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James P. Spillane

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# The More Things Change, the More Things Stay the Same?

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**James P. Spillane<sup>1</sup>**

The articles included in this volume of *Education and Urban Society* inform the special issue theme that poses the question “Are We There Yet?” An examination of educational equity in the era of school reform and accountability. The research by Harris, Diamond, and Finnigan raises important issues regarding the role of teacher expectations, teacher capacity, and principal leadership play in improving the quality of teaching and learning in urban, low-performing schools. The article in this special issue give me déjà vu because the highlighted themes, such as the expectations that teachers have for students as discussed by Harris (in this volume), reflect earlier work (see Rist, 1970; Sandholtz, Ogawa, & Scribner, 2004). However, the enduring issues highlighted here have been pressed on by the recent policy shifts. At the same time, despite two decades of dramatic shifts in educational reform and policy among states and local school districts pre- and post-No Child Left Behind (NCLB), we see that the more things have changed, the more things seem to have stayed the same.

The very rich accounts from teachers in urban schools settings with low to average achievement illustrates that pedagogical practices have remained very much the same at the level of the classroom. As Diamond suggests (in this volume), content may have changed in classrooms but teacher practice has not necessarily evolved. Finnigan’s work (in this volume) shows the important role principals have on teacher’s motivation to improve student learning. These manuscripts highlight the fact that we operate in an educational system that is impoverished when it comes to working with the practice. A consistent

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concern embedded within all of these studies is whether the problem with changing teacher and principal practice is about beliefs or about knowledge, and what is the relationship between the two? All of the manuscripts hint at the need for new knowledge and understandings among teachers. If teachers or principals could imagine alternatives to their current practice, then they might be able to challenge their preexisting expectations.

## **Duel Narratives**

There are dueling narratives that are implicit in these articles. One narrative is the need for greater school accountability as imposed by federal educational policy via NCLB with teachers struggling against it. The alternative narrative portrays teachers as committed educators who would be able to make a difference in teaching and learning if they were able to develop a sense of professional community without monitoring. Although I tend to subscribe to the second narrative, there is a problem with it. The late Fred Hess, a former colleague of mine at Northwestern University, would tell you that if we were in Chicago 20 years ago and sat in the back of the classrooms, you would be angered by the way in which the teachers treated poor Black kids by the expectations they had for them. And he would argue that you certainly did not want a professional community of these teachers determining what children were taught. My dilemma is that these two opposing narratives stymie the conversation by forcing researchers to position themselves in one camp or the other. And if we work with these grand narratives, we may never spark a conversation between the proponents of professional community building and proponents of stronger controls and accountability. The new narrative should be one that meets at the intersection of the two. Whether the Obama administration's approach to educational change via *Race to the Top* and the reauthorization of the Elementary Secondary Education Act will foster this alignment between improving teacher professional communities in the context of high-stakes accountability policy that leads to radical changes to teacher practice remains to be seen.

## **All Students—An American Dream?**

Much of the reform rhetoric embedded with the standards and testing movement is the notion that all with greater accountability in schools, students will be able to achieve the American dream of mobility. This is an egalitarian ideal very much alive in the American psyche, though this notion is not shared globally. This idea is a key feature of federal educational policy, with the

NCLB mandate requiring that all students achieve proficiency on state assessments by the 2013-14 school year. The notion that everyone should have the chance to get ahead regardless of race, class, and other identifiers is an important ideal, despite the fact that, for many, this does not happen. As teachers struggle with implementing this ideal, we need to begin to dissect and ask ourselves, what do we really mean by that? When we talk about narrowing the achievement gaps between Black and White, between Latino and White, and between working-class kids and middle-class kids, how do we create real meaning behind this? We must also consider that educational policy may not be the proper mechanism to accomplish this task.

### **The Limits of Policy as an Instrument of Change**

Many years ago, philosopher Thomas Green (1983) wrote that policy is a blunt instrument. He claims that one would not use an ax to halve a pound of butter and policy is very much that sort of an instrument. He argues that policy might be better suited to the prevention of evil rather than the promotion of very particular goods. The articles in this special issue, for the most part, repeat stories about the limitations (and failures) of educational policy. At this point, we must ask ourselves, "Can policy really reach inside the classroom to address these huge challenges regarding changing teacher pedagogy and expectations?" To be clear, educational policy has had a dramatic impact over the past 40 or 50 years, including desegregation prompted by the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. Nevertheless, we also need to ask ourselves, when it comes to teachers' expectations or changing pedagogy, what can policy achieve and what it cannot? I believe we also need to ask, as other researchers have (see Ladson-Billings, 2006; Wells, 2009), what can educational policy achieve in contrast with economic and social policy? Many urban schools that are low performing are located in communities with high poverty rates and broken social and economic infrastructures with inadequate health care and limited jobs that provide inadequate living wages. Some question whether schools can be expected to redress these huge imbalances in society (see Reese, 2007). If we are to address these monumental challenges, then we must consider how to generate the additional resources needed to address educational, social, and economic disparities for those in urban communities simultaneously. Are the middle and upper social classes in American society prepared to pay more to redress multiple inequities in society? Given the current economic climate and concerns about the national debt, the climate may not exist to convince taxpayers to invest in low-income, urban communities.

## Diagnosing Practice and Designing for Its Improvement

Given the challenges to changing teacher practice, some may suggest that researchers have failed in many respects to generate rich, useable knowledge that will allow for poor children, Latino children, and African American children to succeed. While much of educational research, including the studies for this volume, helps to diagnose the problems with practice, we have failed to provide urban schoolteachers with enough research containing concrete approaches to use as they improve practice. As we continue to grapple with improving educational equity in urban schools, researchers need to take an active role in the construction of a new narrative by accepting some of the responsibility for developing it. This volume poses the question, are we there yet regarding increasing educational equity especially in urban schools? Based on the research in this volume, I would say no—but how would we know if we were?

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**Bio**

**James P. Spillane** is the Spencer T. and Ann W. Olin professor in learning and organizational change at Northwestern University. His work explores the policy implementation process at the state, school district, school, and classroom levels, focusing on intergovernmental relationships and policy–practice relationships.