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Catch-22 and the Paradox of Teaching in the Age of Accountability

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Abstract

Drawing upon Joseph Heller's Catch-22, this paper explores the logic of standards-based education reform and the myriad ways in which accountability systems, performance standards, and market-based reform initiatives have degraded teaching and learning in public schools. In this critical analysis of essential elements of the No Child Left Behind Act and the Race to the Top fund, the author explores three dominant themes woven throughout Heller's work: (1) the reliance on symbolic indicators of progress, (2) the irrational nature and deadening effect of bureaucratic rules and procedures, and (3) the dangers of unchecked capitalism. It is argued that these reform efforts are not only counterproductive, but eroding the democratic foundations of our public school systems. The author concludes that to maintain their autonomy and professionalism, teachers will have to find alternative ways of organizing and produce a counter narrative that not only exposes the failings of standards-based reform but also offers meaningful alternatives.



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In the classic American novel *Catch-22*, Joseph Heller tells the story of an American air force unit stationed on the fictional island of Pianosa in the final years of World War II. Heller's protagonist, a bombardier named Captain Yossarian, finds himself trapped in a dysfunctional military bureaucracy where symbolic acts are interpreted as substantive signs of progress toward the stated objective of defeating the Germans. As the conflict continues, Yossarian loses faith in a war effort where orders become increasingly irrational, profiteering is widespread, and questioning these developments are seen as unpatriotic, even treasonous. Confronted with these developments and deeply troubled about self-preservation and his loss of identity, Yossarian searches for a way out. Faking a liver condition and taking refuge in a medical ward, he temporarily avoids flying bombing missions. When ordered to return to combat, he seeks out the squad's surgeon, begging to be grounded for insanity. Doc Daneeka, the unit's surgeon, rationalizes that those who continue to fly combat missions are indeed crazy and all that is necessary for an exemption from flying is to file a request to be grounded. However, there is a catch. Doc Daneeka explains: "Anyone who wants to get out of combat duty isn't really crazy" (Heller, 2004/1961, p. 46). He further explains that identifying a dangerous situation and expressing a concern for self-preservation is in fact an act of a rational, healthy mind; and those who are sane are required to fly as many missions the military command structure deems necessary (p. 46). This circular reasoning offers no way out. This is crux of *Catch-22*.

Catch-22 is a novel that has captured the public imagination with its examination of the absurdities of war and the contradictions and moral dilemmas faced by those who fight such wars. Perhaps most importantly, *Catch-22* addresses salient issues regarding the dehumanizing nature of modern bureaucracies, the ways in which policy imperatives can pervert the ways in which we think about ourselves and our relationship to one another, and the questionable motivations of those entrusted to lead institutions that will shape the lives of the people they serve (Young, 1997). Heller shines a bright light on the totalizing power of the modern bureaucracy and the ways in which it can systematize and even reward dysfunction. Green (2010) describes the culture constructed in *Catch-22* as "the culture of conformity wherein individual common sense is suspended, rendered inoperable, by the hypnotic lure of a mindset that rationalizes all madness, justifies all mistakes, and triumphs from mendacity" (p. 122). Heller helps us to understand the absurdities of life within bureaucracies led by functionaries who have no moral compass and whose only ambition is to reify and reinforce folly and purposelessness for individual gain.

At the heart of Heller's *Catch-22* is Yossarian's doomed quest for self-preservation and sanity. Trapped in a military bureaucracy that devalues logical thinking and humiliates those who dare to question established procedures and the absurd logic of commanders, Heller offers his readers a comical, yet tragic tale of domination and eventual escape. To survive in a world where bureaucratic imperatives crush any semblance of moral decency or intelligent thought, one must choose to abandon their ideals, continuously denying their humanity and choose to live a fragmented, isolated existence, anxiously waiting the next opportunity to demonstrate allegiance to the ubiquitous logic of the system. Acknowledging this climate of opportunism and the loss of ideals, Yossarian tells Major Danby "That's my trouble you know...between me and every ideal I always finds Scheisskopfs, Peckems, Kornes and Cathcarts [his superior officers]. And that sort of changes the ideal" (p. 445). He continues, "When I look up, I see people cashing in. I don't see heaven or saints or angels. I see people cashing in on every decent impulse and every human tragedy" (p. 445).

Heller's *Catch-22* has come to represent the power of the modern bureaucracy and the suspect motives of the political and business leaders who head our most powerful institutions.

Heller explained that he believed the novel owed its popularity to the fact that in the 1960s the American public saw “an absurd quality, a mendacious quality in many of our political leaders and business leaders” (quoted in Booth, 2002). Although Heller’s *Catch-22* was originally published in 1961, it is difficult to deny its connection with the present reform efforts underway in American schools. Using *Catch-22* as a backdrop, this paper highlights the contradictions inherent in the prevailing conservative education reform agenda as conceived in No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and more recently Race to the Top Fund (2009). Specifically, I will look at two interrelated lines of school reform. The first being a national fixation with implementing a top-down pseudo-scientific monitoring and measuring system implemented with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act. The second line being the corporatization of education policy and learning, wholeheartedly embraced by the Race to the Top program and its push for school choice, competition, and charter schools. Drawing upon Heller’s work, this paper examines the contradictions inherent within these two lines of reform. I investigate what I consider three problematic threads associated with the prevailing education reform efforts in the United States: (1) the reliance of largely symbolic measures of progress; (2) the bureaucratic nature of implementing federal policies; and (3) the shortcomings of market-based school reform. Throughout this analysis, I will closely examine how the standards movement has impacted teacher and learning in New York State, the state in which I teach and have personally experienced the negative impact of standards-based school reform.

Mountains without Summits: The Endless Quest for Symbolic Progress

A theme woven throughout *Catch-22* is the irrational nature of bureaucratic policies and the dehumanizing effect they have on those who are compelled to comply with such policies. In *Catch-22*, Heller creates a highly dysfunctional military command structure where officers, medical personnel, and enlisted men actively participate in what one of his characters describes as the “business of illusion” (Heller, 2004/1961, p. 42). This business of illusion requires Heller’s colorful cast of enlisted men to abandon their principals and uncritically accept irrational orders in order to meet the demands of the military bureaucracy. These orders require not only compliance, but also the willful abandonment of rational thinking and common sense. The increasingly irrational orders require Yossarian’s comrades to fly suicide missions, tolerate war profiteering, bomb civilian targets, and even carry out an air strike against their own unit. These actions take place in a pervasive climate of absurdity and meaninglessness where colonels see each other as enemies, competing with one another to produce hollow achievements thought to win favor with higher-ranking officials. Colonel Cathcart, Yossarian’s commanding officer, continuously increases the number of missions his unit must fly before returning to the states. This tangible achievement, he reasons, is the “dramatic gesture” that would get the generals’ attention and demonstrate his “unique qualities of leadership” (Heller, p. 214). Another colonel is recognized for skill in choreographing military parades. While these symbolic victories have little value in winning the war, they have great value in a cloistered environment, cut off from the world, where symbols trump substantive, meaningful progress.

Symbolic Reform

Like Heller’s *Catch-22*, the use of symbols to represent progress in educational reform is deeply embedded in the current system of standardized education. The No Child Left Behind Act, aimed at closing achievement gaps, relies on test scores as the primary method for improving and

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evaluating educational quality. Student performance is evaluated by paper and pencil exams, school quality is measured by student performance on high-stakes exams, and the overarching goal is to produce students who can score at a level deemed “proficient” and for school districts to continuously make “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) toward this goal. The overarching idea behind AYP is that given a clear mandate to improve academic achievement as evidenced by test scores and graduation rates, schools will work to continuously raise test scores until 2014, the year when 100% of U.S. students are expected to reach proficiency on standardized tests. High achieving schools are awarded blue ribbon status, schools that make AYP avoid state sanctions, and schools failing to make AYP are identified, corrected, and in some cases reorganized or even closed.

This top-down bureaucratic system of school reform depends on a whole series of assumptions that appear to be flawed on several levels. First, standards-based learning is predicated on the notion that the penultimate goal is to make students “proficient” in core subject areas. While proficiency might be defined as the acquisition of a special set of skills or knowledge in an established discipline, most standardized exams contain low-level multiple-choice questions, abbreviated readings, and scripted essays. If proficiency is indeed the goal, one might question whether bubble sheets, formulaic rubrics, and mass-produced test booklets are a true measure of proficiency in any discipline and whether schools devoting tremendous resources to raising test scores are actually providing a high quality education that will support students in developing the skills for active, intelligent citizenship and solving the economic, environmental, and political problems of tomorrow (Saltman, 2005).

A second problem associated with standards-based reform initiatives is that test scores and performance indices have not proven to be a reliable measure of student growth or quality of instruction. As Darling-Hammond (2004) points out, attaining 100% proficiency is a technical impossibility on norm-referenced tests designed to place 50% of students below the norm and some percentage must score below the cut point selected. Hence, to make 100% proficiency a policy goal (reinforced with sanctions) is an exercise in absurdity. Further, Kohn (2004) explains that state officials can create the illusion of progress, stagnation, or decline by simply adjusting test items and altering cut scores. “For the officials in charge, the enterprise of standardized testing is reminiscent of shooting an arrow into a wall and then drawing a target around it” (Kohn, 2004, p. 82). The line that separates students who are and are not proficient is capricious and has been known to change from one administration to the next. New Yorkers are familiar with this capricious system of assessing students and schools. In 2006 a seventh grade student in New York who scored 59.6% on a test was considered to be proficient and just three years later state authorities deemed a score of 44% to be indicative of proficiency. This gave the public the false impression that students were making considerable gains in achievement (Ravitch, 2010, p. 158). In 2010, New York State officials did an about face. They raised the cut scores for standardized tests administered in grades 3-8 weeks after the exams had been scored. This arbitrary change resulted in plummeting rates of “proficiency” across the state. In the city of Syracuse, located on Upstate New York, students who originally deemed proficient on the math test fell from 58 percent to approximately 26 percent and the percentage of students in grades 3-8 passing the English Language Arts exam dropped from 53 percent to 26 percent (Doran & Nolan, 2010). State officials defended this last-minute change as a measure to better prepare New York’s students for high school Regents exams administered in high school and to be prepared for college-level work.

A third problem associated with standards-based reform is that it relies heavily on the notion that the best way to measure school quality is by measuring an entire school’s progress

toward AYP as indicated by test scores. In an effort to address issues of equity and diversity, schools are evaluated by the performance of subgroups that may include minority populations, students whose native language is not English, and students with disabilities. Ignoring the complexity of schools and the diverse student populations throughout the United States, this means that test performance of a small number of students that make up a subgroup can be used to penalize an entire school.

Besides being ostensibly punitive in nature, what is particularly concerning is that the definition of sub-groups varies from state to state. States where subgroups are set at larger numbers (e.g. 40 students as opposed to 20) are less likely to have schools penalized by students who have traditionally performed poorly on standardized exams simply because they do not have enough students to comprise a subgroup (Karp, 2004, p. 54). Further, English Language Learners (ELL) are a subgroup designed to produce failure: once a student who is designated ELL reaches proficiency they are re-designated as language proficient and exit the group. This creates “downward pressure” where high performing students are forced to exit the group and are replaced by newer students more likely to earn lower test scores (Abedi & Dietel, 2004). The result of the endless quest for proficiency and AYP is that public schools serving large numbers of poor children, students with disabilities, or children with limited English skills are more likely to be sanctioned than well-funded schools that do not serve similar populations. George Wood (2004) describes this as a “diversity penalty.” He explains that the greater a schools’ diversity the more likely the students will not meet the scored deemed indicative of proficiency and the greater the likelihood that school will not make adequate yearly progress, resulting in sanctions or even closing. “This,” he explains, “is because of a specific feature of the [NCLB] legislation which says that if one sub-group fails to meet the standard, the entire school fails” (p. 46).

The Consequences of Data-Driven Reform

At the center of standards-based reform initiatives is the idea test data can be used to inform and improve classroom instruction and, in turn, produce academic achievement. Data-driven instruction is predicated on the notion that instructional decisions be grounded in data students’ accumulate as they make their way through the public school systems. This data, derived mostly from standardized test scores, is then used (at least theoretically) to improve classroom instruction. Cuban (2011), however, points out that despite the emphasis on using data to improve instruction, a federally-funded Institute of Education Sciences study (2009) indicates that only 6 of 494 schools could provide evidence of a casual connection between its efforts to gather test data and an actual improvement in academic achievement. While districts spend valuable time and resources collecting data and tracking student performance, the data has limited value for classroom teachers as it is limited to numerical test scores gleaned from students taking tests in previous courses, with different teachers working with different curriculum, and often in different schools.

For the classroom teacher, test data from previous years reveals little about students’ current cognitive, social, or emotional development. By leaving these factors out of the equation, the standards-based equation limits the variables to that which can be measured on standardized tests. Au (2009) explains how the application of scientific efficiency dominates classroom learning and reduces people and complex social situations to numerical data:

The reduction to a numerical score is a key requirement of systems of standardized testing, because it enables the perpetuations of the means-end rationality associated with social efficiency. In the process of the quantification of student knowledge and

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understanding, students themselves are necessarily quantified as a number. The quantification lies at the heart of the measurement itself, which turns real people and real social conditions into easily measurable and comparable numbers and categories. (p. 40).

Here Au's analysis gets at the heart of the standards movement. It is about creating a policy that does more than regulate the curriculum and drive instruction, but also dehumanizes the people it claims to serve. Students and teachers ensconced within this pseudo-scientific system where efficiency is prized over authenticity are silenced, as the totalizing nature of standards-based acknowledges only that which can be quantified, compared, and recorded. The precondition for working within this system is acceptance of this quantification.

It is difficult to imagine meaningful improvement in educational quality from a system that fails to acknowledge the complex nature of teaching and learning. Stedman's (2011) analysis of NAEP scores and SAT results suggests that despite the federal government's efforts to introduce a far-reaching accountability system, student test scores have largely stagnated in reading, math, science, and social studies over the last two decades. Stedman's analysis also indicates that despite the rhetoric of the *No Child Left Behind Act*, in 2008, 17-year-old black and Latino students continue to perform at approximately the same level as their 13-year-old white peers on NAEP assessments in math, reading, science, geography, and U.S. history (Stedman, 2011, p. 6).

Standards-based initiatives also fail to acknowledge or address the fact that

many American students' basic needs are not met and external influences are a significant factor influencing education outcomes. A UNICEF (2007) study of 40 indicators of childhood well-being in wealthy nations ranked U.S. children 20 out of 21 nations, with only U.K. children faring worse. In his research on the connection between poverty and education, Berliner (2009) identifies six out-of-school factors that influence student success:

1. low birth-weight and non-genetic prenatal influences on children;
2. inadequate medical, dental, and vision care;
3. food insecurity;
4. environmental pollutants;
5. family relations and family stress; and
6. neighborhood characteristics. (Berliner, 2009)

Viewed from the classroom where teachers see the toll poverty takes on children, placing the focus on raising test scores without a parallel commitment to addressing fundamental issues such as access to health and nutrition, personal safety, or material well-being seems like a chimera that only diverts attention and resources away from the structural problems that influence academic success (Kozol, 2006).

Further, it appears that our singular obsession for raising test scores may actually be subverting our educational system, degrading the art of teaching and learning, and harming our most vulnerable students. Nichols and Berliner (2007) explain that our high-stakes culture has new set of problems that include teachers and administrators cheating before, during, and after the test is administered, test companies producing tests with errors that jeopardize validity, an overall narrowing of the curriculum, states manipulating test scores and underreporting drop-out rates, all

producing a climate of anxiety and frustration among teachers and students. Top-down education reform may be fostering a climate conducive to cheating and dishonesty as we have seen in the Atlanta public schools where 178 educators, including 38 principals were implicated in altering test answer sheets, ignoring unethical practices and institutional cheating, and even receiving bonuses and praise for their dishonest efforts to raise test scores (Vogell, 2011). It has been suggested that standards-based education reform is feeding the schools-to-prison pipeline and pushing teachers out of the profession. By relying on test scores as the primary indicator of achievement and school quality, standards-based reform backed by high-stakes testing creates an incentive to suspend or expel students who underperform on standardized tests (ACLU, 2010). In addition, many teachers find public schools unpleasant, stressful, even dysfunctional places to work. Teacher attrition increased 50% from 1987 to 2004, and in urban areas like Philadelphia, teachers dropped out (70%) at a higher rate than students (42%) (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2007, p. 1).

Bureaucratic Policy Imperatives and the End of Teaching

A second theme that can be traced throughout Heller's *Catch-22* is the dehumanizing impact arbitrary performance systems have on officers and enlisted men. Throughout the novel, Heller uses a cast of colorful characters to demonstrate the power and reach of *Catch-22*. *Catch-22* is invoked to justify repeatedly raising the number of bombing missions, silencing pilots who question official orders, enforcing the military code of conduct, and compelling all personnel to take a loyalty oath, professing their patriotism. In each case, *Catch-22* is used to symbolize the ways in which power can be applied through bureaucratic channels to achieve compliance with almost any directive. One instructive example can be found in Heller's critical rendering of Yossarian's commanding officer Colonel Cathcart. In his quest for promotion, Colonel Cathcart instructs his unit not to focus on their strategic targets, but on dropping their bombs close together, creating tight bomb patterns that make for impressive aerial photographs. These patterns, he believes, will impress his commanding officer General Peckem who has a penchant for aerial photographs. General Peckem explains, "a bomb pattern is a term I dreamed up just several weeks ago. It means nothing, but you'd be surprised how rapidly it's caught on. Why, I have all sorts of people convinced I think it's important for the bombs to explode close together and make a neat aerial photograph" (p. 325).

Heller's work provides an absurd rendering of a bureaucratic structure where conformity, allegiance, and discipline operate simultaneously to ensure orders are faithfully carried out. Within this system, efficiently carrying out orders, regardless of value or outcome, become the penultimate goal of human activity. An individual's value is not determined by what is effective or actually accomplished in the outside world. Rather, fidelity to the process and efficiency in carrying out procedures determine an individual's value. Hummel (2008) explains:

[B]ureaucracy is a control instrument and a control instruments without compare. Control is the source of power in this organization, and it is natural that those charged with control will emphasize the visible portions of what subordinates do. As a result, instituting standard operating procedures and basing assessment on observed compliance with these is a natural and normal demand. The results of such emphasis on the visible are also inevitable. Eventually control comes to mean largely checking the procedures that are followed instead of looking at impact. (Hummel, 2008, p. 30)

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The result of working in a bureaucratic environment is that humans are transformed into instruments that have little concern for authentic relationships, or actions or ideas incompatible with the demands of the bureaucracy. The successful bureaucrat is not the individual who best serves the client or even the institution; rather, the successful is the individual who willingly surrenders to the demands of the system and works in a prescribed manner. This raises the question of who the teacher and the larger school should serve: the students or the system that governs the students. McNeill (2009) explains that bureaucratic structures and procedures place teachers at the position where the demands of the system and needs of the students intersect:

A school that is designed like a factory has a built-in contradiction: running a factory is tightly organized highly routinized, and geared for production of uniform products; educating children is complex, inefficient, idiosyncratic, uncertain, and open-ended. Historically, the two purposes of schooling, that is, educating children and running large-scale educational institutions, have been seen as separate domains. The one is aimed at nurturing individual children and equipping them with knowledge and skills; the other focuses on processing aggregates of students through regularized requirements of the credentialing process. A bureaucratic school, or a school that is part of a bureaucratic system, is thus structured to be in conflict with itself. And at the point of this tension—where the two oppositional forces intersect—are the children, the teacher, and the curriculum. (p. 11).

The ideal bureaucracy depends on a well-defined hierarchy of authority where each subsequent level of authority is assigned a specialized function adhering to fixed rules that allows power to flow freely from top to bottom. Teachers who advocate on behalf of students are threats to order, efficiency, and the prevailing culture of compliance.

The Subjective and Arbitrary Nature of RTTT

While maintaining its hierarchical nature, the bureaucracy is continuously revised and reworked to reduce friction and eliminate any forms of resistance. This reworking of the bureaucracy can be observed in the Obama administration's Race to the Top (RTTT) program. While much criticism has been directed toward the No Child Left Behind Act and its reliance of standardized test scores, punishments, and performance indicators, the design and implementation of RTTT represents a new permutation of the same bureaucratic mode of reforming public education. RTTT is a \$4.35 billion competitive program funded by The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. This program is designed to foster education reform and innovation. RTTT uses a 500-point scale to evaluate state applications. This scale is comprised of 6 major categories (e.g., "Data Systems to Support Instruction") further divided into 19 subcategories (e.g., "Using data to improve instruction"). Within this system, each category is assigned weights ranging from 47 points for the category "Data System to Support Instruction" to 138 points for the category "Great Teachers and Leaders" (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

What is important to note is that within the bureaucratic structure of RTTT, and its externally-defined goals, scoring formulas, and extraneous rules, small changes in the way categories are weighted and points assigned can potentially produce significant changes in scores, directing hundreds of millions of dollars from one state while withholding it from another. Winning Obama's competition for federal funds for school may have more to do more with complying with the demands of this bureaucratic calculus than actually bringing about substantive school reform. Peterson and Rothstein (2010) contend that the RTTT system suffers from being both arbitrary and subjective. Behind this system of weighting lies a set of priorities about what is

and is not important in reforming American schools. The system is arbitrary in the way it weighs different components of the application process. Peterson and Rothstein ask why the category “Great Teachers and Leaders” should be assigned 138 points while “State Success Factors” is assigned 125 points (p. 4.). To successfully win this contest for school funds, states must accept this arbitrary system of awarding points. Peterson and Rothstein also contend that, despite the emphasis on numerical indicators, the RTTT weighting system is extremely subjective as State applications are evaluated on scales that contain as many as 45 possible positions (pp. 4-7). They argue, “45 points is too large a scale to permit reviewers to make such fine distinctions. Can a reviewer—especially a non-professional reviewer with minimal training conducting a one-time exercise—imagine 45 distinct degrees of effort to secure school districts’ commitment?” (p. 6). Despite its subjective and arbitrary nature, RTTT is being implemented in 11 states and the District of Columbia.

The End of the Art of Teaching

In August of 2010, New York State won \$700 million in RTTT funds in the second phase of the contest. To meet the RTTT criteria “Improving Teacher and Principal Effectiveness” (worth 58 points), New York State Union of Teachers worked with the Board of Regents and the New York State Education Development to design an Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) system. The New State law, Section 3012-c or Chapter 103, of the laws of 2010, states that starting in the 2012-2013 academic year, this new APPR system will use a variety of weighted measurements that include standardized test results (20%), locally developed measurements of teacher performance (60%), and locally-developed measurements of student achievement (20%). These categories of measurement will be used to formulate a composite score for teachers and administrators. This score will be set on a scale of 0-100, which will consist of three cut-scores used to separate teachers and administrators into one of four categories: “Highly-Effective,” “Effective,” “Developing,” and “Ineffective.” Section 3012-c of chapter 103 of the laws of 2010 states that these evaluations “shall be a significant factor in employment decisions including, but not limited to promotion, retention, tenure determination, termination, and supplemental compensation” (NYSenate.Gov). Under this new evaluation system, being designated “ineffective” for two consecutive years is considered just cause for termination.

This bureaucratic structure marks the completion of another chapter in the standards-based project: the curriculum, student assessment, and now classroom instruction have all been reduced to an externally-determined list of skills, technical knowledge, and compliant behaviors reinforced with institutional rewards (i.e., grade promotion, merit distinctions, public recognition, job security) and punishments (i.e., retention, remediation, public criticism, and termination). The bureaucratic structure reduces the art of teaching to a series of artificial performance indicators that are used to represent “value” or “quality.” These indicators are powerful bureaucratic devices that have reorganized schools and the very meaning of classroom teaching around artificial constructs like “proficiency,” “adequate yearly progress,” “school in need of improvement,” and “effective and ineffective.” Within this system, state education departments continuously monitor fidelity and progress toward these abstract (and often meaningless and unrealizable) goals. Reaching these goals is indicated through the act of reducing outcomes to simple numerical indicators. Drawing upon Lyotard’s (1984) work, Ball (2003) describes this endless ritual of inspection, assessment, and discipline as “performativity”:

Performativity is a technology, a culture and mode of regulation that employs judgments, comparisons and displays as means of incentive and control, attrition

and change—based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic). The performances (of individual subjects or organizations) serve as a measure of productivity or output, or display the ‘quality,’ or ‘moments’ of promotion or inspection. As such, they stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual organization in a field of judgment. (Ball, 2003, p. 216)

Performativity eclipses the teaching experience as teachers are forced to abandon the humanistic world of teaching and learning based on shared values, discourse, inquiry, and personal growth and labor in the bureaucratic world of accountability mechanisms that delimit human interactions to quantifiable behaviors reinforced by external rewards and punishments. Under the weight of continuous monitoring and evaluation, the teacher is transformed into a bureaucratic official measured by their ability to follow the official procedures and the students become clients, completely dependent on the system and the designated officials for direction, control, and meaning. Within this system, a teacher’s primary responsibility is to faithfully follow the direction provided by supervisors and, as Hummel (2007) reminds us, “The bureaucrat who becomes deeply involved in the life of a client is regarded as either undependable or corrupt” (p. 37). In the end, authentic human relationships are banished from the classroom and all that is left is an empty ritual of procedures, coercion, and performance.

The Corporate Ideal

A third thread woven throughout Heller’s work is the impact unchecked capitalism has on the stated mission of defeating the Germans and ultimately winning the war. Heller creates the character Milo Minderbinder, a 27-year old mess hall officer, and founder of M and M enterprises, an international syndicate that uses American planes to buy and sell fruits, vegetables, eggs, and meats throughout the Mediterranean region. Milo, a master at persuasive communication, decorates syndicate planes with words expressing American ideals such as “Courage, Might, Justice, Truth, Liberty, Love, Honor, and Patriotism” (Heller, 2006/1961, p. 253). In rationalizing the existence of the syndicate, Milo invites his fellow officers to invest and share the profits he reaps from the privilege of safe passage being granted from both the Americans and Germans. Minderbinder, who believes everything should be subordinate to market imperatives proclaims, “What is good for M & M enterprises is good for the country” (p. 436). As the war rages on, Milo’s greed leads him to do the unthinkable: he contracts with Germans to bomb and strafe his own unit. Applying the principles of free market capitalism, Milo explains to Yossarian that although the Germans are the declared enemies, “the Germans are also members in good standing with the syndicate, and it’s my job to protect their rights as shareholders” (Heller 2004/1961, p. 256). After detailing the damage and the American casualties inflicted by M &M enterprises, Heller explains, “Milo was all washed up until he opened his books to the public and disclosed the tremendous profit he made. He could reimburse the government for all of the people and property he destroyed and still have enough left over to continue buying Egyptian cotton” (p. 259).

The Limits of Market-Based Reform Initiatives

Whereas Heller’s work calls attention to the ways in which unfettered capitalism undermines the American war effort, there is also a growing body of research describing how federal free-market reform policies have had some measure of success in privatizing American public schools and commercializing the educational process (Au, 2009; Bracey, 2002; House, 1998; Leahey, 2010; Molnar, 1996; Saltman, 2005). Although business principles have been applied to make teaching and school operations more efficient since the beginning of the twentieth

century (Callahan, 1962; Kliebard, 1995), it was not until the 1980s that the stated goal of American education was to produce students who possessed the academic skills to successfully compete in a global economy. Commissioned by the Regan administration, *A Nation at Risk* (1983) was a landmark report linking student achievement with economic productivity. This report contended that American schools were failing to produce a competitive workforce that could compete with international students, resulting in the United States losing its edge in commerce, industry, science, and technology. In an effort to make students more competitive, the report suggested that schools create academic standards and that students be evaluated “at major transition points” and that “the tests should be administered as part of a nationwide (but not Federal) system of state and local standardized tests” (*A Nation at Risk*, Recommendations B, p. 3).

The quest for improving students’ standing in international assessments and preparation for successful competition in the global economy has led many liberal and conservative political leaders to call for market-based reforms. House (1998) explains that these market-based reforms are based on three premises: (1) competition will discipline the public sector by creating a demand for higher quality schools made accessible via voucher programs, tax credits, and selective charter schools; (2) a market-based approach will require suppliers (i.e., private and public schools) to compete for revenue (i.e., state education funds) making schools more efficient and ultimately driving down the cost of education; and (3) an open, market-based approach will eventually lead to the elimination of low-quality schools, replacing them with schools that can show academic achievement in the form of test results (pp. 62-63). The implementation of market based reforms have gradually transformed the larger mission of our public schools from institutions designed to create active citizens and capable workers prepared to serve the public good to a system that conceptualizes education as a private good that serves the interests of individuals and prepares them for a life of consumerism, through a competitive environment where the stated objective is to accumulate grades, credits, and degrees (Labaree, 2000).

What’s Wrong with Value-Added Assessment

Drawing upon the language and ideals of the marketplace, RTTT legislation calls for increasing the number of charter schools, strengthening teacher evaluation, introducing merit pay, and increasing the use of numerical data to drive educational policy (RTTT, online). For teachers working within public schools, the most invasive element of the corporate model is the recent move to subject teachers to value-added assessment (VAA), a statistical model that measures a teachers’ “value” by using students’ previous standardized test scores to predict future performance. Touted as an essential tool to measure teacher quality by the Race to the Top initiative, value-added assessment is believed to be a powerful indicator of teacher quality that offers the potential to factor out external factors such as socioeconomic status, parental support, previous educational performance, as well as a host of other factors influencing educational achievement. The concept behind VAA is deceptively simple: Teachers who can produce student growth as evidenced by test scores are considered to add value and are therefore deemed “effective” or “highly effective” as opposed to those teachers who do not produce acceptable scores, and who, under this system, will be deemed “ineffective,” a label which could result in denying tenure, reassignment, or dismissal.

Value-added assessment models are flawed tools to determine teacher quality. Value-added models rest on the precarious assumption that students learn in a continuous, evenly paced, linear progression. Corcoran (2010) suggests that value-added assessment models may actually be a counterproductive measure in the movement to improve teacher quality. He explains that value-

added models assume that test scores can be placed on a continuous scale extending across grades. These types of scales may exist in elementary math classes where short-answer paper and pencil tests are reliable tools to measure students' acquisition of simple skills on a "vertically-equated scale" (p. 14). The problem, Corcoran argues, is that value-added models are being used to determine the quality of teachers working in disciplines where the curriculum delineates skills and concepts that cannot be measured by standardized tests or placed on a continuous, linear scale stretched across several academic years. In addressing this concern, he explains:

[H]istory, civics, English literature, music, foreign language, critical thinking, writing, and research skills may not be so easy to assess in this way [i.e., using value-added models of assessment], and it makes little educational sense to force such skills to conform to such a structure purely for value-added assessment. For this reason, skills readily assessed by standardized tests reflect only a small fraction of what students are expected to know and do. Not all subjects are or can be tested, and even within tested subject areas, only certain skills readily conform to standardized testing. These points are made so frequently that they have virtually lost all meaning; we simply shrug and acknowledge that of course, tests don't capture everything. Yet value-added measures of teaching effectiveness rest exclusively on skills assessable on very narrow standardized tests. (Corcoran, p. 14, 2010)

While value added assessment is thought to be a reliable tool to identify both promising and deficient teachers and practices, without careful consideration it could potentially drive quality teachers from the public schools. Stacey Isaacson, a dedicated New York City teacher who possesses two degrees from Ivy League schools and who received glowing reviews from her principals and accolades from her colleagues and students, was denied tenure based on her value-added scores. Although 65 of 66 of Isaacson's students passed the state proficiency exam with a score of 3 or 4, and she was rated "effective" in her instructional practices and contributions to the school and community, she was not deemed effective in the third category, student achievement (Winerip, 2011, online). The problem was that the value-added model used in New York City which is based on 32 variables, predicted Isaacson's students should earn a proficiency score of 3.69 and when the tests resulted in a score of 3.63, Isaacson value-added score was -.06, placing her in the 7th percentile of all teachers and an indication of her failure to add value to the educational program at Lab Middle School for Collaborative Studies (Winerip, 2011, online). What is more concerning, is that New York City School District acknowledges that value-added scores have a large margin of error, large enough that her placement in the 7th percentile could actually be as low as zero and as high as the 52nd percentile, which could have resulted in her achieving tenure (Winerip, 2011, online).

Given the problems with the design and application of value-added assessment schemes, one might wonder why federal and state governments have fallen victim to the delusions of objectivity and simplicity. It may actually have more to do with the public perception of value-added scores and the movement to remake schools in the corporate image by establishing a seemingly objective baseline to identify teachers and practices that do and do not contribute to raising student achievement. Saltman (2010) argues that "value added promises to 'out' those teachers who do not sufficiently raise test scores, thereby putting pressure on teachers and administrators to raise scores and especially putting pressure on teachers unions by suggesting that firing, job security and pay be linked not to professional review, tenure and seniority, but rather to student test score improvement or decline (Saltman, 2010, para 2).

The result of the federal government's efforts to remake schools in the image of the American corporation is the erosion of democracy and local control. Schools, teachers, and students become subordinate to the prevailing logic of capitalism and its attendant claims to produce efficiency, reward quality, and eliminate waste. Molnar (1996) puts it best:

The prominence of market-oriented school reform doesn't reflect the popular will so much as the ascendance of economic efficiency as the *ne plus ultra* of political and social decision-making. These reforms mark a radical attempt to destroy the social values built into public institutions such as schools, not an effort to improve the system. The destructive logic that drives them would put American society and culture in the service of the market rather than the other way around (p. 172).

As more states apply for RTTT funds and local districts are compelled to reorganize their schools to reflect the corporate ideal and rewarded for implementing Value Added Measures, the values of the marketplace will become fully institutionalized throughout the nation. The elaborate system of arbitrary performance standards, accountability mechanisms, and market-based reforms creates a paradox. The paradox is that despite all of the resources, funds, and attention devoted to improving teaching and learning, the evidence suggests that market-based initiatives are largely failing students and degrading the profession (Miron, Urschel & Saxton, 2011; Rand, 2011; Saltman, 2005; Springer, et. al., 2010; Stedman, 2010). Further, for teachers committed to democracy, social justice, and equity, this paradox offers no escape from teaching within the corporate framework where value is derived from the degree of effectiveness in which concepts and skills delineated in the curriculum can be efficiently transmitted to students whose learning will be measured by paper-and-pencil tests. In the sense, the teacher's primary responsibility is reduced to serving as an intermediary, uncritically transmitting information and measuring the degree to which it was received. Reflection, inquiry, and critical thinking are lost, leading to a greater loss of identity, purpose, and autonomy. Teaching is no longer linked to preparing students for democratic life; rather, teaching is aimed at the narrow, individual targets of raising test scores, college admissions, merit pay, and job security.

Within the constraints of this environment, the teacher becomes reminiscent of Heller's "soldier in white." The soldier in white represents the deadening effect of the irrational, bureaucratic world of *Catch-22*. Heller describes the soldier in white as wrapped entirely in gauze, legs and arms suspended from steel cables, an empty whole for a mouth in which to insert a thermometer. When one soldier inspects the figure to determine if the soldier in white is alive, he declares, "He's hollow inside like a chocolate soldier. They just took him away and left those bandages there" (Heller, 2004/1961, p. 365).

Conclusion: Beyond Catch-22

The best explanation of *Catch-22* comes from an old woman who appears late in Heller's novel. She explains to Yossarian that soldiers chased all the young women away from an apartment he frequented. When he asks why, she responds, "Catch-22. Catch-22 says they have a right to do anything we can't stop them from doing." (Heller, 2004/1961, p. 407). *Catch-22* is not just a no-win or impossible situation, or a bind, as used in mainstream lexicon. *Catch-22* is about power: the power to impose a singular reality on people who work with a bureaucratic system where the forms of communication and rules of logic are established to perpetuate the system. When power is exercised arbitrarily within bureaucratic systems it has a debilitating impact on the people who work (and learn) within them. Such systems dehumanize people by denying them the

right to work in rational, sensible ways to address complex challenges. And when these closed systems fail to produce substantive change the cause of the failure is too often attributed to the people trapped within the system, not the nature of the system itself, or the social and economic policies that created the educational system.

As we continue the march toward completing standardization project, and policies become increasingly irrational, well-qualified, caring teachers will be faced with a dilemma. They will be forced to comply with the irrational demands of federal reform efforts, surrendering their autonomy and playing an active role in implementing bureaucratic procedures, arbitrary educational goals, and free-market schemes designed to impose discipline and achieve compliance. Or, teachers will have to find new ways of organizing and create a counter narrative exposing the absurdity of the system and its failure to produce substantive change. There is a growing body of conceptual and practical literature delineating ways teachers have challenged standards-based reform. One line of research focuses on working with students to name, understand, and work against the bureaucratic constraints offered in traditional schools (Anyon, 2005; DePalma, Matusov, and Smith, 2009; Finn, 2009; Morrell, 2007; Shannon, 2011; Wink, 2010). A second line of research focuses on how teachers can create authentic learning environments within conventional school systems (Au, 2009a; Beck 2009; Kumashiro, 2009; Leahey, 2011; Leahey, 2012; Sleeter & Cornbleth, 2011). Attending these counter-narratives offers both hope for reclaiming classrooms for authentic teaching and learning and exposes the contradictions of the prevailing standards-based system of reform.

Despite this research, the nation's fixation with implementing new forms of accountability will make the struggle to teach in creative, authentic ways difficult. What is particularly concerning is that many of those who choose to enter the public schools may not know any other option but to uncritically accept, internalize, and enforce the corporate model of education and the bureaucratic system that presently dominates school reform. This makes it critically important to continue conducting research investigating the impact standards-based educational reform, exposing the contradictions, and when possible, offering seeds of hope for better forms of teaching and learning.

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