

## Book Review

**Koyama, Jill (2010). *Making failure pay: For-Profit tutoring, high-stakes testing, and public schools*.** Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 192 p., 22,00 USD, ISBN 978-02-264-5174-9.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is an American federal policy that aims to improve schooling for the poorest segments of American society. NCLB evaluate schools using annual tests of students, and sanctions schools that do not demonstrate adequate yearly progress (AYP), i.e., schools with low average test scores. Schools with serially low scores can be closed or have their personnel fired. A less dramatic component of the policy qualifies students in failing schools for supplementary education services (SES), which are private firms that tutor students after school in an effort to boost their test scores. This policy has provoked a storm of controversy. Despite its partial roots in the U.S. civil rights movement, which used measures of black-white achievement gaps to champion equity issues and set goals for improvement, critics see NCLB as the epitome of today's "audit culture" in which government accountability regimes intrude into education using misleading metrics and unhelpful sanctions. These critics fault NCLB for over-emphasizing testing (dubbing it 'No Child Left Untested'), for punish-

ing rather than supporting schools, for creating perverse incentives for administrators to rig test scores, for promoting teaching to the test, and for diverting public monies to private SES providers (e.g., Meier et al, 2004).

*Making Failure Pay* elaborates on the latter criticism. Anthropologist Jill P. Koyama begins from the premise that NCLB, in the name of accountability, puts poor children in the hands of SES providers that have not been proven to be effective. In readable prose, Koyama draws on her field work in New York City in which she attended SES provider fairs, observed SES afterschool classes, sat in on SES management meetings, and met with various teachers, principals and parents. Her key interest was to understand how NCLB identifies failing schools, how those schools then link to SES providers, and how those providers then tutor children. She describes NCLB as organizationally complex. The policy is governed at multiple levels: Federal funds are directed to states which then compel local districts to implement the policy. The policy is also very loosely coupled. Rather than sharply dictating how SES provision should take place, the policy grants local actors much latitude to interpret its guidelines, use their own discretion, and act accordingly. To Koyama, the lack of monitoring of SES providers reinforces the need for continual improv-

isation. Koyama is critical of the actual implementation of the policy. She asserts that it constructs schools as 'failing' in often exaggerated and unhelpful ways. Schools with good average scores can still 'fail' when only some subgroups of students do not meet AYP, yet those schools are then encouraged to embrace SES as a way to signal their compliance with the policy. She also exposes SES provisions as often irresponsible and ineffective. Many providers do not hire proven instructors. Some are incompetent in their administration and pedagogy. As an instance of bureaucratic absurdity, the policy requires students to attend SES for literally 37.5 minutes of daily instruction after school, but many eligible children do not bother to attend.

These criticisms may not surprise critics of NCLB, but they will appreciate the book nonetheless as further ammunition for their opposition. Many will cheer Koyama's exposure of this policy's many faults, gaps, and unintended consequences, such as the lack of provisions to actually transport children to SES providers. If anyone believes NCLB is being implemented in a hyper-rational fashion, with clearly prescribed actions, closely-monitored processes, high quality data, and effective sanctions for deviance, this book will make them think differently. But I do have a criticism of the book, centring on Koyama's choice of theoretical framework. To be true to her field observations, she needed a framework that recognized that many contemporary policies are not particularly determining, and tend to trigger relatively organic, unscripted processes that require sense-making from a variety of actors. But rather

than pursuing mainstream institutional approaches that have covered such terrain for several decades, Koyama opted instead for Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory (ANT), along with occasional nods to figures like Stephen Ball, Anthony Giddens and even Harold Garfinkel. She uses ANT in ways that imbue her theorizing with a splendid lack of intelligibility, as C.W. Mills once put it. We are told that ANT is "... a way to examine how policy, while made to do many things, simultaneously "makes" many actors do many things in many situations across many settings" (p. 39). Such statements, while true, are not developed further in the book. The 'networks' in ANT turn out not to be real, interconnected and map-able entities, but are instead only concepts in a method of thinking about multiple actions. Koyama repeats similarly evasive phrases from throughout the book that generate little 'value added' insight (to invoke NCLB jargon), in my opinion. Likewise, her analyses always sound critical, but their substance is often elusive. Instead, the analysis mostly re-describes social processes in highly general ways that sound enchanting, exotic and faintly sinister. To distance herself from the policy, she deploys literary device like repeatedly placing scare quotes around NCLB terms like 'failing', but readers may feel set up for a punch line that never comes. In some respects, this theorizing seems to voice an otherwise conventional critique of NCLB in a more elaborate language. I would have preferred that she had attempted to further explain just *why* the policy is being implemented in such loosely coupled fashions, and maybe contextualize

that in what is an increasingly complex organizational field of education.

Having said that, this book helps move educational research in two fruitful directions. By observing how an accountability regime actually plays out on the ground, it helps correct scholarly tendencies to assume policies are indeed implemented in clear and consistent manners and have their intended consequences. By studying the tutoring industry, the author draws attention to a fascinating form of private education that, despite growing in many countries around the globe, has attracted a surprisingly small number of research-

ers to date. These topics are signs of our new times. Hopefully this book will kick start more research on both.

*Scott Davies*

### **Reference**

Meier, D. L., Darling-Hammond, G., Wood, A., Kohn, S., Karp, M. N., & Sizer, T. R. (2004). *Many children left behind: How the No Child Left Behind act is damaging our children and our schools*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

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