

# Modernism in School Reform: Promoting Private over Public Good

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## Abstract

*School reform in the past several decades has taken a “modernist” bent in that it has focused on quantitatively based accountability systems modeled after business (Ravitch, 2013; Tienken & Orlich, 2013). The author uses a model devised by a Finnish scholar to demonstrate that 1) these reforms are indeed modernist, and 2) the private good is being promoted over the public good, and 3) that privatization and standardized tests are the primary tactics used to force schools to comply with this vision for schooling.*

Ever since *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, school reform has depended on a narrow interpretation of accountability; an interpretation that consists of 1) privatization in terms of school choice, vouchers, and of services - which used to be done by school employees - and 2) test scores (Ravitch, 2013; Tienken & Orlich, 2013; Wolk, 2011). Race to the Top and Common Core were preceded by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) as the *de facto* overarching P-12 schooling policies. Although Race to the Top and Common Core are policies enacted by a Democrat president and NCLB by a Republican, they both represent a worldview that believes that reality is based on what can be quantified (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2014; Tienken & Orlich, 2013; Wolk, 2011). This directly conflicts with reality, according to those who hold a diametrically opposite view: Post Modernism (Boboc & Nordgren, in press; Slattery, 2006). The Bush-Obama reform policies (as well as Clinton, Bush I, and Reagan) can be categorized as Modernist in that they depend on measuring that which can be relatively easily measured and relying on extrinsic motivators to get schools, districts, and states to comply with their view of schooling (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2014; Wagner, 2015; Zhao, 2014).

This article examines how privatization of schooling is used as a favored mechanism to control the direction of schools, a mechanism that is essential to “Education Modernists” who have come to dominate both sides of the political aisle. By presenting a Post Modernist alternative, it also briefly demonstrates how this pattern can be broken and meet the needs of the Post-Industrial, Post-Knowledge Age world (see Zakaria, 2015).

### **Modernism and “Global Education Reform Movement”**

Pasi Sahlberg (2011) coined the phrase “Global Education Reform Movement” (GERM) to describe the U.S.-led school reform philosophy that now encapsulates most of the developed world (2011). GERM is essentially the antithesis of how the Finns conduct schooling (Sahlberg is Finnish); a way that may be the prime reason for their successes on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) exam (Schwartz & Mehta, 2011). The Finns eschew a test-centered accountability system where business models are held up as exemplars, models based on extrinsic motivation (see Pink, 2009).<sup>2</sup>

GERM correlates to Modernism through its dependency on measurement and extrinsic rewards based on competition. The “Finnish Way,” on the other hand, coincides with Post Modernism in that it is highly individualistic in delivery (yet, dependent on cooperation rather than competition) and is highly contextual, and it does not rely on “elixirs” too often prescribed by so-called research-sourced tactics (Ravitch, 2010; 2011; Tienken & Orlich, 2013; Wolk, 2011). The Finns are an individualistic society as are the nations using the Modern model of school reform; however, the Finns and other Scandinavian societies embrace a “horizontal individualism” rather than a “vertical individualism” (Triandis, 1995). The former tends to favor flat, democratic, egalitarian organizations and economic systems that have a relatively short range of incomes and wealth (Triandis, 1995; see also, Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012; Pickett &

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix, at the end of this paper. It depicts the essential differences between GERM and the Finnish System; these are translated by Boboc and Nordgren (in press) as Modern and Post Modern school reform movements.

Wilkenson, 2011). In contrast, the latter refers to societies that have great discrepancies between rich and poor and employ systems that exacerbate these, especially those that depend on competition as the primary motivators (Pickett & Wilkenson, 2011; Picketty, 2013). Privatization of schooling and the use of tests are the two primary levers employed in societies following Modern tactics in education reform (Boboc & Nordgren, in press; see also Berliner & Glass, 2014; Henig, 2012; Zhao, 2014).

### **The Finnish Way**

Boboc and Nordgren (2014; in press) use the Finnish model as an exemplar of a Post Modernist education system based on their school reform principles (found in the Post Modern column in the Appendix) and the fact that they are highly regarded in the global education community (Ravitch, 2013). The Finns gained notoriety after the results of the 2001 PISA and subsequent administrations showed them to have one of the top education systems in the world—at least as measured by PISA<sup>3</sup> (Sahlberg, 2011). However, the Finns do not focus on such tests and, instead, press for systems-wide changes that are more qualitative than quantitative (Ravitch, 2013). Instead of dependence on standardized tests, Finnish teachers are encouraged to create their own assessments, thereby, contextualizing evaluation of student performance (Sahlberg, 2011; Schwartz & Mehta, 2011). Teachers in Finland are valued both in esteem and in financial rewards as are physicians and attorneys (Schwartz & Mehta, 2011); and with this comes a great amount of autonomy *and* responsibility. Policy makers leave educating to teachers and their principals; not interfering with the learning process and management of the schools (Ravitch 2013; Sahlberg, 2013). Universities only accept one-third of teacher education applicants and all teachers are expected to hold a master's degree (Sahlberg, 2013; Schwartz & Mehta, 2011) adding to the prestige of the profession. This focus both on autonomy and contextualization of the schooling process make the Finnish system a valid match to the tenets of Post Modernism in education which features customizing teaching and learning according to individual

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<sup>3</sup> The most recent PISA results in 2013 found the Finns to have declined, slightly. According to Sahlberg (Center on International Education Benchmarking, 2014) is a lapse in leadership, a laxness that can come with knowing you are the best.

needs and the context in which teaching and learning take place (Boboc & Nordgren, 2014).

### **Privatization versus the Public Good**

The Finns use a system that supports the “public good”; that is, a belief that a collective effort will “lift all boats.” whereas GERM, or Modernist approaches, support *laissez faire* capitalism which relies on competition (Sahlberg, 2011; Schwartz & Mehta, 2011). This free enterprise-type capitalism pits one school against another competing for scarce resources (Tienken & Orlich, 2013). It also introduces “choice” as a way to increase competition and, finally, it uses privatization as “proof” that government sponsored public good enterprises are inferior to those in the private sector (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2014; Ravitch, 2010; 2013). In short, this form of capitalism would have the private good to increase, while the public good to diminish to the point where it simply acts to protect the private goods of citizens (through the police force?) and of corporations (through the military?) (Reich, 2002; Weiss, 2012).

Privatization of the public good includes all social services – observe, for instance, the rapidly increased push of for-profit and of non-profit healthcare agencies, supported by public funds (Pickett & Wilkensen, 2011). In contrast, Nordic nations such as Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, overwhelmingly rely on government entities to provide these services; services such as healthcare and schooling. For instance, these three nations not only provide free university tuition, but actually provide a living stipend for students (Sahlberg, 2011). Although charter school privatization became a short-lived trend in Sweden after a Center-Right political takeover in 2005, the trend was quickly reversed as public backlash forced the returning Social Democrats to increase government’s commitment to public schools (see Pollard, 2013).

Schooling, of course, is a huge expenditure for governments, especially for State governments (remember: states are compelled to support public education whereas the federal government is not). Essentially, 92% of a school’s funds come from a combination of state and local taxation (US Department of Education, n.d.). States that adopt privatization schemes allow public money to go to for-profit and non-profit – even some religious – organizations,

allegedly as a way to incite the public schools to increase quality of service (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2014; Tienken & Orlich, 2013). However, a closer examination of this seemingly Modern agenda may uncover a more nefarious reason behind privatization: the destruction of the public good (Giroux, 2014; Picketty, 2012). A “starve the beast” (a phrase coined by Republicans in the 1980’s) mentality among some Modernists would have the public schools, devoid of appropriate resources, forced to fail and then close; thus, opening up more opportunities for private entities to flourish (Giroux, 2014).

In the end, education, as public good, may be reduced to warehousing those children and youth who the privatized schools spurn (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2014; Ravitch, 2013). Moreover, it also does: 1) open up the \$621billion<sup>4</sup> in education expenditures to profit-seekers, 2) break teachers unions which are interestingly Modern entities, but find themselves in direct opposition to privatization schemes, and 3) “prove” that nothing should be left to the public good, because, after all, it is the private good that matters (Tienken & Orlich, 2013). This situation clearly reflects and appears connected to the philosophy of Objectivism first developed by the novelist and political activist Ayn Rand who advocated selfishness over selflessness (see Rand & Branden, 1961) and who remains a guru to many on the political right (Weiss, 2012).

## **A Clash of Worldviews**

Those on the political left have historically supported labor, schools, and other entities of the public good (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2013) yet since Clinton’s “Third Way” the Democratic Party’s policies toward school reform have been Modernist (Boboc & Nordgren, in press; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2013); and these policies may threaten the public good (see Giroux, 2014).

An examination of Systems Theory will help the reader better understand Post Modernism and why Modernism is so powerful in school reform today. Quantum physics explains how our physical universe is more than what we can see and measure (Wheatley, 2006). Interactions, according to the study of quantum physics, cause unpredictable results that cannot be explained in a Modernist

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<sup>4</sup> 2011-2012 figures by National Center for Education Statistics (<http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=66>)

worldview (Dumm, 1988; Slattery, 2006). Essentially, everything is connected and any movement made will cause a series of events that go beyond a sequential, sensory explanation --beyond what Modernism can explain. Post Modernism allows for such unpredictability by examining everything in context, accepting the extraneous variables that confound the binary tendencies of Modernist thought as described by Foucault and Habermas (Boboc & Nordgren, in press; Dumm, 1988; Slattery, 2006).

An “educational Post Modernist” views the student within the student’s unique context, seeing her as an individual who is constantly impacted by her environment (Boboc & Nordgren, in press; Slattery, 2006). And who can be entirely different from one day to the next, if not one moment to the next. This opposes the “value-added,” Modernist notion supported by NCLB that one year of education should be applied to each child each year—as if the child were a widget and the school were a factory and teachers were assembly workers adding parts to the chassis as it passed along the line (Tienken & Orlich, 2013; Zhao, 2009, 2012, 2014). This Modernist view of education reform is also supported by the dual Race to the Top/Common Core initiative that relies on two components 1) testing to give fodder for measurement, and 2) competition for resources based on the results of testing (Boboc & Nordgren, in press; Tienken & Orlich, 2013; Ravitch, 2010; 2013).

Since *A Nation at Risk*, it has become politically detrimental for anyone in Washington or in statehouses to lay blame on any perceived problems in education on societal factors (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2013). Therefore, all blame must fall onto the shoulders of schools (Ravitch, 2010; 2013; Tienken & Orlich, 2013). Choice schemes arising from *A Nation at Risk* were to ostensibly improve quality of schools through competition that would crush the “rising tide of mediocrity” that threatened to destroy the Republic as the report’s lead author Terrence Bell put it (US Department of Education, 1983). Privatization of schools and school services was to allow for competition to make schooling more efficient, deflating bloated bureaucracies by inserting free-market strategies (Giroux, 2014; Ravitch, 2010; 2013). Clinton’s Third Way was intended to be a “compassionate conservative” approach toward government, one the 42<sup>nd</sup> president made famous in parallel with former British Prime Minister Tony Blair (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012). In simplistic

terms, the political Right wanted an end to government, and the Left, more government. Clinton's (and Blair's) answer was to instill capitalist practices to improve government, a type of compromise between the two extremes (Weiss, 2012). Clinton strongly advocated early charter schools and they began to proliferate in his second administration; in reality, Clinton did more to promote Modernist school reform than his predecessors Reagan and Bush (Boboc & Nordgren, in press; Giroux, 2014).

The initial bi-partisan support of NCLB (Democratic Senator Ted Kennedy was one of the initial advocates) continued the Third Way approach, dependent on business practices, including extreme quantification of results, as the main functional mechanism (Ravitch, 2010). This continued with Race to the Top/Common Core and, today, faces very little political opposition<sup>5</sup>. As of 2015, the predominant U.S. schooling policies are Modernist and, as long as the U.S. continues to favor laissez faire capitalism, this will not change (Giroux, 2014).

### **Conclusion**

The predominant school reforms advocated by policy makers in the U.S. and other GERM nations, are really only "more of the same." They offer nothing new in terms of effective models of schooling, ones that would truly enable graduates to be prepared for the global society and economy (Nordgren, 2003; Sahlberg, 2011; Zhao, 2009; 2012; 2014). These nations seem to be stuck in a Modernist mindset, one that is conducive to the Industrial Age more than the Post-Fordist or Post-Knowledge Ages (Zakaria, 2015). If these nations and societies are to fulfill their moral obligations to their citizenry, then they must employ new Post Modern reforms such as those used in Finland and in much of Scandinavia (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Sahlberg, 2011; see also Nordgren, 2003).

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<sup>5</sup> Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders appears to be an exception supporting Post Modernist education reform (Sanders, 2011).

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**Appendix**  
**Modern/Post-Modern Teacher Education Contrasts**

<b>Modern advocates in theory and/or practice:</b>	<b>Post-Modern advocates in theory and/or practice:</b>
<p><b>1. Standardizing teaching and learning</b></p> <p>a. Setting clear, high, and centrally prescribed performance expectations for all schools, teachers, and students to improve the quality and equity of outcomes.</p> <p>b. Standardizing teaching and curriculum in order to have coherence and common criteria for measurement and data.</p>	<p><b>1. Customizing teaching and learning</b></p> <p>a. Setting a clear but flexible national framework for school-based curriculum planning.</p> <p>b. Encouraging local and individual solutions to national goals in order to find best ways to create optimal learning and teaching opportunities for all.</p> <p>c. Offering personal learning plans for those who have special educational needs</p>
<p><b>2. Focus on literacy and numeracy</b></p> <p>a. Basic knowledge and skills in reading, writing, mathematics, and the natural sciences serve as prime targets of education reform. Normally instruction time of these subjects is increased.</p>	<p><b>2. Focus on creative learning</b></p> <p>a. Teaching and learning focus on deep, broad learning, giving equal value to all aspects of the growth of an individual's personality, moral character, creativity, knowledge, and skills.</p>
<p><b>3. Teaching prescribed curriculum</b></p>	<p><b>3. Encouraging risk-taking</b></p> <p>a. School-based and</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Reaching higher standards as a criterion for success and good performances.</li> <li>b. Outcomes of teaching are predictable and prescribed in a common way.</li> <li>c. Results are often judged by standardized tests and externally administered tests.</li> </ul>	<p>teacher-owned curricula facilitate finding novel approaches to teaching and learning, and encourage risk-taking and uncertainty in leadership, teaching, and learning.</p>
<p><b>4. Borrowing market-oriented reform ideas</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Sources of educational change are management administration models brought to schools from the corporate world through legislation or national programs.</li> <li>b. Such borrowing leads to aligning schools and local education systems to operational logic of private corporations.</li> </ul>	<p><b>4. Learning from the past and owning innovations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Teaching honors traditional pedagogical values, such as teacher’s professional role and relationship with students.</li> <li>b. Main sources of school improvement are proven good educational practices from the past.</li> </ul>
<p><b>5. Test-based accountability and control</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. School performance and raising student achievement are closely tied to processes of promotion, inspection, and ultimately rewarding schools and teachers.</li> </ul>	<p><b>5. Shared responsibility and trust</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Gradually building a culture of responsibility and trust within the education system that values teacher and principal professionalism in judging what is best for students.</li> </ul>

<p>b. Winners normally gain fiscal rewards, whereas struggling schools and individuals are punished. Punishment often includes loose employment terms and merit-based pay for teachers.</p>	<p>b. Targeting resources and support to schools and student who are at risk to fail or to be left behind.</p> <p>c. Sample-based student assessments.</p>
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