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REVIEW OF *PERSPECTIVES ON THE MISTREATMENT OF AMERICAN EDUCATORS: THROWING WATER ON A DROWNING MAN*

by Norman Dale Norris  
Scarecrow Press, 2002

A November 16 article in the *Kansas City Star*, "Teachers Feeling 'Extra Pressure,'" details the initial response of local districts to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act. Common objections to the law—that it is under-funded, that it places too much emphasis on testing, and that already stressed teachers are being pushed to their limits—surface again in this report, which begins with a profile of a second grade teacher who "can imagine herself choosing not to be a teacher" (Robertson, B1).

2. Such recent, negative press unconsciously echoes *Perspectives on the Mistreatment of American Educators*, Norman Dale Norris' pre-NCLB indictment of school reform movements. Intriguingly subtitled *Throwing Water on a Drowning Man*, Norris' *Perspectives* describes casual public debate—"polite conversation" about the current state of our education system—that continues to belittle teaching as a non-profession and blame teachers for failing schools. Educators at all levels of public education, especially those directly affected by NCLB, could easily rally behind Norris' well-supported demands for reasonable working conditions, professional respect, and a reconsideration of the "testing mania . . . deeply entrenched in the American educational culture" (118). However, the divisive language Norris uses to empower certain members of the profession, as well as his counter attacks on a well-intentioned public that doesn't "have a clue" about what is happening in schools, occasionally undermine his noble intentions.

3. As a veteran of the classroom and an advocate of responsibly applying education research, Norris traces the ill-conceived development and implementation of school reform movements, and renders vividly their often-devastating impact upon educators. He concludes that uninformed individuals engaged in polite conversation often blame teachers for failed school reforms without realizing that such reforms are imposed upon teachers by education leaders who "allow . . . new information to go from theory to bandwagon" (111), without being adequately tested and proven. Such "reforms" result in untested programs and ever-growing attention to standardized test scores, which in turn create "unworkable situations and unenforceable rules" (109).

4. Norris notes that "those who create policy" frequently blur the line between "research-based" and truly researched theory, and rush to implement both tested and untested methods into school systems on a broad scale, often with disastrous consequences (68-69). Examining such temporarily popular theories as Multiple Intelligences and The Responsive Classroom—as well as "quick fixes" like the Madeline Hunter Elements of Instructional Design and the School Restructuring movement—he concludes that while the theories on which these movements were based are fundamentally sound, the researchers who constructed them never intended or endorsed such broad applications. Madeline Hunter, for example, "refuted numerous times that the model was intended to be used to design every lesson in every classroom across the country" (95).

5. Nevertheless, explains Norris, over the last twenty years teachers have endured an unbroken series of instruction and assessment programs that involve ludicrous amounts of preparation and paperwork. These methods are often explained by hurriedly trained facilitators who themselves have had exposure to only a small part of the theory. While far from the most odious "quick fix," the School Restructuring movement—intended to decentralize decision-making powers and increase professional autonomy (103)—was simply another instance of teachers being asked to handle their own full-time teaching responsibilities and then spend "inordinate amounts of after school and personal time involved with matters that further [complicate] the school day" (103).

6. Norris describes an excruciating Hunter-based teacher evaluation model that he and his colleagues experienced early in his teaching career. Their brief training consisted, in part, of "a very propagandized video." Individual teacher observations were then conducted by outside evaluators using an instrument consisting of "71 'indicators,'" and after follow-up conferences with administrative personnel, many teachers in the district found themselves teaching to the instrument and still being marked down for minor matters such as classroom seating and failure to "include 'closure'" in a lesson (96-97). After a number of heated confrontations between teachers and administrators, the program was virtually abandoned within two years. Norris traces the "[t]eachers' collective anger" to being "subjected to this brutal, demoralizing process for nothing. Nothing changed, nothing worked better" (101).

7. Norris frequently refers to such experiences, as well as to conversations he has endured throughout his twenty years in teaching with friends and fellow professionals in other fields. However, the true source of his ire finally surfaces in his seventh and final chapter, "Schools, Realities, and Teachers' Work," when he cites Martin Gross's *The Conspiracy of Ignorance* as "the book that caused me to say 'this is enough'" (140). Gross's broad attack on public education, which Norris asserts is "journalistic" and "skewed toward the sensational" (140), specifically targets teacher certification and competencies, questioning the validity of the Doctor of Education degree.

8. Norris doesn't reveal his hostility toward Gross until his final chapter, but the first—on "Perceptions of Teaching"—as well as other sections of the text are burdened with related appeals to professional dignity. Although he effectively counters misperceptions about an unnecessary teacher certification process, empty education coursework, and the low academic standings of education majors, two sections deal exclusively with the "folk myths" regarding the Ed.D.—what others (read Gross) call the "false" doctorate (8). Defending the education doctorate as a worthy terminal degree that provides both knowledge and practical testing of theory in the field, Norris conversely implies that Ph.D.s are dusty theorists locked in the tower. "Generating more data," he argues, "does not solve problems; working in the field solves problems" (7). Subsequently countering the argument that colleges of education are "less scholarly," Norris emphasizes that

beginning professor[s] of education typically [have] a work background that is practical, not theoretical. . . Their experience with their academic discipline has been years of . . . "working in the trenches". . . . Since we know that new education professors are generally older than

their beginning counterparts, it would make sense they are far more likely to have home, family, and other adult responsibilities that a younger person might not. (16, 17)

Norris surely intends this as a down-to-earth comparison written in the same folksy, common sense spirit as the rest of his book, yet it comes across as somewhat insulting to the "fellow professionals" he often invokes.

9. Equally distracting is Norris' frequent assertion that the general public "doesn't have a clue" or "is clueless" about the problems in and day-to-day management of a classroom. Not only is this colloquialism overused and overstated—becoming insulting to readers equally sympathetic to teachers who are merely "doing what they're told to do" by administrators—it also undermines Norris' obvious expertise in the history of education and educational reform, his extensive familiarity with the fundamentals of research theory, and his own knowledge and experience of the real problems encountered by classroom teachers.

10. Norris ultimately concludes that "[i]t should be an embarrassment to American society that many individuals who have made teaching their career want their own children to consider other career options" (164). In short, all public school teachers are drowning and, based on more recent evidence, many are still choosing to leave the field or forego this career altogether before the water gets any deeper. More often in my own classes, I encounter education majors who face the prospect of a teaching career with trepidation. They understand that the future of teaching most likely involves the long-standing problems of low pay, long hours, and under-prepared students, as well as increasing pressure for districts to perform to imposed standards. Norris' most convincing treatment of these issues comes in his seventh and final chapter when he chooses to reflect on his own years in the classroom. His experience in impoverished districts vividly illustrates that teachers in these settings must cope with student behavior problems, ill-informed parents, and a lack of resources. His years in more affluent schools reveal that all teachers are subject to "created problems" such as ridiculously redundant paperwork and extensive "staff development" requirements (158-160). Although Norris asserts that "[t]he political and media rhetoric often bypass and minimize the crucial teacher shortage this country is battling" (160), perhaps more recent press about public schools and the impact of NCLB marks a shift in "polite conversation" toward recognizing the burdens placed upon public school teachers.

### **Work Cited**

Robertson, Joe. "Teachers Feeling 'Extra Pressure'." *The Kansas City Star* 16 Nov. 2003: B1.