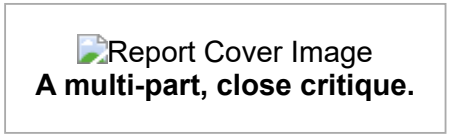
On Education as Social Action, Not Crisis Response

by Robbie McClintock

Observing the current scene with some dispassion, we might wonder whether crisis-mongering has exhausted its capacity to move the nation to action. In 2012, most Americans perceive, quite without the aid of an august task force, a persisting economic crisis, at home and in Europe, with unemployment persisting at unconscionable levels. Further, we see a political crisis, both confused and confusing, with the capacity for collective action stymied by an unprecedented partisan stalemate, with the likelihood of the upcoming election failing to resolve it. Perhaps everyone has become jaded, dissociating crises from suffered consequences, perceiving them merely as a new form of spectator sport. Observing how an evident economic crisis is simply reinforcing commitment by all parties to business as usual, TF68 might have chosen a different construct than that of looming crises for discussing education reform and national security.



A multi-part, close critique.

All of us can, as reasonable persons, deeply want to improve public schooling significantly, without having to base our effort on a perception of national crisis. Better education is good for the quality of American life. Reasonable people can also want sound provisions for the security of our country without asserting that the nation is tottering, its defenses in disarray. Both education and national security merit thoughtful public deliberation, crisis or no crisis. But public schooling and national security are the two largest governmental activities in the United States, which poses a paradox for power-speak. Having built up a ferocious presumption that governmental efforts are by nature inefficient and undesirable, power-speak must gin up a sense of crisis to justify public initiative that does not lead directly to the further contraction of governmental services. For many, national security has a sense of threat, of crisis, inherent in it. Unwilling to propose improvements in public schooling simply as desirable enhancements to the quality of public life, TF68 starts its report explaining how "The Education Crisis Is a National Security Crisis" [pp. 7-13]

TF68 opens with a reasonable question, one which might elicit a variety of reasoned responses. "Why is education a national security issue?" In response, a reader might expect discussion of the pros and cons of a universal national service program or increases in the funding priority assigned to those sectors of higher education particularly important for military preparedness. But TF68 entertains no such considerations. To the question why education is an issue of national security, it immediately responds: "The Task Force members believe America's educational failures pose five distinct threats to national security." Education does not strengthen national security; public schooling's failures tangibly threaten it.

How does public schooling threaten the country with deathly danger? TF68 immediately lists how. Public schooling threatens the nation's economic growth and competitiveness; public schooling challenges the physical safety of the nation; public schooling undermines the country's intellectual property; public schooling dissipates the global awareness of Americans; and public schooling sunders national unity and cohesion. TF68 explains each of these five threats in the remainder of the chapter. Power-speak gives the rhetoric of threat and crisis a semblance of plausibility by depicting concrete human difficulties with a great deal of abstraction and by reducing complex interactions among persons to simplistic, unidirectional causes.

Here let's consider the first and last way public schooling threatens national security, the one to "economic prosperity and international competitiveness" and a related threat to national cohesion. Both threats arise because the educational system does not prepare people "to meet the demands of the global workforce," either for the nation as a whole or for those who are losing out on the nation's promise of opportunity. This phrase, "the demands of the global workforce" stands at many degrees of abstraction away from the lived realities of people teaching and learning in the U.S. educational system. Did some prominent employer, Global Workforce, post a clear announcement of its required skill specifications a couple decades ago? Did the U.S. educational system blithely ignore these requirements? Where did the global workforce post its demands? When? With what authority? For several decades the employment and earnings prospects for highly educated persons have been better than those with modest and minimal educational qualifications. That general observation amalgamates an extremely complicated array of specific jobs and real people interacting through numerous dynamic processes of production, distribution, and consumption—global, national, regional, and local. It is nonsensical to hold the education system to have been the cause of overall employment pattens on a global scale.

Power-speak glosses over complexities and fundamentally misunderstands what takes place in educational interactions. Seeing the situation only in the abstract, power-speakers naturally fill it out by presuming their own expectations must be the common sense shared by all. Power-speakers became power-speakers because they experienced their world to be replete with opportunity and promise, which they grasped with enterprising sureness by pursuing their formal education to the full, thereby mounting the meritocratic ladder. To them, that is the human reality. And when other kids, perhaps born into different circumstances, seem to perceive their opportunities for schooling differently, power-speakers think that the schools the poor kids attend must have been doing something very wrong to prevent students from grasping the evident use of formal education. If some seem to suffer a dearth of opportunity, the schools must be at fault, for they are not working as a means for the least advantaged to get ahead, jumping onto the fast-track of lucrative employment by maximizing their academic skills.

To explain how education threatens prosperity and competitiveness, TF68 significantly bowdlerizes an essay by Michael Spence, an economist of Nobel stature. The report suggests that unemployment is resulting "because of disparities between the workforce's education and skills and those needed by employers" [p. 7]. It then quotes Spence in a way that appears to back up its suggestion that education caused the unemployment. Spence's actual analysis is far more subtle, indicating that economic factors, both domestic and international, were affecting different employment sectors in ways that were changing employment opportunities, increasing employment in some high skilled areas and decreasing it in some low skilled. The causes were economic, not educational.

Analyzing the employment problems arising with globalization, Spence unravels many component interactions and thinks concretely about how different people, with distinctive assets and limitations, respond to their concrete situations. He states that "education should be boosted," not because its failure causes the problem, but because improved education may help to solve it, but only in tandem with other initiatives that will help many people change their subjective expectations about the uses of schooling. Spence notes that education reform has been "a priority for some years, yet the results are in doubt" [p. 37]. And he notes that the reasons why reform efforts have proven difficult are themselves complicated and involve factors both internal to the schools and factors deeply embedded in the society and economy, which affect how many people think about educational opportunity. "One comes full circle, in other words: increased educational effectiveness is needed for the United

TF68 quotes from Michael Spe
28 in "The Impact of Globaliza
Income and Employment: The
of Integrating Markets." Foreig
90/4:July/August, 2011, pp. 28
also the Working Paper by Mic
Spence and Sandile Hlatshwa
Evolving Structure of the Amer
Economy and the Employmen
Challenge," Council on Foreig
Center for Geoeconomic Studi
(download from
http://www.cfr.org/industrial-
policy/evolving-structure-amer
economy-employment-challen
This working paper has a fulle
implications for policy, which a
like those presented by TF68.

States to be competitive, and the promise of rewarding employment is a necessary incentive for [communities] committing to improving education" [p. 39]

In addition to improving education effectiveness, Spence called for substantially increased investment in infrastructure; for more public funding in science and technology, specifically in ways that would increase job creation; for changes in taxation, lowering rates on income and increasing taxes on consumption, particularly in ways that would encourage the consumption of domestically produced goods and discourage demand for goods produced abroad. He concludes with a strong suggestion that a significantly flatter income distribution is important for the nation's economic prosperity and international competitiveness. "Many other advanced countries have flatter income distributions than the United States, suggesting that tradeoffs between market forces and equity are possible. The U.S. government needs to face up to them" [p. 40].

Rational choice theory is singularly inappropriate for modeling educational behavior. Educational experience unfolds over many years, for each person a concatenation of experiences, some trivial and some important, each colored and partially influenced by an ever-changing subjective awareness and intentionality. Within the framework of rational choice, the link between the preference, say more math and less music, and the desired result, say success in the job market ten or twenty years hence, is better described as a leap of faith than as a intelligible choice. To make matters worse, only very rarely does a parent or student or teachers, or principal experience a big choice as a big choice. Almost always it is a slow accretion of lots of tiny choices, some small ones, and an occasional few of moderate import—all together radically limiting the feasible possibilities. Max Weber's ideas about social action are much more suited for thinking intelligently about educational activities—

> We shall speak of 'action' insofar as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to his behavior—be it overt or covert, omission or acquiescence. Action is 'social' insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course.

See Max Weber, *Economy an*
Vol. 1, p. 4 (Berkeley: Universi
California Press, 1968.)

But power-speak does not work well with theories of social action, preferring a loose rational-choice cast of mind, treating people as if they faced clear choices for maximizing utilities and expecting that they would, if neither deluded nor thwarted, obviously take their optimum path. For instance, TF68 intones that "poorly educated and semi-skilled Americans cannot expect to effectively compete for jobs against fellow U.S. citizens or global peers," as if that is what they expect. But power-speak here completely misjudges the pedagogical problem. Poorly educated and semi-skilled Americans do not suffer from overblown expectations that they can compete despite the adversity of their situation. They know all too well that they cannot, that the system is stacked against them, that they are the designated losers. This subjective meaning that they perceive all to well in their social situation colors a vast range of little choices, as does the subjective meaning their teachers hold towards them, and all sorts of others all around, even far away. To those who experience their world as designated losers, schooling does not appear as a means to get ahead but as a means for stamping them with signs of their futile status for all the world to see. What may appear to power-speakers as "the only 'intervention' capable of putting [the disadvantaged] on track to a better life," will lack that virtue when viewed as a place of social action for persons whose lived experience is devoid of advantage and privilege.

There is a terrible condescension in talk about *the only intervention* capable of salvaging a bad situation. Too many people may subjectively experience their situation as the designated losers in the larger scheme of things. They will act in part accordingly. Yet they live their lives primarily, not in the larger scheme, but in their concrete surroundings. There, they know, as social actors in their world, that they face lots of conditions, situations, and choices with respect to which they are not designated losers, but active choosers. They know with subjective certainty that many very concrete things in that world could well be better, enabling them to concatenate their choices more effectively: big

things like improved housing, a better job market, especially for young people, an effective infrastructure and humane public services managed dependably to help those who need it most, an end to Jim-Crow imprisonment; smaller things like a good public library open evenings and weekends, day-care for younger siblings, after-school centers, safe places to meet, to pursue a hobby, to play a sport, to get some of those extras that guide, open doors, even inspire; and very difficult things like forging the common feeling that others recognize them, that they are not invisible, that their dignity has the respect of all, as much as that of anyone else. Where education involves everyone as social actors, the whole public will participate, with full fellow-feeling, in the education of all its members.

- Clueless—1: Power-speak on Public Schooling
- Clueless—2: "School Failure" as a State of Exception

Coming next, "Clueless—4" on what is a means and what is an end.