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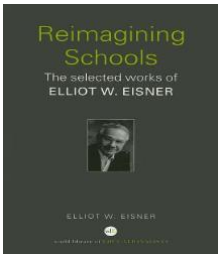
Professional Book Review

Eisner, E. W. (2005). *Reimagining Schools: The Selected Works of Elliot W. Eisner*. Taylor & Francis. ISBN 0203019075, 9780203019078. ($190)

Reviewed by Burhan Ozfidan, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX, USA



As an issue in education, I would like to focus on the responsibility for education. The author, Eisner affirms that "since the Constitution makes no mention of education, it is a responsibility of states" (Eisner, 2001, p. 298). This idea is flawed; most of the nations address educational concerns at the national level, whereas in the United States they push this onto their state governments. What kind of message are they sending? Schwartz and Robinson (2000) affirmed, "In virtually every other developed nation, this question would be incomprehensible. Most everywhere else, national governments, even in federalist systems, are clearly responsible for setting national policy; that is what education ministries do" (p. 174). The United States has made a huge blunder by not addressing the concerns of education at a national level and within their national doctrine.

Due to not having a formal responsibility for education at the national level, but having to cope with educational issues at the national level makes it rather chaotic. As Eisner (2001) points out, "More than a few believe that we have a national problem in American education and that national problems require national solutions" (p. 299). How do people create national solutions for state level problems? Eisner recommends the use of highly rationalized procedures for developing schools as one aspect to solving this national question. Six rationalizations for school reform efforts have been addressed and include: specification of intended consequences, holding people responsible for outcomes, control and predict, rationalizations downplay interactions, rationalizations promote comparison, and extrinsic incentives motivate actions.

Firstly, clear specifications of intended consequences include the idea that standards and rubrics must have a purpose. In a 2001 study, Eisner indicated, "If you don't know where you're headed, you will not know where you have arrived" (p, 301). Standards in essence are general statements intended to proclaim our values (Eisner, 2001). In a different study in 1995, Eisner also indicated, "Standards imply high expectations, rigor, things of substance. To be without standards is not to know what to expect or how to determine if expectations have been realized - or so it seems" (p, 302).

The second rationalization for school reform efforts is the rationalization that people should be held responsible for outcomes. Eisner (2001) uses brilliant words when depicting this reasoning rationalization typically uses measurement as a means through which the quality of a product or performance is assessed and represented. Measurement, of course, is one way to describe the world. Measurement has to do with determining matters of magnitude, and it deals with matters of magnitude through the specification of units. In the United States, the unit for weight is pounds. In Sweden or the Netherlands, it is kilograms. It's kilometers in Europe; it's miles in the United States. It really doesn't matter what unit you use, as long as everyone agrees what the unit is (p, 298).

The problem at hand is that everyone must come to an agreement on the standards. Perception plays a main role in this rationalization effort (Aydin, 2014). Because standards are perceived in various lights it is vital for individuals to comprehend that standards are intended to be measureable; however, because standards are effectively more general and ideological the tools for measurement are relatively salient.

When considering the third and fourth rationalizations, control and predict and rationalizations downplay interactions. A thought comes to mind that we can't predict or control all interactions. Eisner (2001) argues,

> Such idiosyncratic considerations always complicate assessment. They complicate efforts to rationalize education as well. Prediction is not easy when what the outcome is going to be is a

> function not only of what is introduced in the situation but also of what a student makes of what has been introduced (p. 302).

Teachers have little control in regard to outside factors. Which leads into the fifth topic, rationalizations promote comparison. This rationalization focuses on the idea that schools and districts must be compared. However, Eisner (2001) also emphasizes that:

> Making comparisons between the math performance of youngsters in Japan and those in the United States without taking into account cultural differences, different allocations of time for instruction, or different approaches to teaching makes it impossible to account for differences in student performance or to consider the side effects or opportunity costs associated with different programs in different cultures (p. 300).

This idea was proven through the article, A Nation at Risk: "International comparisons of student achievement, completed a decade ago, reveal that on 19 academic tests American students were never first or second and, in comparison with other industrialized nations, were last seven times" (Eisner, 2005, p. 45). In this address it is clear that the issue may not be the actual level of achievement, but other variables affecting achievement. One can't compare schools and performance without taking into account the differences.

Schools are compared on many different factors. Many of these comparisons lead to extrinsic incentives to motivate action, which in turn creates the survival of the fittest effect (Aydin, 2012). Eisner (2005) assesses "If schools don't produce effective results on tests, they go out of business" (p. 301). In some states principals are bribed to increase performance by bonuses and additional funding.

> Because those of us in education take test scores seriously, the public is reinforced in its view that test scores are good proxies for the quality of education a school provides. Yet what test scores predict best are other test scores. If we are going to use proxies that have predictive validity, we need proxies that predict performances that matter outside the context of school (Eisner, 2005, 302).

Test scores will only tell schools so much about students' academic performance.

What are these standards and performance objectives doing for the future of our children? Our goal should be to provide future-ready young adults post-graduation. How are we providing future-ready individuals with standards and curriculum objectives that do not correlate to real world expectations and situations? Because our classrooms have transitioned from portals of learning to structured rigorous lecture-based preparatory centers, we have lost many important aspects of development. Our students have lost the art of conversation and inquiry-based learning. Will we really have an improved school system if we get our "standards straight and our rubrics right and make our test tough enough? I'm not so sure" (Eisner, 2005, p. 303). Instead of sending a message of passion and joy of learning to our students we send a message that what really matters in their education is their test scores. Do we really want our kids to be uniformed outcomes of someone's ideology of intelligence? What if we looked at education in a more holistic way? We should expose our students to valuable experiences and help them develop their strengths and improve their weaknesses based on their interests and talents. Commensurability is not possible unless all students are on the same level. We need to lose this mentality that students should be able to answer our questions, and gain the philosophy that students need to be able to ask their own questions. We will do our students more good if we help them understand their own strengths and how to improve their own learning. If we want our students to be able to survive in the real world, we need to bring real world practice into our classrooms.

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