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essay



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The relevance of the book by Aseltine et al cannot be overstated. With respect to the state of education in the United States, the book takes a comprehensive survey of the education system. By doing so, it identifies the inherent weaknesses of the system, while also suggesting robust corrective measures. At the heart of the training philosophy promoted by the book, is recognition of the role of teachers in molding students, but also in the reputation of the school as a whole. In the process of reading the book I had noted down my impressions, reactions, criticisms and an overall evaluation of the work. These have synthesized into my thesis statement. Giving due acknowledgement for the positive facets of the book, including its numerous insights and action plans for teacher and school improvement, I will however argue that as a result of its limited focus the book fails to recognize and address larger systemic factors that have undermined the education system.

One of the highlights of the book is how it documents the evolution of teacher evaluation over the course of the last century. Early teacher appraisal was an informal, ad hoc and a subjective process, but it has now been replaced by the more precise clinical supervision. The result is a more quantitative and comprehensive survey of teacher performance over several key parameters. One of the good things about these clinical supervision models is that they do not interfere much with the teaching process. In other words, after involving the teacher in goal-setting and determining of assessment methods, the supervisor's role becomes that of an objective observer. The effectiveness of clinical supervision is borne by their capacity to " reveal deficiencies in teachers' skill sets, promoting mastery of basic elements of teaching and classroom management". (Aseltine et al, 2006)

However, one has to weigh this proclaimed success in the backdrop of the current state of education in the United States, which leaves much to be desired. Far from being an institution that we can be proud of, educators are grappling with the problem of falling of scholastic standards. It is believed that programs, such as No Child Left Behind, may have actually undermined the quality and parity in education. (Aseltine et al, 2006) There is consensus among educationists that math and literacy proficiency among American students is lower compared to their European counterparts from the same age group. Such learning deficiencies have profound implications for the country's future. In the context of economic globalization, many American jobs are already being offered to skilled workers from India and China. If the standard of education continues to dilute then American graduates and post-graduates will find it more difficult to compete with workers from the rest of the world. Aseltine et al fail to answer why such decline has occurred at a time when learning supervision methods have been fortified. Moreover, how can they claim that schools have improved in the backdrop of dismal realities alluded to here.

Talking of positives, Aseltine et al perform a stellar job of devising an approach to supervision that is grounded on carefully considered facts and assumptions about student learning. For example, their approach incorporates the fact that “ children learn best when new learning is connected to prior knowledge, instruction builds on that knowledge and addresses learning needs, and assessment informs instruction” (Aseltine et al, 2006). Another key understanding, upon which the supervision models are built, is with regard to improvement. Whether it is a student or a teacher,

change always occurs from the inside out, meaning that substantial improvement in performance needs personal effort and personal goal-setting. Such positive outcomes also need to be given necessary time to fructify. Though the authors should be lauded for thoroughly probing all these elements of a supervision model, their scholarship does not deal with external forces influencing the state of education in the country. For example, it is fairly obvious that the capitalist economy has invaded academic campuses and education has also become a commodity to be purchased and profited from as afforded by one's class background. In this milieu, the rising tuition fees at a time of prolonged economic recession have added to parental woes. This means that for many middle-class American families providing their children with quality education is becoming ever difficult. Even in recent American history, public education used to be a safety net for children from lower rungs of American society. But this is no longer the case today. This is partly attributable to government decisions to reduce public expenditure during successive recent economic downturns. As a result, funding to public schools has dried up substantially. In turn, this has led to hiring of unqualified teachers and poor infrastructure. This book by Aseltine et al is expressly purported to be about school improvement no less, we see no discussion whatsoever of this most important issue of contention. Such conspicuous omissions detract from the overall merit of the book.

An admirable quality in the book is its proposals for revamping supervision models. A major creative output of the author team is in the conception and design of the Performance-Based Supervision and Evaluation (PBSE). This model comprises of novel techniques that purport to make supervision

methods more professional. They also “ provide efficient strategies to increase the analytic and instructional capacity of schools and school districts” (Aseltine, et. al, 2006). What more, these scholars have run trials with the model, the successes of which they’ve documented in detail in the three case studies. To broad base the experiment as well as to minimize bias, the three schools chosen are very different from one another. Whereas the first is a suburban middle school, the second is located in an urban school district, and the third is a statewide vocational-technical school system. Across these diverse environments, the PBSE is found to be consistently efficacious. Having acknowledged what is good about the book, I have to point out that it eschews any discussion of education ideas. To elaborate, the education system as it exists today fosters obedience and skill acquisition at the cost of critical thinking. The motives and methods witnessed in educational institutions today is far from the ideals set forth by such luminaries as John Dewey. The present system’s purpose is one of indoctrinating the young. It is as if the system has turned into one giant assembly line for producing labor forces for Corporate America. The nation’s business leaders are products of these mass producing institutions. This explains why the nation is frequently beset by corporate scandals, bankruptcies, stock market crashes, economic depressions and recessions, and ever increasing unemployment figures. In the backdrop of these depressing facts, it is fair to state that the education system is not molding enlightened and inspired young leaders to take charge of business and political institutions. While better teacher supervision methods and evaluation scales might improve efficiency in the functioning of the system, there is nothing in the book to suggest that it would improve prospects for

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the nation. It is fair to claim that the PBSE, even if adopted nationwide, is not going to alleviate economic disparity, improve social cohesion, eliminate financial crashes, lessen instances of war, or enrich culture and the arts.