroom, teacher and student designed to look the same: school ratings/labels, compulsory testing, exit exams, educators evaluated and compensated based on test performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choice, opportunity, and decision-making are directed by educators, families, and students collaboratively • Knowledge is expanded – students are constantly introduced to real world experiences, scrutinizing information, altering beliefs, refining behaviors, and creating new knowledge. Innovators define education in terms of "what students become" and recognize wisdom cannot be prescribed and real learning is not pre-determined • Learner-centered: personalized, eclectic, flexible, intuitive, integrated and multi-sensory approach to instruction, curriculum and assessment – borrowing the best from a variety rather than being limited under one model. Students develop independently and uniquely • Many sizes for many students - Increase opportunities and expand resources. Varied education alternatives create multiple pathways for individual triumph and social advancement beyond existing institutional barriers. Special attention given to addressing poverty and system inequities

Further Comparisons

Reformers

The fixation on measurement, tracking, sorting, and reporting is understood as a function of management and efficiency. Their means are dependent on factors of competition and comparison that have very little to do with learning and nothing to do with children. The best way to distinguish a Reformer from an Innovator is whether the solution is tied to a price tag, product, sales or service. Reformers advocate for online for-profit schools, external school management companies, virtual learning, consultants, data systems, bubble tests, curricula, standards, and product lines that fall somewhere in the alignment equation. They define human success in terms of compliance, rewarding the top and punishing those who do not, or can not conform with narrower options and barriers to future education and advancement. Corporate executives with the Business Roundtable, lobbyists, and policy leaders such as the National Governor's Association comprise the reform leadership. Education reform, although opponents argue ineffective by all measures, has proven to be a profitable endeavor. Schools have less money, corporations more money and children are left with empty bubbles instead of educational resources and opportunities for advancement.

Innovators

Innovators view education not as a function of management and efficiency but as a function of culture and experience. Innovators share the philosophy that the public education system should emphasize not "what to think," but instead nurture the innate human quality of "how we think." Innovators respect human individuality and the differences in the way we learn, the varied talents with which we are endowed, and the unique ways in which individuals experience and express life and learning. They define human success in terms of curiosity, creativity, initiative, and social contribution. They direct their attention to building trusting relationships, enriching experiences, shrinking inequalities, growing opportunity, personalizing practices, improving conditions, expanding resources, nurturing inspiration, prevention and intervention, and supporting people -- factors often beyond the measurable, yet essential to learning and children.

Understanding the Differences

The back to school night activity conducted at The Washington Park Early Learning Center in Denver, Colorado best illustrates the difference between Reform and Innovation. Teacher, Christina DeVarona, broke parents into two groups for a pumpkin-creating activity. Group one was given prescribed instructions with common outcomes. The outline of the pumpkin was drawn and the shapes already cut. Group two was directed to a table with a variety of materials – construction paper, beads, paints, feathers, glitter, ribbons, etc.

As the two groups worked, DeVarona took notes recording their conversations. Group one was disengaged and had to be continuously re-directed. Group two worked enthusiastically, collaborating, discussing earlier experiences and sharing ideas. At the end of the exercise, the pumpkins were lined up on the front wall. As she pointed to the elaborate and original pumpkins from group two, she emphasized how unique we are as individuals and how human capacity is unlimited. She looked at Group one's pumpkins and pointed out the obvious – they had duplicated her pumpkin.

The factory analogy describes the reform pedagogy - identical materials (inputs) are uniformly processed through a quality-controlled system and result in identical outcomes or outputs. The aluminum can is one example - metals are combined, the can is shaped, labels are painted, cans are washed and the product is packaged for filling and distribution. The factory model emphasizes lower operating costs, increased production, faster processing, and higher revenues. Reformers consider the "business approach" efficient and cost-effective. Control is easier to exercise centrally through a uniform system designed with the singular goal of counting, quantifying progress, and measuring the outputs of children. Improvement is determined by making the process faster with less money and time.

Innovators believe the factory model does not apply to human beings. Materials (learners) are never identical, the learning process is not uniform, and the output is always completely original, despite manipulations. Differences in economics, talents, interests, experiences, culture, genetics, chemistry, and living environments render comparisons irrelevant and competition counter to the needs for collaboration and cooperation. Knowledge is not packaged, learning cannot be prescribed, and human development is a goal, not a measurement.

The concern on the part of Innovators is that manipulating the nature of something often leads to the destruction of that nature. Children are natural learners and innovators promote education policies and practices that honor and serve children. Unlike reformers, Innovators are neither the "shaper" nor the "shape." Leadership in a democratic society comes from the refusal to impose power onto the young or vulnerable.

Editorial

The parents of the preschool children in Christina DeVerona's class learned more in that one pumpkin exercise than education reformers have learned in three decades of failed mandates - children and human beings cannot be mechanized, industrialized, and standardized. As Yong Zhao, distinguished professor at Michigan State University, writes in his book, *Catching Up or Leading the Way*, China in its pursuit of innovation, creativity, and cooperation is trying to model its education system after America at the same time we are using standards and tests to demolish ours.

Most devastated by Reform initiatives have been poor and minority students. Since the passage of No Child Left Behind poverty has increased by 9%. In the decade following the War on Poverty and the Original 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act poverty dropped by 6%. The achievement gap between rich and poor has widened; college tuition rates have increased faster than at any other time in history; the need for remediation has risen dramatically; and every school that has closed has been in a low-income community. Reformers have sought to maintain dominance by defining knowledge and controlling education opportunity as to fulfill their own ideals and increase their capital.

In his article titled, "[Gated Intellectuals and Ignorance in Political Life: Toward a Borderless Pedagogy in the Occupy Movement](#)," Henry Giroux writes:

"A gated or border pedagogy is one that establishes boundaries to protect the rich; isolates citizens from each other; excludes those populations considered disposable; and renders invisible young people, especially poor youth of color,

along with others marginalized by class and race ... The gated intellectual works hard to make thinking an act of stupidity, turn lies into truths, build a moat around oppositional ideas so they cannot be accessed and destroy those institutions and social protections that serve the common good.."

In the words of Jonathon Kozol, The prevailing "Reform" paradigm has led to racial isolation and a narrowing of civic virtue. The majority of today's high school graduates know learning in terms of what can be measured on a standardized test. Their experience of achievement is realized only in their comparisons with others and only in the context of prescribed academics. These young students are denied the opportunity to think critically, create solutions to the most challenging problems and build something worthwhile. Their education is being hijacked for purposes besides their own. As opportunities for college, employment, self-sufficiency, and the pursuit of happiness continue to diminish, students are recognizing that they are giving something for nothing. Parents are discovering increased demands and declining budgets have led to overworked, underpaid teachers in overcrowded and underfunded classrooms. Attempts from Reformers to maintain and sustain power and control through all means necessary have dehumanized classrooms, fractured communities, trivialized the American education system, and corporatized the public trust.

Two choices

In the most distilled sense, Innovators stand for freedom - freedom of thought, feelings, faith, speech, and freedom from fear, oppression, discrimination and exploitation. Innovators recognize that freedom is inextricably tied to equity. In Finland, where there are no private schools or colleges, the main driver of education policy has reflected the [commitment to equity](#). Safe and healthy schools are the objective and free school meals, easy access to health care, psychological counseling, and individualized student guidance are provided to every student. Since 1980 when the Finnish addressed social inequity through their education system, Finland has emerged as a premier model in education.

Data centered, profit motivated reforms have done extreme damage to American education leaving traditional industrial school models near collapse. What has resulted is an opening for Innovators to create learning communities truly reflective of a democratic society, committed to the development of each human being, representative of validated research and professional integrity, safe, equitable, affirming and invigorating examples of possibility and innovation. Ultimately it is our money and these are our children and the future of education is still to be decided. We can continue with the current reforms of standardization and high-stakes testing leaving student's malleable and complacent enough to conform to the world around them. Or we can revolutionize the education system; inviting students to question the systems and assert their rights as learners and future citizens in order to create a world we have yet to see.

<i>Educational Leaders and Organizations</i>	
Reformers	Innovators
<p> ALEC (American Legislative Exchange Council) McGraw Hill (Curriculum and test publishers) Pearson (Curriculum and test publishers) Democrats for Education Reform, (DFER) The Walton Foundation Common Core National Standards Foundation for Excellence in Education KIPP Schools and Foundation National Governors Association Stand for Children Students First Americans for Prosperity Teach for America Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation The New Teacher Project New Leaders for New Schools Edison Schools Institute for Justice </p> <p>Reformers represent members from both the secular and non-secular community. Individuals from both the Republican and Democratic party identify as reformers. Most are corporate executives while others work in the political arena. None have originated from the classroom.</p>	<p> National Education Policy Center Uniting4Kids Rethinking Schools Parents Across America Fund Education Now Economic Policy Institute Fair Test National At Risk Education Network (NAREN) Save Our Schools Alternative Education Resource Org (AERO) Coalition for Better Education Leadership Center for the Common Good United Opt Out Coalition of Essential Schools </p> <p>Innovators also include members from both political parties and represent both secular and non-secular beliefs. The shared commonality among Innovators is marked by their experience in education. Innovators are school founders, administrators, scholars, researchers, professors, parents and educators.</p>

"It is in fact nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry; for this delicate little plant, aside from stimulation, stands mainly in need of freedom. Without this, it goes to wrack and ruin without fail."

Albert Einstein

"Upon the subject of education, not presuming to dictate any plan or system respecting it, I can only say that I view it as the most important subject which we as a people can be engaged in."

Abraham Lincoln, First political announcement, 1832

"I know no safe depositor of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them but to inform their discretion.

Thomas Jefferson, Letter to William Charles Jarvis, 1820

Further Reading

Unequal By Design; High-Stakes Testing and the Standardization of Inequality, *Wayne Au*
Reading Educational Research: How to avoid getting statistically snookered, *Gerald Bracey*
What's Worth Learning, *Marion Brady*
Shadow Children ~ Understanding Education's #1 Issue, *Anthony S. Dallmann-Jones*
Why is Corporate America Bashing Our Public Schools, *Kathy Emery and Susan Ohanian*
Seeds of Tomorrow; Solutions for Improving our Children's Education, *Angela Engel*
Pedagogy of the Oppressed, *Paulo Freire*
Education and the Crisis of Public Values: Challenging the Assault on Teachers, Students, and Public Education, *Henry A. Giroux*
Declaring War Against Schooling; Personalized Learning Now, *Don Glines*
Compulsory MisEducation, *Paul Goodman*
Toxic Schooling: How Schools Became Worse, *Clive Harber*
How To Survive in Your Native Land, *James Herndon*
How Children Fail, *John Holt*
Deschooling Society, *Ivan Illich*
Life in the Classrooms, *Philip Jackson*
Education and Ecstasy, *George Leonard*
Educational Genocide; A Plague on our Children, *Horace 'Rog' Lucido*
The Power of Their Ideas, *Deborah Meier*
What are Schools For? Or Free Schools; Free People - *Ron Miller*
The Education of Sam Sanders, *T.S. Poetter*
Lives of Passion, School of Hope, *Rick Posner*
The Death and Life of the Great American School, *Diane Ravitch*
Freedom to Learn, *Carl Rogers and H. Jerome Freiberg*
Out of our Minds: Learning to be Creative, *Sir Ken Robinson*
Finnish Lessons; What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?, *Pasi Sahlberg*
The Edison Schools: Corporate Schooling and the Assault on Public Education, *Kenneth J. Saltman*
Learning Communities 2.0: Educating in the Age of Empowerment, *William Spady and Charles Schwahn*
Crisis in the Classroom, The Remaking of American Education, *Charles Silberman*
Educating for Human Greatness, *Lynn Stoddard and Anthony Dallmann-Jones*
Learning on Other People's Kids: Becoming a Teach For America Teacher, *Barbara Torre Veltri*
Catching Up or Leading the Way, *Yong Zhao*