**A (complicated) conversation?**

The committee describes their report as "the beginning of a conversation" (CFR x), newly framed. I wondered if it was really new,* and if it was really a conversation. Who is invited to take part in the conversation? Who is not? What words get used, and what assumptions are behind them? Which questions can be asked in this conversation, and which are hidden?

**Wandering Outline**

**Who** are these people? — *authors; influences*; *audiences*

Who is **missing**? — *Dissenting views*; *Researchers we've read in class*; *Other missing voices*

- What is meant by **linked**?
- What is meant by **failure**?
- What is meant by **education**?
- What is meant by **work**?

Three **recommendations** for improving schools — control; competition; coercion

- What is meant by **national**?
- What is meant by **security**?

What **questions** are left unasked?

** No, not much is new here. At first the idea of militarizing public education seemed, if not new, at least more openly stated than it had been in the past. But on reflection, that's not very different from Pinar's examples of education in the Weimar Republic.*

*The only thing that I actually haven't seen before is the attempt to identify children of military families as a "special category" of student, like minority and economically disadvantaged students. (pages 21, 50, and 54)*

**Who *are* these people? What are their allegiances, and what experience have they in education?**

> *"…subjected to a barrage of advice from individuals who have never taught, but apparently, because they went to school or made money or run a business, feel entitled to tell us how to teach…"*
> *(Taubman 138)*

No-one, I think, was surprised by this report, considering what we all know about the major authors. Obviously, with Rice and Klein invited to chair the committee, and the only obvious dissenting voices being very gentle dissenters, the results were fairly predictable (and indeed, were predicated pretty accurately on a number of blogs). Yet I confess I was a little surprised at how *many* nepotists and sycophants appear in the guest list.

Participants claim to be participating in their "individual, not institutional, capacities" (CFR 78) but they cannot, of course, be separated entirely from their institutional connections. The profiles drawn in the report (p. 74-96) identify major alliances, but I found after reading through them that all the participants sounded like well-educated, globally-aware, successful businesspeople who care about children and education, and while that's probably true, it seemed insufficient. I wanted to know what their educational expertise was based on, the political leanings of their organizations, whether they were white or minorities, whether any of them had ever been teachers, and, although I would not have expected to find this, I wanted to know what their own experience in school had been like. I looked up as many people as I could.

Richard Haass, President of the Council on Foreign Relations, wrote the introduction. He's a smooth politician who knows when to be noticed and when to slip away quietly. *The Economist* (Jun. 18, 2009) described him in a book review: "Thoughtful, intelligent, scholarly and often even wise, he is usually persuasive about foreign policy.… [His book] is a tale of a good man doggedly working for a bad end..." I think this is probably still a fair description.

Everybody knows Condoleezza Rice: professor of political economy and political science at Stanford University, she was Bush's Secretary of State, and National Security Advisor. Joel Klein was Chancellor of the New York City Department of Education, and during his time there worked with the Gates Foundation on the spectacularly unsuccessful "smaller schools" reform. He's now Vice-President of Rupert Murdoch's scandal-ridden News Corporation.

Julia Levy, the "Project Director," is the person who actually penned the report. She's a blogger and social media specialist, with a website called "Culture Craver" which is still in beta testing mode. So how the hell did she get on this committee? She was director of communications for the New York City Dept of Ed., involved in Bloomberg and Klein's curriculum overhaul for the NY public schools... so, she knows Joel Klein, and helped him with similar work in the past. Is there such a thing as a public policy debutante? "The fact that Levy rated one of those "cute," off-beat *New York Times* wedding announcements featuring her love of a certain type of cookie, is evidence of her power connections." (Ohanian)

Participants who signed off without dissent include a few really bad apples, and a lot of people who seem well-intentioned but whom we must see as compromised because of their personal financial connections to institutions specifically promoted by the report. Only four people involved in the report have expressed "dissenting views."

*Bad Apples:* Margaret Spellings was Secretary of Education under Bush, and one of the creators of NCLB. Nothing else needs to be said about her. Preston Geren was Secretary of the Army and Special Assistant to the Secretary of Defense, and a Texas congressman; he's also the director of a petroleum corporation. He comes to the committee from the Sid W. Richardson Foundation, which provides grants not only to Teach for America and the New Teacher Project, but to Just Say Yes (an abstinence education program), and the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, as well as a bunch of other things, some of which might be less disgusting but I didn't have the heart to keep looking them up. Frederick Hess is from the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, "a well-respected conservative think-tank," which held a conference Nov. 30, 2006, to examine NCLB, school choice, and after-school tutoring. "The various presentations that day demonstrated that state education departments were drowning in new bureaucratic requirements…and that none of the prescribed remedies was making a difference. Choice was not working, they all agreed." (Ravitch 99) Since he did not express any dissent, I must count him as a yes-man. Of course, this is on the say-so of Diane Ravitch, but I'm willing to give her credit for owning her mistakes.

* Some voices make themselves heard, without actually signing their names to anything. They, like most of the actual signitors, probably mean well. *

*Curriculum publishers; Common Core connections*: People who made presentations to the task force, in addition to **Arne Duncan**, also included **David Coleman** (one of the major authors of the Common Core standards). The group also included "observers" from **Pearson and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.** On the other hand, to be fair, Houghton Mifflin sent their Vice President of Corporate and Social Responsibility. It's nice to know they have such a title!

*Charter Schools*: Ah, the legendary **Wendy Kopp**, who invented Teach for America as her senior thesis project…. The stated goal of Teach for America is laudable: to "motivate its teachers to take up the causes of educational excellence and equity throughout their lives, from either inside or outside the system." Many Teach for America alumni have gone on to work helping improve education equity, mostly by promoting charter schools. Many of them are somewhat suspect (for example, Washington's infamous Michelle Rhee). "These free-market reformers advocated testing, accountability, merit pay, and charter schools, and most were notably hostile to unions."(Ravitch 177) And, as with the data wars over charter schools, studies vary widely on whether Teach for America is actually helping disadvantaged students learn. (Ravitch 189) Kopp is joined on the committee by **Richard Barth** of the Knowledge is Power Foundation (a charter system grown from Teach for America), and by several other people who are in charge of Charter School systems, some more and some less interesting from a pedagogical standpoint.

*Testing:* **Gaston Caperton**, former governor of West Virginia, is now president of The College Board (whose SAT exams have prescribed the national curriculum for decades anyway). I learned more about Caperton's personal educational experience than most participants. He does seem dedicated to improving equity in schools. He co-authored a Huffington Post article (6/20/11) titled "The Educational Crisis of Young Men of Color," which I look forward to reading. He struggled with dyslexia in school:

> "…Caperton offered up advice for parents with children who have a learning disability. His five step plan? Appreciate life. Have a good sense of humor. Allow your family to become closer as a result. Realize the power of grace, of love without earning it. And lastly, be inspired by leaders who have had dyslexia, including Thomas Edison, Harry Bellafonte, and Nelson Rockefeller.

> Caperton has put his money where his mouth is, leading the College Board in its creation of five lab schools currently enrolling 1000 underserved middle and high school students in low-income New York City neighborhoods, with 1000 more students scheduled for enrollment next year.
>
> The schools, which receive additional support from the Gates and Dell Foundations, each embody four key underlying principles: high expectations, people who believe in the students, hard work, and no excuses.
>
> http://educationupdate.com/archives/2006/Jun/html/speced-collegeboard.html

So his Great American Story of "toughing it out and winning through" is at least something he may sincerely believe in. I suspect, though, that if he'd been a poor and/or black child with dyslexia his story would have been different.

Other participants have strong ties to various universities, to professional development schools, to LLC corporations, to Public Radio and Smithsonian Museums, to Nabisco and Six Flags, to IBM and Apple.

And of course, the **Broad Foundation**, which provided "generous support" (CFR xvi) for the report: "These foundations, no matter how worthy and high-minded, are after all, not public agencies…not subject to public oversight…. The foundations demand that public schools and teachers be held accountable for performance, but they themselves are accountable to no one." (Ravitch 200-201) The Broad Foundation, which trains management professionals and places them into influential positions in schools, "has been extraordinarily generous in supporting the arts and medical research, without trying to redefine how art should be created or how medical research should be conducted. In education, however, the foundation's investments have focused on Eli Broad's philosophy that schools should be redesigned to function like corporate enterprises." (Ravitch 217)

Of course, to avoid a simply cynical mode, we must suppose that the reasons all of these players participated on the committee stem from their sincere desires to make schools more equitable and successful.

*Good Guys:* It would be unfair to say that dissenting views are not at all represented in this report. In the forward, Haass invites us to read the appendix where four people voiced

concerns, disagreements, and complicating factors. (I actually read the dissenting views first because they seemed less depressing.) **Carole Artigiani** is founder of Global Kids, Inc. and is also involved with the Institute of Play (CFR 78). I looked at the Global Kids website and it looks like a good organization in general. The Institute of Play is extremely cool and very relevant. Why do none of the recommendations include game-theory research in education? That stuff is actually arguably "new." **Stephen Walt** is a professor of international affairs at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. He also has connections with the University of Chicago, and although he was a social sciences dean, this does sort of connect him to curriculum theory. (Sort of.) **Randi Weingarten** is president of the American Federation of Teachers. She works to protect teachers' voices in education reform and is definitely one of the good guys. **Linda Darling-Hammond** is a professor of education at Stanford University, and so far she seems to be the only professor of education involved in this business. She headed "President Barack Obama's education policy transition team." (CFR 81) Taubman is a bit hard on Linda Darling-Hammond. He sees her work as supporting the sense of crisis that lead teachers to fall deeper and deeper into the trap of thinking that teachers are to blame for all of society's problems. (143) But certainly we must count her as an ally.

*…the report is best seen as one element of a larger conversation,*
*and not as a reliable blueprint for reform.*
*(Walt - CFR 65)*

The dissenting views, taken as a group, bring up ten main points – although in some cases, these points are still made conspicuous by the *absence* of dissent. For example, all agree wholeheartedly with the praise for the Common Core standards. Charter schools and standardized testing, however, are generally critiqued (and criticized) in the dissentions. One statement takes issue with the idea of a "threat" to the nation, and several suggest weariness with the theme of "failure," and with the blaming of teachers, although none dispute that schools are failing. The dissenting views also seem to suggest a different sense of the purpose of education, although this is not clearly articulated. They speak more specifically than does the report itself of the need for good teacher training, for equitable financing in schools, and for a stronger sense of public-ness in education.

*Audiences:* The implied audiences of the report include, of course, the Council on Foreign Relations, but the report is also addressed to state governors. State governors are specifically said to "hold the key to national security" (CFR 45); the recommendations made are largely steps to be implemented by state governors. As a final recommendation, the Task Force aims "to keep everyone in the country focused on the national goal of improving education to safeguard America's security today and in the future." (CFR 55) This opens the audience to include all of us. The report aims to "raise public awareness" (CFR 5), "to engage the American people"(CFR 45) in addressing the problems in education. But why? In what way will heightened public awareness of school problems, help schools improve?

Public awareness and accountability must "engender consequences" (CFR 53). This makes some sense if you suppose that public awareness allows parents to distinguish good schools from bad ones, that knowing the difference allows a choice to be made, as in the purchasing of goods, and that choosing good schools over bad schools will cause the good schools to proliferate and the bad schools to fade away. All three of these assumptions are precipitate at best.

In addition, however, the report also suggests that the "public awareness campaign should be managed by a coalition of government, business, and military leaders" (CFR 55) which is positively creepy. At the very end of the report, Levy suggests to the American public that if we do not rally behind the recommendations of the report, we must accept – have caused! – the decline of the nation. "Americans can either accept U.S. decline or can come together to support and implement fundamental and radical changes that put the country back on track to fulfilling its promise and potential." (CFR 59)

The state governors are praised and encouraged to continue to collaborate; the public is rallied. The audience is on board.

**Voices not heard**

Missing from the conversation, notably, are researchers in education. "When one member of the commission suggested that people with dissenting views be brought before the panel to present other ideas, and Diane Ravitch's name came up, Klein vetoed it, members of the panel said. Ravitch is the leading voice against the test-based accountability movement and

"school choice," but Klein, who has long had tense relations with the education historian, didn't want the panel to hear from her." (Ohanian)

Teachers and Parents are missing from the conversation: "Teachers don't count. Parents don't count. Students count only as eligibility quotients for the military." (Ohanian)

Children are also missing, even by description. The "student" constantly held before us is either the dangerous drop-out or the "the child redeemer" who is expected to "absolve us from racism, poverty, drugs, and pollution." (Grumet 157) Like the youth of the Weimar Republic, our students are held up as "both the greatest threat to society and the greatest hope for the future." (Pinar 99)

*"Other people's children are abstract. They are reading scores, FTEs, last year's graduating class, last week's body count. A curriculum designed for my child is a conversation that leaves space for her responses, that is transformed by her questions."*
*(Grumet 173)*

Where are the real children in this conversation? They arrive at school not only with last year's reading scores but with "social instinct" which leads to language, the "instinct of making," the spirit of inquiry, and the urge for artistic expression! "It is useless to bemoan the departure of the good old days of children's modesty, reverence, and implicit obedience…. we must recognize our compensations – the increase in toleration, in breadth of social judgment, the larger acquaintance with human nature, the sharpened alertness in reading signs of character and interpreting social situations, greater accuracy of adaptation to differing personalities, contact with greater commercial activities. These considerations mean much to the city-bred child of today." (Dewey) I don't see any actual children in the CFR report. But even a hundred years later, Dewey's description sounds more or less like the children I know: the "wily, winsome, wise, wild, and whiny creatures" we love. (Grumet 156-7) Since children are unlikely to be invited to advise the Council on Foreign Relations, we must include voices to speak for them.

**Conversation Topics**

The thesis of the report – the argument they claim and own – is that education is linked to national security. This is not presented as an actual question (*Is* education linked to national

security?) but as an assumption (*How* is education linked to national security?) (CFR xiii). Another assumption – unquestioned, and presumably unquestionable – is that schools are failing. In order to say that something fails, we must have an idea of what success would have looked like, implying that we know the purpose of the thing. Less clearly stated but strongly present throughout the report is the assumption that the purpose of education is to prepare students for work. The questions admitted as legitimate conversation topics exclude any real difference in point of view.

**What is meant by linked?**

*"…undeniable—though often unconsidered—link between K-12 public education and national security"*
*(CFR 5)*

The links between education and security are "undeniable" only because no voice questions them. A great deal of time is spent drawing out things that are linked to security, but the actual connections are vague. Pinning them down reveals logical gaps and some fairly extravagant reaches for *my* credulity, at least. Yet this is one of the most essential arguments for the report as a whole: that education is linked to security.

Which things do they actually say are "linked?" They claim that education is linked to security via physical safety (i.e., military strength), international standing (i.e., economic strength and "global awareness"), and the American Dream of unity and cohesion. Sometimes the linked elements are listed as three things, or four things, or five things, but they essentially fall into those categories.

But they don't actually use the word "link" very much at all: only five times in the text of the report. These five links are scattered all over the text, but picked out and lined up in a logical order, they outline the argument perfectly clearly, however wildly sketched in the prose.

**"…national security today is closely linked with human capital, and the human capital of a nation is as strong or as weak as its public schools."** (CFR *7*)

education → human capital → security

That's the connection – the labor force. This is glossed by spreading the importance of education to careers all throughout the paper, as an essential and unquestioned assumption: the purpose of education is to provide jobs. (If this were the *only* purpose of education implied in this report, it would be easier to accept as a premise.)

Poverty is linked -- to academic failure, but only briefly and grudgingly. "It also held that many other countries have the same degree of diversity as the United States, but that socioeconomic disadvantages in the United States are more closely linked with poor academic performance than in other countries." (CFR 25) The Audit (testing) links the new expectations to the punishments that will be imposed. A section header demands that we "Launch National Security Readiness Audit To Link Accountability To New Expectations" (CFR 53) Indeed, if there is to be strict accountability, and new expectations, they certainly ought to be linked (English). Finally, the audit will be linked to public awareness, in order to "engage the American people." (CFR 45)

**What is meant by Failure?**

The words fail, failure, or failing are used 49 times throughout the text. Notably, each section of the text begins – usually in the very first line of writing – with a reference to school failure.

> Forward: It will come as no surprise to most readers that America's primary and secondary schools are widely seen as failing. (ix)
>
> Preface: Education is one of those core strengths—and its erosion will undermine the United States' ability to lead. (xiii)
>
> Introduction: … elementary and secondary (K-12) schools are failing to provide the promised opportunity. (3)
>
> I: The Task Force members believe America's educational failures pose five distinct threats to national security… (7)
>
> II: The United States has many excellent elementary and secondary schools, but, on the whole, too many schools are falling short in achieving their basic objectives… (14)
>
> III: It is apparent to the Task Force that U.S. students are not developing the knowledge and skills they need to contribute to America's future economic growth or security….The mismatch between the jobs that American students are preparing for and jobs that are available or projected to grow is growing. Not surprisingly, a lack of education is a primary driver of the discrepancy. (41)
>
> Recommendations: The failure of U.S. K-12 schools to prepare young Americans with essential skills and knowledge puts this nation's economic growth and competitiveness, physical security, information security, and national character at risk.(44)

Conclusion: Three decades ago, in August 1981, President Reagan's secretary of education, T. H. Bell, gathered a panel of educators and business leaders to investigate the secretary's concern about "the widespread public perception that something is seriously remiss in our educational system."(56)

**Failure and Shame**

In *Teaching by Numbers*, Taubman explores the process by which even progressive educational projects become fodder for the accountability engine, churning out Failure. Shame is one of the keys to this process. "…shame, as opposed to guilt, results from failure to live up to … the ideal image we hold of ourselves."(Taubman 139) That ideal, for teachers, is the heroic myth of the school as the embryonic form of the Perfect Society, like a molecular cloud in space, majestically churning out stars. But our actual attempts to bring more justice and equity into the schools have been halting, stumbling, even frightening. Taubman describes the deep sense of ambivalence and loss teachers faced even while trying to move toward "a more equalized economic system." Fears of "falling backward," "losing what little economic advantage they had over the poor," made teachers ambivalent about the social justice agenda of schooling. (Taubman 156) Freire also described this emotional hurdle: when people are forced to see themselves as the oppressors they experience "considerable anguish" (Freire 49). The ambivalence of white teachers who fear a loss of status and of black teachers who resent a loss of control leaves everyone feeling guilty and ashamed; the most "intolerable" guilt is the fear of "hurting children." (Taubman ?) How to ease this pain?

Guilt and loss are ameliorated by the addictive fantasy of heroic sacrifice: "We assume teaching is a service profession and that our *raison d'etre* is to serve the learning needs of students." (Taubman 146) The business agenda promises a redeeming "certainty, control, professional status, and a heroic identity of self-sacrificing service." (Taubman 157) To erase shame, teachers "aspire to the professional status held by medicine or engineering or law or business" and to "adopt the language and practices of standards and accountability," seen as central to "professionalization." (Taubman 145)

**Failure and Confusion**

We should not be surprised that in accepting the ideology of the business world, our hopes are rushed forward, urgently, in a fantastic but limited-time offer. Ideology claims "necessity for its own" and uses "shortness of time to forestall other perspectives and possibilities." (Willis 164) From the 1960s on "…the crisis in national security was displaced into curriculum planning…. Scientific and military failure was relocated as the failure of public education in America." (Pinar 216) And since the 1960s, it's been urgent; a crisis; a "real but time-limited opportunity" (CFR 58); a "crossroads" (CFR 59). Why is this the "critical moment of opportunity" (CFR 57)? Because now (Now!) we have 1) wide acknowledgment of the problems in education (public and bipartisan), leadership (unspecified), and some individual examples of successful schools (again, unspecified). Of course, any of these could be claimed in any decade of living memory. The report also does point out that at this political moment, the economy is terrible and that is often a motivation for change. (That's a good point, actually.) The sense of urgency adds to the feeling of confusion.

The report is definitely confusing. If you just read it quickly, it sounds perfectly sensible. The sentences are clearly written, and there's no mention whatsoever of positionality, decathecting, or epistemological anything. Each section begins with the invocation of failure, and an articulation of the purpose of education. Transitions are created by calling us to think of our national hopes and the American Dream. Graphs and charts are placed each on their own page so one can glance at them without having to read explanations or commentary. But trying to pull out the implied purpose of education makes the whole business snarl into a byzantine tangle. No particular argument follows logically from another; no particular solution addresses any specific problem.

In some ways, this "conversation" as it is written, is already complicated. But the complexity is that of a twisting path, suggesting difficulty and danger, and allowing a sense of relief when we arrive at the conclusion, rather than the complexity of intersections, suggesting alternative directions and other possible roads.

**Refusing Blame**

*"….politicians and businessmen raise alarms about a nation at risk…and blame educators" demanding "much stricter accounting and obeisance from those educators than they ever do from corporations, which have been plagued by scandals, or from a military, which, at least in the last half century, cannot claim many victories or wise decisions"*
*(Taubman 135)*

Failure of the economy, diplomacy, and military surely should lay first at the feet of adults in those professions, rather than have the blame fall on children and their teachers. The report blames educators for resisting "innovation" when "the problem is less about an opposition to change than it is about too much churn and change. This adds to disrespect and the sharp demoralization of our current teaching force—something that is never seen in the countries that outcompete us." (Weingarten – CFR 67) And as Taubman points out (139), we do not blame business schools for the failing economy (or military academies for unpopular wars).

When researchers push back, some push back hard. Teachers are not to blame for the nation's economic problems, and in fact, they're not to blame for students' problems in school either. "Teachers are responsible for being well-informed, socially engaged, and self-aware, for being pedagogically spirited and adaptable and ethically committed, for making every effort to engage students intellectually and psychologically. *But it is sheer nonsense to assert that teachers are accountable for students' learning."* (Pinar 217)

Instead of placing blame, what constructive steps could we take? Thinking through this report suggests three ideas to me fairly immediately:

**1. Use different language:**

I did actually do some word counts for terms they use often, like Equity, Learning, and New, and also for words that seemed conspicuous by their relative absence, like Hope, Imagination, and Power. This was amusing for me but I will not take up much more time with it here. Pinar suggests educators' associations sue for slander and libel when the media refers to "failing schools." (201)

**2. Trust the teachers**

Good praxis requires that we "trust in the oppressed and in their ability to reason." (Freire 66) Although teachers can be situated on the oppressor side of the cultural line, these days they're also certainly the oppressed. In asking how to improve education, we should trust the teachers and their ability to reason.

How should teachers be trained? The report "holds up Teach for America (TFA) as the solitary model for entering teaching—despite the fact that recruits have only a few weeks of training when they enter and most leave their positions after two years…While the commitment of TFA recruits is commendable, we need solutions like those developed at Columbia, Stanford, and many other top universities…"(Darling-Hammond – CFR 63) Darling-Hammond also mentions Finland and Singapore as examples of nations with successful schools, who respect teachers, and show it: *through pay*. They "invest in recruiting top people and preparing them well— completely at government expense and with a stipend while they train…. Salaries are competitive with other professions" (64)

3. To know what we mean by schools' failure or success, I think we need to be clear about **schools' purpose, "promise," and potential.**

**Education = Learning**

Psychology, not philosophy, directs modern education, and Learning "emerges as both the telos of and synonym for education," (Taubman 180) while the concepts of environment, behavior, and motivation turn teaching "into manipulation, or the best way to...control students." (Taubman 175) A cursory count tells me that the report uses the words "learn, learner or learning" 55 times; "understand" only 15 times.

Taubman asks us to reconsider the assumptions behind the idea of learning. We should not assume that learning is predictable, that it can be controlled or demonstrated on demand. If we were to think of learning without the big capital letter L, it could be "a subjective experience that would always be occurring. Everyone would learn all the time..." (but not necessarily always "what is meant to be learned.") (184) The learning sciences, in their "pursuit to control

and predict," must "exclude human subjectivity, the life of the psyche, and the effects of meaning making." The individual student must be "reduced to an exemplar or anomaly" of the norm. (174) What else might education be?

> *"What we share with students is the human project, which no one can escape, of transforming the stuff that surrounds us into a world we share though the action of our intentionality."*
> *(Grumet 124)*

Dewey tells us the "primary root of all educative activity is in the instinctive, impulsive attitudes and activities of the child." Taubman suggests that teaching might be considered "the shared study of the curriculum." (190) Citing Buber, Grumet observes: "If education means to let a selection of the world affect a person through the medium of another person" "the influencing of the lives of others with one's own life" is "otherwise found only as grace." (107)

**What is education for?**

> *Schools "really do seem to assume that all are trying to achieve broadly the same aims in life."*
>
> *"The way in which we are all expected to pursue the same aims suggests that those at the bottom of a class society are there apparently, and they believe it for themselves, because of their own smaller capacity to achieve these aims. All accept, so to speak, the same rules, meanings and goals of the game – and also what counts as winning and losing."*
> *(Willis 147)*

The report describes many "purposes" of education, each evidently obvious and unquestionable. Which goals of education are realistic and which are idealistic (i.e., impossible to achieve)? School reformers thinks it's perfectly sensible to ask schools to prepare "all students to succeed in the global market," but claim it's impractical to ask schools to "take a stand on the ideal of social justice." (Taubman 151)

Although the essential purpose of education is a fascinating question with which to spark a complicated conversation, the committee members -- even some of the dissenters -- seem to agree that the purpose of education is to prepare students for work. It's not entirely clear whether this preparation is meant to serve the interest of the students, or the employers.

In some ways, this is about national economic power; in some ways, it's about the individual's economic power; in many ways it's also about the American Dream of equity over the power of socio-economic forces.

However, this purpose (preparing for work) is not specifically spelled out. Rather, throughout the report, different purposes for education are held up in the light of failures, threats, and promises.

In section 2, they ask how well our schools are "preparing young Americans to be ready to help promote technological advancement, innovation, and economic, military, and diplomatic strength." Presumably all that, taken together, is the purpose of education. Later, the purpose of education is to provide "security" through reading, math, global awareness, and American Values, all smushed together. Sorted out, section-by-section and bit-by-bit, five overarching purposes for education emerge (or maybe four, or maybe six, depending on how you count).

- physical (military) safety
- world leadership (economic)
- world leadership (political)
- American Dreams of innovation and creativity
- American Dreams of equity and unity

Education might be for the nurture of children. "The primary business of school is to train children in co-operative and mutually helpful living; to foster in them the consciousness of mutual interdependence; and to help them practically in making the adjustments that will carry this spirit into overt deeds." (Dewey).

It might be for the creation of a more equitable society. "The important thing, from the point of view of liberation education, is for the people to come to feel like masters of their thinking" (Freire 124) Freire describes the purpose of education, thus: 1) for students to see the "reality of oppression" as a "limiting situation which they can transform," 2) to then see their relationship as the "antithesis" to the oppressor: "without them the oppressor could not exist," and 3) to engage in "the struggle to free themselves." (49)

"Our professional calling is nothing less than the subjective reconstruction of the public sphere through complicated conversation, a resuscitation of the progressive project in which we understand that self-realization and democratization are inextricably intertwined. That is, in addition to providing competent individuals for the workplace and for further study in higher

education, we must renew our commitment to the democratization of American society…" (Pinar 227)

**Everyone involved seems to be holding on to multiple purposes for schools, but the one they do seem to all agree on, is that school prepares children to be adults.**

Schools provide time and space for a transition from home to the public world. But we use schools as a giant sorting machine, where kids are shaken into categories and directed toward different doors. What else might that space (and time) be like?

**Getting from home to school**

*"Children can live in school as out of it, and yet grow daily in wisdom, kindness, and the spirit of obedience." (Dewey)*

Grumet's work describes school as a place (and time) of transition and growth, asking women (and men) who teach to "reclaim the classroom as a place where we nurture children." (179) Dewey's work was based on the belief that "the nature and destiny" of children (i.e., their home lives and future public lives) were just parts of a continuum, not to be seen in opposition to each other; nor should school be so very different from either home or the public world. School should bridge the child's familiar world over into the "larger, maturer society into which he is finally to go forth." Certainly the world of work – though specifically practical, hands-on trades such as "shopwork," cooking, and "textile work" (not medicine and law) – are central in his vision of that larger society and what it's all about. (Dewey)

*What else is involved in public, adult life? Anything besides work??*

The Common Core will prepare students for "college, careers, or military service" (CFR 36) But what of the other aspects of adult life? What of the adult's role in forming families, or the importance to our larger society of personal physical health and spiritual well-being? What of informed voting and active civic participation? Artigiani, in a dissenting view, claims "…the very nature and purpose of public education" is "preparing young people of all backgrounds to become informed and active citizens who understand their rights and responsibilities to

contribute to society and participate in the shaping of policies that affect their communities and the larger world." (CFR 61) "Contributing to society" usually means "work," but the rest of it sounds like it's about voting.

**What do we actually mean by Work?**

We mean jobs. Sometimes we mean super-elite jobs, like being CEO of an international corporation or president of a university. Sometimes we mean low-paying, "simplest" jobs, like the ones we're evidently losing to China.

*Jobs are leaving this country and American employers say that students today lack the basic skills to do even the simplest jobs.*

(from the Broad Foundation website)

Preparing students for work is the major agenda for this committee. It's hard to suppose, though, that any of these large corporations really want to hire Americans to do "the simplest jobs." Around the time the committee was working on this report, Chinese workers protested their working conditions by threatening (and attempting) mass suicide by leaping from ~~the~~ factory rooftops. Apple took a public media hit, but these conditions are not specific to iPhone factories. Rather, they are so widespread that according to the China Business Review, they can be assumed to be the rule rather than the exception. (www.chinabusinessreview.com) Many suicide stories came to the public attention, if briefly.

Did conditions improve? Well, Apple installed safety nets in some factories. I wonder if anybody asked committee members Laurene Powell Jobs (Apple's widow) or Matthew Pottinger (from China Six LLC, a private firm that advises other companies about doing business in China) about this, even in the hallways during breaks.

*Work vs Labor*

Willis describes three "penetrations" of the labor class in clearly seeing their own place in society. And indeed, while CEOs and university presidents prepare our students for Work, perhaps they ought to listen to the labor force saying 1) we know better than you about "real life," 2) we are in control of our own labor, and 3) all labor is pretty much the same. But Willis

remained somewhat perplexed about exactly why and how the lower classes continue in a state of oppression. Arendt helps us by distinguishing Work from Labor.

Work is public. It involves the creation of – multiplication of - Things. Once a thing is made, work has been done. Labor is private. "Unlike *working*, whose end has come when the object is finished, ready to be added to the common world of things, *laboring* always moves in the same circle" of nature, in which "growth" and "decay" are neither separate nor meaningful. (Arendt 98) Since ancient times we have held contempt for labor; "impatience with every effort that left no trace, no monument." (Arendt 81) The lowest work is the kind that is most necessary to sustaining life: "The opinion that labor and work were despised in antiquity because only slaves were engaged in them is a prejudice of modern historians. The ancients reasoned the other way around and felt it necessary to possess slaves because of the slavish nature of all occupations that served the needs for the maintenance of life." (Arendt 83) So in spite of its necessity, or rather, because of its necessity, we despise labor. This makes sense to me so far.

Arendt also claims "most work in the modern world is performed in the mode of labor" (141) and this is surely even more true now.

But is this a good thing or a bad thing? "The danger is that the modern age's emancipation of labor will not only fail to usher in an age of freedom for all but will result, on the contrary, in forcing all mankind for the first time under the yoke of necessity" (Arendt 130) "Our whole economy has become a waste economy, in which things must be almost as quickly devoured and discarded as they have appeared in the world" (Arendt 134)

And yet she also shows that while work can create individual wealth, labor, in creating a surplus of the necessities for life, only benefits society in the larger sense. "The only possible advantage of the fertility of human labor power lies in its ability to procure the necessities of life for more than one man or one family" (118); kept as an individual benefit, such a surplus is nothing more than rot (109).

*Teachers' work is definitely labor.*

"To have a definite beginning and a definite, predictable end is the mark of fabrication…. Labor, caught in the cyclical movement of the body's life process, has neither a beginning nor an end." (Arendt 143-144) Teaching is definitely labor.

Alas for the years I spent stomping my feet and waving my arms because I don't like it that we treat teachers like "labor" instead of like "professionals." What I objected to, of course, is treating teachers with contempt instead of with respect.

And certainly, teaching, labor, and women form a tight triangle. While Willis' lads identified physical work as masculine and mental work as feminine (and thus less appealing), Arendt connects women to labor. Taubman looks at teaching as historically a female profession and asks to what extent the critiques of teachers are "a function of misogyny." (146) "Women's work is seen as maintenance, repeated in daily chores required merely to sustain life, not to change it." (Grumet 24) Teaching is labor; teaching is women's work; women's work is labor.

I think I could learn to be ok with this.

**Recommendation 1: Control over Curriculum**

*The purpose of curriculum is to "bring what we know to where we live." (Grumet 127)*

*"Curriculum is always a means to somebody's end." (English 69)*

None of the dissenters had anything but admiration for the Common Core standards. I've read them pretty carefully and I don't have a huge problem with them either. Nor do I particularly care whether our public school curriculum is established at the state or national level, as both state government and federal government, democrats and republicans, all seem equally likely to write very boring standards such as these. Here, especially, reform is held back by stultified notions of what education "is."

**Recommendation 2: "Choice," Competition, and Capitalism**

In The Death and Life of the Great American School System, Ravitch details the "data wars" (139) over charter schools: some studies found charter schools did about the same as traditional public schools on tests; others found they did significantly better; still others found

they did worse. She quotes Loveless and Field: "…Just as it is unreasonable to expect charter schools to solve all of the problems of American education, it is unreasonable to expect research to settle all of the theoretical disputes about market-based education and school-choice." (143) This is where the majority of the signitors are clearly biased, and where the dissenters offer the most argument. It's all pretty straightforward.

**Recommendation 3: Coercion (More testing, with more punishment)**

*"All the marking and mapping and routing are but the obsessions of an eagle scout looking for the badge instead of the mountain."*
*(Grumet 121)*

The proposed audit would not measure "national security readiness," (Walt – CFR 65). Standardized tests measure what they've always measured – absorption of cultural capital. Weingarten also notes in her dissention (67) that the obsession with standardized testing is not helping students develop "higher-order knowledge and skills."

Taubman critiques "Secretary of Education Margaret Spelling's comment that NCLB is committed to ensuring that 'every child – regardless of race, income, or zip code – can read and do math at grade level'" by citing Rothstein, Jacobsen, and Wilder (2006) in pointing out that that's a mathematical impossibility, because of the way "grade level" is calculated as an average. (38) But alas, the dissenters do not struggle nearly hard enough here.

I already know what I think about standardized testing. It is the work of the devil. Although I would happily write a longer section here, for now I will simply ask Dewey and Pinar to speak up:

> "As long as we confine our gaze to what the child here and now puts forth, we are confused and misled. We cannot read its meaning. Extreme depreciations of the child morally and intellectually, and sentimental idealizations of him, have their root in a common fallacy. Both spring from taking stages of a growth or movement as something cut off and fixed. The first fails to see the promise contained in feelings and deeds which, taken by themselves, are uncompromising and repellent; the second fails to see that even the most pleasing and beautiful exhibitions are but signs, and that they begin to spoil and rot the moment they are treated as achievements." (Dewey)

> "What has happened in the United States is the relocation of the "totalitarian temptation." Punitive action against the past and preemptive protection against the future have been acted out inside that institution wherein the past is reconstructed and the future is foretold." This totalitarianism is achieved through standardized testing. (Pinar 63)

And of course, Ravitch must write this passage on the board 100 times:

> "Even aside from the problems raised by poorly-worded questions, ambiguous answers, and errors on tests, there are the inherent variabilities in a student's situation which could make a student able to pass a test one day and fail it the next, or vice versa. In addition, "testing experts frequently remind school officials that standardized test scores should not be used in isolation to make consequential decisions about students…" and that "test scores…cannot reliably serve as a measure of the teacher's skill." (152-153)

**Getting Back to Work**

*"The point of being in the world is not to exploit its resources and peoples for profit."*
*(Pinar 207)*

In this report, every stated purpose of education is ultimately about work. Our physical safety? It's all about getting skilled employees into the military. World leadership? All about those fancy upper-class jobs. Economic security? That about the lower-class jobs. The Great American Creative Spirit? It's about having creative jobs. (And it's very, very interesting to look through the list of things they identified as "creative," with an eye to race and gender.) Most importantly, the American Dream of Equity and Unity is all about getting a job.

**What do we mean by National?**

I have a (still) very rough draft of this section, in which I am examining our sense of nationality in terms of Unity and Equity, and also in terms of individuality and "imagination." The report uses rhetoric about creativity in a cursory and almost defensive mode. It's clear that all the talk about schools fostering imagination and creativity is just that – talk. It's interesting to look at why they feel the need to talk that way, but I doubt we'll learn anything new here.

More interesting is the grasping after both social (i.e., economic) equity, and national unity. Somehow those seem to be considered the same thing, which I think is interesting. If we consider the "national" sense of unity of medieval people, certainly economic equality wasn't even on the radar. But if we assume "national" to refer to a sense of the modern nation (i.e., post WWI), then economic equality may be inextricably linked. That's very interesting, but I fear I'm wandering too far.

Certainly the rhetoric in this report orbits around dangers to our international leadership, competitiveness, and American ideals – to the American Dream itself. (CFR xiv) So when we say National Security, perhaps we don't mean the security of the nation, but rather the security of our nationality.

Relevant to this conversation would be some (hopefully friendly) argument between Dewey and Freire about the creation of the Just Society through the education of children. Both of them, individually or together, could probably send the whole committee home to hang their heads in shame at wasting our time. Grollios criticizes the "child-centered perspective" of the liberal upper middle class, "whose members were indifferent to social problems and social injustices" (Grollios 134). Certainly there are inherent problems in making schools "an embryonic community life, active with types of occupations that reflect the life of the larger society, and permeated throughout with the spirit of art, history, and science" (Dewey). After all, nothing here changes the injustices of the larger society, and we know the school ends up reproducing them as well. Yet if I had to place my own child in Dewey's hands or Freire's, with respect, my kid would be going to Dewey's school. Of course, I am about as middle-class as one can be.

The dissenting views also point out that this report, like the ones before it, makes a lot of demands without actually offering any money. There's some work to do on that line of conversation as well. The report does concede that "If schools are severely resource-constrained, they will not be able to innovate their way to success" (52). And of course I'm generally in favor of schools having better funding, but I do wonder what Freire would say about that quote. For schools to help us move towards a more just society, do they need more money, or more love? Not that they shouldn't have both.

**What do we mean by Security?**

*(Economic) "growth is necessary to finance everything else that makes the United States a desired place to live and a model for other countries."*
*(CFR 8)*

Just the phrase "a nation at risk" is enough to set alarms off. According to the forward, preface, introduction, and sections 1 and 2, education is linked to physical security and a capable military force. Section 2 mentions both the need for education to provide us with a military and with diplomats. This is a disturbing idea, and not surprisingly, there's not actually a lot of argument for this point. They weakly suggest that a lot of soldiers seem out of their depth, and that not many spies and diplomats were trained to speak "Dari, Korean, Russian, Turkish, Chinese." They mention "five distinct threats" which are totally vague and not at all distinct from one another, including some nonsense about intellectual property and cyber-espionage, which is clearly meant to sound very scary. But they don't make a strong case, and don't strongly attempt to make the case, that our schoolchildren or our school teachers are responsible for the physical safety of the nation, or even for our diplomatic successes. That would have been a hard argument to make: surely diplomatic training should be for young adults in post-secondary school, and military readiness should be the focus of boot camp sergeants, not grade school teachers.

Artigiani doesn't think much of the big threat. "Nothing in this report convinces me that that our public schools "constitute a very grave national security threat facing this country." Indeed, claims of alarm can only set the stage for dramatic actions unsupported by evidence…" (60) Walt agrees: "the report exaggerates the national security rationale … it offers only anecdotal evidence," and "none of the states whose children outperform U.S. students is a potential rival." Clearly the anxiety over security is being shifted around, like the cup with the pea under it in a shell game. "There are good reasons to improve K-12 education, but an imminent threat to our national security is not high among them." (Walt – CFR 65)

The models we have adopted for education reform are not just business models; they are military models. Psychologists' work in education derives from their work in the military. Their systems for teaching (ex., Gagné's nine steps of instruction) are actually systems for training (Taubman 162-163). Schools' research and development money is compared to that of the military (CFR 32), and while the committee concedes that "schools are not directly responsible for obesity and crime," (CFR 9) - thanks for that - the education gap will "tear at

the fabric of society" (CFR 12). One might argue that the education gap has always been an intrinsic part of the fabric of our society. The future in which that gap no longer exists is a strange and beautiful fabric, the like of which we've never seen.

The report plays on our fear of crime, with a chilling sidetrack about high-school drop outs and prison statistics. "Students have been reframed as victims and perpetrators" (Taubman 131); the techniques for control that make our schools seem like prisons themselves are "presented as helping kids" so that teachers' fear - racialized, class-based, therefore inadmissible – can be recoded as "helping kids." (Taubman 131-132)

If we're going to claim education as a means to a military end, let's be serious about it. At what age should children begin actual military training? Along those same lines, what aspects of military training would we want to consciously and conscientiously adopt as pedagogy? Let us face this idea squarely and begin that conversation. If schools are the cornerstone of our security, should we simply make every public school a military school?

Or instead, let us ask: What actually needs to be secured? American's "liberty, democracy, capitalism, equality of opportunity, and unique ability to generate innovation" (5) all depends on the schools, and on the above depends our "standing in the world" (6). What is at risk is not our physical security but our "status as an educational, economic, military, and diplomatic leader." The committee fears that the US will turn inward instead of being a "stabilizing force in the world" (CFR 13), and thus we begin to shift the focus of our fear from our neighbors' children to miscellaneous other countries.

But it's not just about our national (thus shared) status. It's about the specific group of people who actually share in the national "status," enjoying physical safety, economic advantage, and political power. The social status, political and economic power of the elite is more specifically at risk. We have established that schools are responsible for the nation's economic growth; this growth "is necessary to finance everything else that makes the United States a desired place to live and a model for other countries." (CFR 8) "Power wears many masks" and here it is the "Common Culture" that "pretends neutrality while it advances the ways of knowing, the forms of language and relation that enhance the privilege of those with power." (Grumet 171)

If our schools "fail," what are the actual risks we face as a nation? The report, in an oblique way, is building the case that schools equal jobs equal money equals power equals safety. But from whence the threat to our safety: other countries? or from internal, domestic violence and dissention? Poor nations are statistically also unsafe places to be. But is the crime caused by poverty or the poverty caused by the lack of safety? Chickens and eggs: must schools unravel even that ancient riddle?

And surely, if we were to examine the poorest nations and most dangerous ones, for example, on the worldbank website (http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GNP.PCAP.CD), would we not find that in many cases it's not a matter of violence from outside, but internal, domestic violence that threatens those nations? When the oppressor is internalized people fear freedom; when they "locate the oppressor outside themselves, they take up the struggle." (Freire 164)

**None of the Above**

> *"But what if real education happens when something doesn't work?...What if the aim of education is not learning? What if there is no aim to education other than the brief coming together of teachers and students to question, explore, study, compose, create, and experience a kind of life that most will rarely experience again in our market-driven world?...What if the obsession with learning keeps us on track but also keeps us from being educated?"*

> *"What would it mean to give up fantasies…that we are central to students' learning, and that self-sacrifice and service provide our identity?" "It would mean understanding teaching not as social work, or missionary work, or service or servitude."*
>
> *(Taubman 189, 195)*

Taubman and Grumet offer us space to step back, perhaps to "decathect" and disengage emotionally, or perhaps to remember and feel. Pinar offers us permission to sue for libel and sass back without fear. With such permissions we can look not only for alternatives answers but alternative questions.

These researchers ask us to try, at least for a while, to linger in the "gaps between the transformation and the critiques." (Taubman 200). Having spent a good deal of my own life in that sort of space, I have to say it's a nice place to visit but I wouldn't want to live there. There is enormous power and wisdom to be gained in those weird spaces, and teachers will surely need that power and wisdom if they are to hold on to the joy of their labor in the face of so much anxiety and anger. But they also have to be in the classroom earlier than I currently am accustomed to have my first cup of coffee, to close the door, and face the little faces there. Some practical steps might be helpful; perhaps someone should write a more-dissenting dissenting view.

In one moment I find I can indeed look up at the sky and mutter "None of the above" (Grumet 131), while in the next I find myself saying with great grief, great hope, and total sincerity that it really doesn't matter what Emily learns in school as long as she gets decent grades.

Where have I wandered?

**Sources I used (please forgive the somewhat haphazard MLA format; I don't really know what people prefer these days):**


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*And a bunch of other websites, including Wikipedia, that I used to get myself quickly oriented in the world of international finance, charitable foundations, and weird but interesting charter schools.*