

Unpacking the Meaning of School Reform

A Social Foundations Perspective

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Introduction

There are many voices that speak about what ought to happen in education—but some voices speak louder than others largely because education is an initiative of the state and increasingly of the federal government. Since the common schools are “public” perhaps the loudest voices are those of politicians and policymakers, while the voices of those who must make the schools work are often excluded from policy deliberations. Clearly policymakers can be swayed, as they were by the economic slump of the early 1980s when, I would argue, business leaders were willing to blame education for their failure to sustain economic growth (Philipsen & Noblit, 1993). Education has continued to be the whipping boy for the economy ever since. Once business saw that it was able to influence public education policy and transfer responsibility for economic problems to education, it developed a full fledged assault on education. It has promoted many ideas such as vouchers which were to create a market model of education. While vouchers demonstrated that the public were not ready to give up on education as a social good, and led to the famous compromise we call charter schools, business and the federal government were successful in arguing that schools were failing. This in turn led to what we came to call the school reform era and its culmination in accountability policy (Noblit et al., 2001). It was through school reform that the federal government altered its role in education from that of supporting efforts to make schooling more equitable (as with school desegregation and compensatory programs) to actively countering these efforts by claiming they led directly to increased mediocrity in education (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). This challenge to equity was claimed to be about excellence but this is a misnomer. Rather the school reform era could be better understood as an effort to more tightly link schools to both economic interests

and to federal policy (Miron, 1996; Murphy, 1999). Any efforts at excellence have been short lived, in part because those calling for reform were also calling for cutting the costs of public education. Over time, the evidence seemed clear: school reform was both costly and complex. As a result, reform devolved into accountability policy. Accountability policy has had dramatic influences on schools, but as I read it, is ultimately a recognition that school change and improvement is too complex for governmental policy. Accountability policy, then, is a policy wrought in failure. The failure of school reform frustrated business and federal policymakers and has led them into a raw exercise of power. If they could not change schools, then schools would simply be forced to comply. No Child Left Behind is not about improving education but about forcing schools to focus on test scores, and we are now seeing the consequences of such simple-minded efforts: teacher turnover, increased dropout rates, and a persistent black-white achievement gap that some argue schools can do little about (Barton, 2003). In NCLB, the persistence of gaps in achievement is used as evidence that the public schools have failed. The goal of this effort is to open education as a market for the private sector (Murphy, 1999), reducing education for citizenship to education for consumerism.

This commentary is the result of the work that a number of scholars in the field of social foundations have been doing over the past 25 years. The school reform era not only affected schools, it affected what was to be studied by academics. Research and evaluation funding were channeled to support the reform efforts. Many of us had been studying efforts to make schools more equitable and more responsive to the diverse communities schools serve, but as policy changed so did research funding. This is a sad statement about academics, of course. We do follow the money—but some do more than others. My argument in this chapter is that there was, and is, a difference in

perspectives on school reform that is worth understanding. For argument's sake, I will focus on two perspectives. One I will simply call the school reform perspective. The other I will call the social foundations perspective. My argument is that these perspectives are substantively different, and that examining these perspectives will help define what is distinct and significant about the work we do in social foundations.

The Foundations and School Reform Perspectives

This chapter is written largely from my own experience, not because my experience is somehow distinctive, but rather because it is not. I take my research and evaluation efforts over the past 25 years to be a path many of us in social foundations took. In part (and worryingly), this path was prompted by the shift in funding to school reform, and those of us who admittedly followed this funding shift want to believe this was justified by our need to support graduate students and to allow them to have extensive research experiences. It also is part of the larger funding problems in higher education where faculty members are increasingly pressed to bring in funds to support their work and the wider university (in the form of indirect costs). This "following the money" is problematic in many ways, including that it means that the academy is less generating new knowledge or transforming the knowledge base and more selling its skills. I admit that I have been and am complicit in this. For my part, I hope I have kept a small degree of integrity by studying reforms that have histories that came from other places than the federal logic. This is true of both Comer schools and A+ schools. I can also say that my funded research is not the only work I have been doing, but I would not argue that these negate this critique.

For another part, taking the path of studying school reform was prompted by a concern that if foundations scholars did not do this work then others would. These "others" are not to be demonized but to be understood as researchers who would not see the issues raised in the paragraph above. These researchers would see it as fully appropriate to shape their efforts to fit government priorities. This is part of the school reform perspective I will elaborate below. Social foundations scholars who moved into school reform work were concerned that if we did not, then what was learned about schools and change would be limited to instrumental knowledge (Horkheimer, 1996). In instrumental knowledge, what is studied is relative effectiveness of the means to achieve goals, and not the goals themselves. We were, and are, concerned that without also considering the intents and goals of reform, research could not address if these were good ideas to pursue. Being rather democratic, we inquire about what other stakeholders see as

important in reform, regardless of the desires of policymakers. This does mean that the social foundations perspective takes on more than is politically welcome and thus we ran the risk of being dismissed as not credible because we did not do only what we were funded to do. Social foundations scholars also worry about instrumental knowledge being so narrowly defined that unintended and/or unanticipated effects or consequences (Giddens, 1979) are not discerned. Our perspective is broad in this sense—looking at wider contexts of the school and the reform efforts, and learning how contexts and reform efforts interact to produce what was intended (or not) and what resulted regardless of intentions. The social foundations perspective also takes a historical view of reform. In this, the argument is that schools were created as mass institutions and their essential form was decided at their origins (Katz, 1975). These origins were also characterized by efforts to assimilate immigrants, and thus from the beginning schools were what we now call "subtractive" (Valenzuela, 1999). For those not Anglo, middle class, and Protestant, students must leave their home cultures (and thus their families and identities) behind in order to succeed. History also teaches us that secondary schools were consciously planned to mirror the economy (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). The factory model had students as the raw materials that were processed by teachers with the curricula in classrooms. Each teacher was a station on the assembly line and at the end of the assembly line of courses the graduate emerged as the product of school factory.

For a third part, our willingness to follow the path (and money) of school reform was about enabling critique. Of course, policymakers are not all that welcoming of critique. They think academics should follow their lead, and "get with the program." Yet the social foundations perspective asks: who is to hold the government accountable? Clearly, the media has some role in this but in recent years the idea of the media being a "third estate" seems to have devolved into partisan politics. Social foundations scholars see their role to be one that asks the hard questions about what education is to accomplish. During the school desegregation era, we critiqued the lackluster efforts at promoting equity and during the reform era we have critiqued reform as not understanding the larger value conflicts over education and their effects, as well as the misunderstanding of how schools change (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). We also critique ourselves as a way to limit righteousness and to also indicate to all that we subject ourselves to what we do to others.

In sum, then, the social foundations perspective examines school reform in terms of the various ways it is valued by different groups, what the requirements beyond mere compliance to requirements are, and how reform effort, how context and history affect

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possible, and the conditions under which these possibilities can be expanded. The social foundations perspective hopes it can inform schools and educators, but the perspective also takes seriously the need to engage other ideas critically. In the end, then, this chapter is in essence a critique of the school reform perspective based on an examination of a reform initiative that violates many of the presumptions of the school reform perspective—an arts-based school reform called the A+ Schools Program.

The school reform perspective can be seen in Porter (1994). The school reform perspective is a theory about how to change schools. The general argument is that reforms vary by their specificity, consistency, authority, power, and stability. Specificity refers to detail and extensiveness that characterizes a reform. Consistency refers to how well the various aspects of the reform are coherent and reinforce one another. Authority is increased when the reform has the power of law, is consistent with expert knowledge, existing beliefs, and norms, and is promoted by charismatic leaders. Power refers to rewards and sanctions associated with the reform. Stability refers to consistency over time in people, circumstances, and policies. In the school reform perspective, the higher the level of each of the five components the higher the probability that reform will be successfully implemented. Thus better reforms are those with: (a) great specificity as to what is to happen; (b) high levels of internal consistency in the details of the reform; (c) the full authority of law, knowledge and conventional wisdom; (d) the considerable power to establish incentives for the reform and disincentives associated with not reforming; and (e) stability sufficient to maintain the reform as it was intended.

I also want to be clear that there are both strong and weak versions of the school reform perspective. The strong version accepts the terms of what Miron (1996) calls the "entrepreneurial coalition," that there is a crisis and that this justifies extreme actions. In this the interests of local school boards, educators and parents must be put aside. Indeed, teachers are often seen as the perpetrators of the crisis. The strong version seeks compliance with school reforms that are believed to be effective in raising test scores. This is the bottom line and it cannot be challenged.

The weak version recognizes that schools are complex organizations and that we actually do not know how to improve them. This version is focused on learning what works as we try to reform schools. Indeed, the weak argument acknowledges that school context is important and because of this schools need to consider a range of reforms to find the one that will work best for them. The weak version of the school reform perspective is closer to the social foundations perspective but still accepts the argument that schools are failing, that change is necessary and, most importantly,

that we should be moving towards the knowledge necessary for the strong version to be possible.

As the school reform era developed, what I have termed the strong and weak versions worked in collaboration. The weak version taught the strong version that more knowledge was needed in order to change schools in the ways reformers wished. School reform changed its emphasis repeatedly in what became called *waves of reform* (Desimone, 2002). The first wave focused on increasing standards and regulations, while the second wave was more about, among other things, affecting the relationships of schools with families, aligning teacher education with standards and changing teacher roles to be more professional. The first two waves did not result in much change and as a result a more comprehensive effort to reform whole schools was seen as the third wave. Yet it is clear that school reform never got beyond implementation concerns. That is to say, while reformers knew that reform had to be put into place and then institutionalized, the challenge was to get reform put into place with fidelity. Our own research on Comer schools revealed that schools are not stagnant entities but rather constantly changing in terms of people, state and local initiatives, and students. Change was ubiquitous and this made planned change essentially temporary. Once put into place, a reform had to continually be re-implemented because of changes in personnel and competing initiatives. The weak version kept explaining to the strong version proponents (that were promoting extreme measures justified by the crisis) why schools were not able to change in extreme ways. But for strong version proponents, the explanation was met with exasperation—patience wears thin when one believes there is a crisis that must be resolved.

The school reform perspective in the end failed to produce the changes the entrepreneurial coalition wished. There were several ways to think about this failure. It taught that school reform was hard to accomplish and that the reasons for this were many and complicated. The interpretation of these lessons, however, was key. These lessons could have led to the conclusion that reform needs to be a long-term agenda, and one which would require considerable resources. However, one of the founding cries of the entrepreneurial coalition was that money was not the solution, and that more importantly taxes were already too high. Since this founding cry could not be revisited politically, another interpretation was offered, and that was that schools simply should be forced to change. Using test scores as the bottom line, accountability policy announced that the state and federal governments no longer cared how achievement was raised. Schools must raise test scores or be taken over, educators fired and students allowed to transfer; an interesting invocation of vouchers.

The school reform perspective, of course, has lingered on, now largely because raising test scores takes

considerable effort. Schools are using reform models to try to accomplish this goal, but it seems clear that states have given up on reform. They now tell schools to implement programs on test taking and to align instruction with testing. The curriculum has narrowed considerably as a result, and when schools are low-performing on tests then even instruction becomes scripted to that tested (Noblit et al., 2009). School reform researchers are now largely out of business, replaced by testing and measurement strategies that in end are about controlling and limiting what goes on in schools.

The school reform perspective even in its end game has much to teach us. It could teach us that the era was misguided or that schools are caught in a web of the value conflicts in the wider society (Meyer & Rowan, 1978) and thus are more cultural artifacts than mechanisms for economic development. It could have taught us that educational institutions are unique and the school reform emphasis on fidelity in the five components simply does not work, and so on. For the purposes of this chapter, though, it will serve to teach us what a social foundations perspective about reform is and how it would understand reform differently from the school reform perspective. In the above, I have explained the elements of the perspective but what is needed is to ground the abstract language in concrete reform efforts. I will do this by exploring a particular reform we have studied for the past 10 years: the A+ Schools Program. We were the evaluation team for the pilot of the program in 24 schools for over 5 years. Subsequently, we were funded by the Ford Foundation for two more years to study the remarkable sustainability of the program. My effort here has to be limited to illuminating what we learned rather than fully arguing what the social foundations perspective has to offer.

The A+ Schools Program

The A+ Schools Program is an arts-based effort to change and improve schools that began in 1995 after an extended planning period involving a wide range of stakeholders. The program was sponsored by the Kenan Institute for the Arts, which funded the program in part and arranged for A+ to have support and funding from a wide range of stakeholders, including the state of North Carolina. It began with a 4-year pilot program in 24 elementary, middle and high schools in North Carolina. As Awsumb (2001) wrote: "The A+ Schools Program is a comprehensive school reform that views the arts as fundamental to how teachers teach and how students learn" (p. 4). Awsumb goes on to characterize the reform as having both instructional strategies and organizational strategies. The instructional strategies included increasing arts instruction by increasing the number of arts taught

(visual arts, music, dance, and drama), the professional development of teachers to use the arts in instruction of core subjects, collaborative planning of arts-integrated units, and using arts specialists as regular members of the teaching teams and as coaches for the teachers of other subjects. A+ emphasized two-way arts integration (core content integrated into the arts and the arts integrated into the core subjects) and thus the arts became more central to instruction. Howard Gardner's (1999) idea of multiple intelligences was used to encourage a variety of instructional approaches, embracing a range of ways of learning and being assessed. This was also connected to an emphasis on hands-on learning. As part of the curriculum, teachers designed thematic units that addressed required curricular content while integrating the arts.

Awsumb (2001) also explains that A+ used two primary organizational strategies to promote the needed changes: increasing professional development and strengthening school partnerships. The former involved annual summer conferences as well as school-level professional development tailored to how the school had adapted A+ to their needs. A+, unlike other reforms which demand high degrees of fidelity, actively encouraged adaptation to the local school context. Partnerships with parents, business, community organizations, and arts agencies brought new resources into the schools and pushed the schools out into the wider community. A+ is a reform that also invests heavily in networks at various levels. These were among the schools as well as between the wider reform effort and political and philanthropic institutions. The Kenan Institute was instrumental in creating and maintaining these networks.

The A+ Schools Program also is an unusual arts education program. Roughly speaking, before A+, arts education programs were either regarded as having to make a choice between an "arts for arts' sake" approach or an "arts as instrumental" to some other end. A+ decided that this was a false dichotomy and embraced both.

Gerstl-Pepin (2001) has written a history of the program that details the many trials that the A+ program overcame, but the principal trial was that, due to a political shift of the legislature in North Carolina, accountability policy began the same year as A+. This was, and is, a continuing concern of the participating schools, but notably A+ decided that it could adapt to accountability and continue to offer an elaborated curriculum. They developed a comprehensive "enriched assessment" which linked instruction to what the schools were doing inside the classroom and instruction.

A+ has continued to develop and refine the program. Years since the pilot, A+ has expanded to include most notably Oklahoma and Arizona, and now includes schools in North Carolina to the north.

schools. The original districts signed a contract with the Kenan Institute that promised that districts would increasingly assume funding necessary for the program, but this did not occur. A+ schools have had to develop new funding streams for their programs and have had to make decisions about how to cover a range of arts in rather creative ways. The Kenan Institute also changed its commitment to A+ and in the end A+ was "spun off" to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro with transitional funding. A+ is in the process of becoming a self-supporting reform initiative. The A+ schools see the uncertainty of this but have also weathered many storms and much uncertainty in the past. Their participation in the planning and in the Network helped them understand the challenges ahead and to become active partners in planning. No doubt A+ will change as a reform program and in each of the schools, but this is its history as much as its future. Indeed, our research funded by the Ford Foundation was to explain why A+ was sustained when so many other reforms fell by the wayside after a few short years.

There is not space here to more fully explore the A+ School Program. For those interested in the technical results of the program, Awsumb (2001) reports that the results of the pilot evaluation were highly positive. There were clear differences in what the schools did and how the arts were used but our read was that the program was remarkably effective in promoting change and capacity to change. The A+ schools were successful with the state's accountability system and in many other ways. This is of course important to the school reform perspective, but my intent here is to show what a social foundations perspective on school reform would distinctively emphasize. In the above, the social foundations focus on the context and history is illustrated. As part of this, the intersection of A+ and accountability policy is key. A+ had to adapt to this agenda, but did so on its own terms. A social foundations perspective would also inquire as to how a reform is valued by different groups. To illustrate this, I will focus primarily on the data from our sustainability study funded by the Ford Foundation. These data are sufficient to outline the distinctiveness of a social foundations perspective in its focus on what is valued in the schools regardless of the state's valuing of test results. I will examine here what teachers, administrators and to a lesser extent A+ program staff had to say about the effects of the arts and the A+ Schools Program. My purpose is to show how school reform can be valued differently by those who work most closely with children.

The Difference the Arts Make in Schools

Where school reformers would focus on the effects of the arts on test scores either in the arts or in other

subjects, social foundations scholars are more interested in the meaning of the reform as enacted in the schools. Here we will use the example of the differences the arts make for schools in the A+ Program. Those closest to the A+ Program (teachers and administrators) reported four themes to explain why A+ was sustainable as a reform when so many reforms wane after 3 years or so:

- The arts make learning fun.
- The arts reach more students because success is defined in different ways.
- The arts make learning more meaningful by adding important connections.
- The arts tap a core need for identity, creativity, and growth.

To illustrate these themes I will use reflections from data collected in the fall of 2003 from the A+ school principals and coordinators. (The coordinators are teachers in the A+ schools who are willing to spend the time in their buildings to coordinate curriculum professional development, materials dissemination, and teaming schedules.)

Learning as Fun The school reform era has included a strong push at the state level for standards and frameworks. These more carefully define the important attributes of what children need to know and be able to do, often constraining what happens in the classroom. With the federal No Child Left Behind legislation, the stakes on the accountability front have increased dramatically. This means that most classrooms have become much more task oriented. That often translates into a situation where the word "fun" is often stripped from the classroom vocabulary. To be sure, all the A+ schools have felt the same standards and accountability pressures, but with a strong arts focus there is still ample room for fun. As one coordinator explained:

When asked "What did you learn in school today?" The response is no longer "Nothing." The children *talk* about what they learn. Actually the children think they just had "fun" and learning was incidental.

A principal elaborates:

It's always a positive and joyous learning environment—centered on the success [of the students]. The parents and the community get tired of dealing with bad grades, low test scores, or the need to "push" students. [Students] soak up these opportunities to shine, to learn, and celebrate learning.

This is confirmed by another coordinator:

It gives a wonderful feeling as soon as you walk in the front door. The children are happy, teachers are happy—there is something for all children to feel good about.

This latter comment makes an important point about the increased fun quotient in the A+ schools—everyone noted that it is not just the students that are having more fun, but also the teachers.

Teachers can bring their personal artistic talents into their instruction. Teaching becomes more *fun*!

(principal)

The arts make learning *fun*. They help us as teachers have *fun* as well and we are able as teachers to *love* what we *do*.

(coordinator)

It is exciting, teaching is never boring—always able to update and modify what and how you are teaching.

(principal)

An added bonus, beyond just the students and teachers, was also the fact that parents were also able to see the excitement in their children. This was repeatedly emphasized:

Parents like happy kids; A+ is a happy way of doing education; it is for life not just for a test.

(coordinator)

Parents see their children “eagerly” wanting to come to school.

(principal)

They see their kids beaming with excitement about ... all things ... when kids love school and talk about learning with excitement, then the parents and community *take notice*!

(coordinator)

Reaching More Students One of the most vexing problems for school reform has been finding ways to ensure the success of students who traditionally have not fared well in the past. The achievement gap itself has encouraged reformers to increasingly script instruction so that the focus on discrete skills is critiqued in the following. Nearly everyone we talked to made the point that the arts, and its focus on tapping a range of different intelligences, are a key tool in this battle to find ways to make all students successful. They argued, very convincingly, that the arts give students a different way to show themselves, their peers, their teachers, and their parents that they understand important concepts and content that often eluded them in the more traditional learning environments. As staff from the Kenan Institute explained:

Multiple intelligences create a richness of entry points. There are many ways move [sic] on this [subject matter] and teachers are becoming more fluent in the recognitions of the assets of different children.

Teachers and principals saw it in practice:

The arts provide avenues of learning that are not available in “traditional” classrooms which allow students to find a successful/familiar way to transfer knowledge.

(coordinator)

All students are able to become involved. It is a natural way to learn. And authentic!

(principal)

Students have the chance to experience knowledge and success in many different ways.

(coordinator)

One administrator, in a play on words from the new federal legislation, shared how the arts provided a way for all students to learn: “The ‘arts’ are good for all children and leaves no child behind in its presentation.” A key message in recognizing the value of the arts for reluctant learners was that it offered success in situations where success had rarely been encountered in the past, as one coordinator noted:

The arts often engage children who do not feel successful in other areas. What a delight to turn the light on for that child!

Not only do the arts help reach a wider range of students, but as the educators we talked to emphasized, it is done in a way that parents can see and appreciate:

Parents want to know that their children are succeeding but they also want to know that the “whole” child is being recognized—A+ children have a chance to excel somewhere.

Learning as More Meaningful Through Connections

The last theme clearly pointed out that the arts are a significant avenue for helping a wider range of students become successful. The obvious question is how or why. The comments from this theme help answer that. What the arts do, according to those who work closely with students, is add a richer and deeper meaning to the learning process. The arts provide a way for students, teachers, and parents to “connect the dots” across a set of diffuse and seemingly random activities, producing a clearer picture. The educators saw three types of connections: between the disciplines, between the content and wanting to learn, and between school and life.

The arts are the *glue* that helps tie the subject areas together. We use the arts to help our students see the “Big Picture”—how do we make connections—and through the connections we help them become critical thinkers.

(coordinator)

Concepts are presented in a way that children will remember what they learned. They tie learning to an activity that they do not forget.

(principal)

Art makes connections for students—They see things that make sense in their lives; they are excited about themselves.

(coordinator)

Although all subjects have a state curriculum to follow, it's the *integration*, the connecting that helps students and faculty to sustain interest in learning/profession.

Educators saw arts and arts integration as also meaning that content was connected to the larger world, including a broadened definition of how students should spend their social time:

The arts help students realize that learning, like life, is connected. They help students in our fragmented world make bridges.

(coordinator)

The arts [make] connections outside the school—children point out arts events, asking to attend performances, etc.; increased involvement in after-school and private arts organizations (i.e. piano, dance ...).

(coordinator)

The connections provided by the arts extended beyond just students. It was a way for teachers to make more meaning of their work and for parents to better understand what was going on with their children's learning. As they explained,

A+ and the integration of the arts and curriculum make learning meaningful and it makes teaching meaningful. Teachers are just like students. We are passionate about learning and we teach best when our heart and soul are in the teaching. Meaningful teaching equals meaningful learners.

(coordinator)

But equally important, the arts helped parents connect to what their children were doing and learning in school in ways that an A or an F on a report card simply cannot capture ... As they sit in an audience and watch with awe what their thirteen year old boy is doing in a choreographic offering on war and peace, or stroll through a gallery with artworks reflecting inclusion and thoughts on alienation, or hear music played for a slide show on mechanized security, and other sharings—they come to realize that the arts and the A+ philosophy has offered their child *power* and a *voice*.

(coordinator)

Finally, connections were also being made among the schools. This cannot be overemphasized since teaching has often been characterized as a lonely profession, with the work of instruction being done behind closed doors with little sharing, even across the hall, let alone from building to building. Indeed, school reform has made schools and classrooms even more insular. Yet in A+ schools, the collective focus on the arts brought educators from around the state together to make their work much more public.

A+ provides a network of principals and coordinators and teachers who support each other through collaboration at regional and statewide meetings—to share arts/artists and ways to keep art really alive and a part of the curriculum. Collaboration is key. Art has therefore become part of what we do—who we are.

(coordinator)

Creating Identity, Fostering Creativity and Encouraging Growth Any organization operates more smoothly when everyone is engaged in the same issues and moving in

the same direction. In the school reform perspective, this focus is achievement growth only. In A+ schools, though, focus provides a synergy that encourages people to be creative and look for a range of growth opportunities. The arts, according to many of the educators we listened to, provided that focus for the A+ schools and the students in them:

The arts help bring positive attention to the school. They allow students' personalities to be expressed—self-expression—and give the school a “personality.”

(coordinator)

It provides a common ground where creativity engrains the curriculum.

(coordinator)

It provides a “center” or “pulse” for our school.

(coordinator)

The principals were especially sensitive to this theme since their job is to make the whole school work. They used words to describe this like “identity and common purpose,” “much more teamwork,” “more thinking and doing out of the box,” and “deeper instruction.” They even went further to suggest that such actions contributed to “improvement in school climate—learning and teaching is more fun,” which also “provided a delivery focus that is natural for children, fits how they relate to the world, promotes a neurological impress[ion] that brings learning back to them over time.”

This focus had the added feature of being very inclusive, allowing everyone in the building to be part of it, instead of having something that was imposed from the state or some national “model” of what a school should look like.

The arts are a reflection of their [the community's] own cultural values. Each school capitalizes on the talents immediately available to them.

(principal)

Everyone can find “their” place to belong.

(principal)

This sense of identity for the school helped spark a creative side that had been either dormant or non-existent, creating an excitement that encouraged staff to continue growing.

The arts added a creative element to our school that did not exist prior to A+. It set us apart and added depth to our teaching that cannot be measured, nurtured our kids and made them better. It wouldn't have been the same result without the arts.

(coordinator)

It's [the school] constantly growing! It's amazing how open our staff is and each year we continue to grow. With new folks coming aboard—they feel the energy of the rest of the school and jump right in.

(coordinator)

As staff from the Kenan Institute put it:

The arts provide a huge dose of creativity. They contain optimism about the real possibility of doing things differently because artists do things differently.

Being part of the A+ Schools Program also gave people an understanding of the usual process of school reform, and what was exceptional about A+. As a result, A+ engendered a critique of school reform as it was usually practiced. As a member of the Kenan staff explained:

I look at the Department of Public Instruction and legislatures, who created mandate after mandate. My experience is when grownups mandate things all you get is compliance. There is no generative power, only compliance. You can't add your own piece to that process. But what you really want is if a school thinks it can commit to something more than is required of them that this is not considered stepping out of line.

Finally, the staying power of that growth potential is best captured in a comment about how an arts focus helped rally the entire network of schools, even in the face of strong adversity. While the original agreement with school districts was that they would assume funding of A+ at the end of the pilot period, they did not. Yet the Network developed a way to deal with the loss. They decided to work out collaborative arrangements and make the institutes more school-based and lower-cost. Further, the potential loss of arts teachers (because of funding cuts) meant the Network decided to focus the institutes themselves even more on the arts so that the classroom teachers could further develop their knowledge so they could do arts integration more on their own. As one educator said of the Network: "It does take on a life of its own."

A Social Foundations Perspective on School Reform

In the above, it is clear that the arts are key to making this school reform different from others. A school reform perspective would ask though regardless of its different nature—does it work? To this, coordinators and principals repeatedly said: "It works!" As Awsumb (2001) noted, A+ schools were able to satisfy the accountability system and be more interesting and attractive places to teach and learn. In large part, this was because the A+ schools were able to make the reform their own—they made the meaning of, and with, the reform. Here we can see the distinctiveness of a social foundations perspective. In the data reported above, our interest was in what the schools made of the reform—not what reform made of the school. Our focus was on what the school participants learned to value about the reform, not what the reform did instrumentally. This focus sets a new bar for the effectiveness of school reform. The new bar is: What can educators

do with reform? In A+ schools, they learned to take charge of change. They struggled and learned what the arts could do for them. They came to value the fact that not only could they satisfy the state's accountability system, they could do something that they, the parents and children, valued for substantive reasons—because students and teachers liked to be creative and have fun, because the integrated arts program enabled students to draw connections across disparate fields of knowledge, because students could find success in many different ways and thus could build student identities around creativity and not simply memorization of factual information that is so central in high stakes accountability tests.

Whatever the original reasons for joining A+, the effect on students has become the driving force in sustaining the reform. The emphases on multiple intelligences, hands-on-instruction, and connections to larger learnings observed by the research team would likely have long-waned if students had not found A+ so engaging and such fun. This result of the arts also made A+ inviting to teachers. Teachers found that the hours spent planning integrated instruction were worthwhile because it made learning fun, because it "worked" in that it resulted in significant learning, and because it put teachers in creative control of both curriculum and instruction. A+ engaged teachers as professionals who care about their students and what the students are learning. All the schools have had at least one change (and many, two or three changes) of principal over the 8 years, and while this usually leads to the demise of a reform, it has not with A+. In the above, we see that the arts explain this in fundamental ways. The principals see students enjoying learning, teachers enjoying teaching, and parents pleased by both. They also see changes in school climate as well as in student achievement. The arts have also made their schools distinctive and "marketable" as open enrollment has become more common across North Carolina. The arts thus have a big payoff for administrators, even if they inherited the reform rather than initiated it.

The engagement and learning the arts engendered also affected the program overall. In the initial professional development, the educators were slightly embarrassed about engaging in the arts. This uneasiness gave way to excitement as they got used to this and more importantly as they saw what the arts were doing for the students, themselves and the schools. These lessons taught the educators that the arts could be a productive way to approach learning and school improvement.

Finally, the A+ experience also seems to speak to the literature as well. There is evidence for all four possibilities of the significance of the arts for school reform. The arts enabled hands-on production as well as the production of distinctive identity and meaning of education in the A+ schools. The arts became the

basis both for imaginative learning and teaching, but also allowed schools to imagine education differently. When this image became reality, it has proven difficult to imagine giving it up. The arts also created a host of new connections between the arts and other subjects; students and teachers; teachers and other teachers in the same schools and across the Network; teachers and principals; and principals and other A+ principals; teachers and principals and the Kenan Institute and other arts organizations, and so on. These connections all sustained the identities of the A+ schools in the face of the challenges they have faced, and enabled them to imagine an A+ outside the Kenan Institute. The arts also have culminated in communities within the schools, within the groups of teachers who came to lead the professional development efforts (termed A+ Fellows), and across the Network. Each school has a somewhat different community and thus plays a different part in the Network community.

The school reform perspective would find the above interesting but not quite to the point. They would note that it is hard to assign the success with the state's accountability system to A+ because A+ was not an integral reform package. While it is often argued that reforms must be well-specified and fidelity to that specification is important to the school being successful (Desimone, 2002), the A+ Schools Program was not very specific about what had to happen. It was largely outside the authority structure of public education. It had no substantial rewards or punishments attached to it and thus would be seen as having low power to change schools as well. That is to say, fidelity was not possible in the ways the school reform perspective imagines it. Yet because teachers spent a lot of time in professional development and because schools were asked what they thought ought to be important about an arts-based school reform, the A+ Schools Program did incite people to think about, to create, and to invest in local definitions of what their A+ school ought to be about. In the school reform perspective, sustainability has proven to be a real hindrance to the efficacy of reform efforts (Century & Levy, 2002), but A+ has been successful not only in terms of testing but in terms of sustainability as well. The social foundations perspective helps us understand this in ways the school reform perspective cannot. The social foundations perspective lets us see that what the reform gave up in terms of fidelity is gained in terms of commitment. Because A+ trusted educators to make decisions about how to best adapt the reform, and because A+ let the educators learn how to value the reform in their own schools, A+ became their reform—not someone else's. Clearly, A+ invested heavily in professional development and this had an effect on what teachers could do in the classroom and how they understood the arts and arts integration. Yet instead of fidelity, A+ created capacity, which the

teachers took as their own and put to their own uses. The social foundations perspective would also let us examine context and understand that the state's accountability policy was useful to A+ because it served as an outside threat, making A+ seem even more grassroots than it was actually. Context is important in reform efforts. In this case, the context of accountability also led to the school's developing a critique of other reform efforts and accountability policy. Schools could see what was happening with A+ and how testing threatened these accomplishments. The critique also led to the development of an assessment process (enriched assessment) that let schools link A+ to high stakes testing. The evaluation team did not have to develop the critique, but as social foundations scholars we were impressed with the critique of testing as threatening to alter the meaning of education rather than assessing the what student were able to do. A+ also let the schools historicize A+. Each school was asked to tell their story repeatedly, and here the evaluation process itself helped. By interviewing and observing the schools and classrooms, we called upon them to explain their approach, and again this made A+ seem more like their invention than it was. The schools came to value A+ in their own ways and to take it on as their own.

It is likely that other reforms could be characterized in the way we have here with A+. However, we are less likely to know this because the school reform perspective would not be interpreting the above in the ways we were. The school reform perspective would be looking for compliance and the results of compliance. This is a great loss to our understanding of how schools improve and the various ways such improvement can be valued. The social foundations perspective is unlikely to be seen as "part of the solution" of school reform and accountability, and this is for a good reason. We ask broader questions than policymakers want answered and, equally important, what we find challenges the assumptions they have made. Our work is not as instrumental as they would wish but it does provide an explanation for why school reform is in its endgame. Its lens was too narrow and its conception of schools and the people in them was framed by a will to dominate rather than a will to learn and participate.

I want to end with an additional interpretation. People find it difficult to see their own assumptions and thus it often takes an outsider to be able to articulate the assumptions of a group. There is an assumption in the data reported above that the participants share but are not explicit about. It is clear to us that the A+ schools came to see the arts as a value stance in itself. They chose and continued with A+ through high stakes testing, leadership change, and the uncertainty that A+ itself engendered by asking people to take responsibility for the reform in their schools and in

the network because they believed the arts made their schools better places for children, for teachers and for the community. That is, A+ schools were making a moral claim as well as any other claims about arts as art or the arts as instrumental in teaching other content or in changing schools. This conclusion cannot be overemphasized. The A+ schools in many ways reformed their practices and to productive ends. Yet these schools also experienced a fundamental shift in values, and with the belief that their arts-enhanced school was morally better than it had been before it became an arts-integrated school. These schools had a basis for a school identity beyond what other reforms can claim to foster with their emphasis on more content and better test scores. A+ schools could create and recreate themselves because they were clear about what they valued. They rediscovered for themselves what foundations scholars have known all along—schools are moral institutions. This is ultimately why parents entrust their children to them.

In conclusion, a social foundations perspective would lead to different kinds of research on school reform. It would begin with questioning the logic of reform. It would ask what is the state and powerful groups doing to its citizens in the name of reform. We can see this approach in the work of Miron (1996) and Apple (2003). It would study reform in terms of what it implies about the moral meaning of education (cf. Noblit & Dempsey, 1996). It would ask who reform is serving (cf. Miron & St. John, 2003). It would ask these and other questions that would directly address the meaning of education for the citizens and society, and who is served, and not in the competing definitions of the meaning of education (cf. Fine, 1991; Lipman, 1998). Research on reform from this perspective would be designed to be close to those involved in it and investigate what they saw as important as well in comparison to other stakeholders in the reform efforts. Achievement would be important but it would be variously conceived and measured, putting the various achievement measures in the context of the tradeoffs they entail. The social foundations perspective is unlikely to win the support of the proponents of the strong version of school reform with its emphasis on crisis and extreme measures. However, my own career is evidence that there are those in philanthropic organizations, advocacy groups and government who have expansive interests in education. They offer the hope that even if the social foundations perspective cannot become dominant, it can be another voice in a wide ranging debate about the meaning of schooling. For me, this is actually what a social foundations perspective should be about—not control but vigorous contention. The meanings of education are constructed in contestation. Hopefully, social foundations researchers can be vital participants in such debates.

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