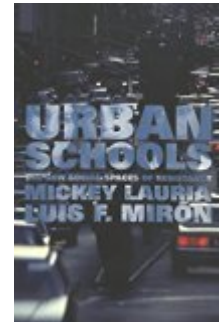


Mickey Lauria, Luis F. Miron. *Urban Schools: The New Social Spaces of Resistance.*
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Reviewed by Michael T. Bertrand

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Accompanied by the strains of early rock 'n' roll, Hollywood in 1955 released *The Blackboard Jungle*, a gritty and seemingly straightforward motion picture about high-school life in the inner city. For anxious parents and cultural guardians, the movie was, to say the least, disturbing. As Bill Haley and the Comets' performance of "Rock Around the Clock" blared over the opening credits, moviegoers were transported into a world apparently turned upside down. The classroom, traditionally viewed as an extension of the family living room, exploded on the movie screen as a hellish nightmare. Cynical teenagers, completely disengaged from conventional pedagogy, refused to respect authority, assaulted teachers, destroyed property, and generally lumbered the halls as anti-social thugs. Shell-shocked teachers, threatened by conditions both real and imagined, had long given up trying to teach. The principal and other administrators refused to acknowledge any problem, even as bedlam ensued all around them. Authorities literally had surrendered the school to delinquents. While the rather formulaic film ultimately concluded on a positive note (a new and idealistic teacher arrives to save the day), many

spectators nevertheless departed the theater traumatized. What had happened to our schools?

Since at least the early 1950s, parents and other concerned adults have consistently asked this question. Indeed, many of today's problems in public education arguably can be traced to trends established half a century ago. The apprehension over public schools, for instance, originally stemmed from larger societal transformations brought on by World War II. The massive rural-to-urban transitions of the war and postwar years served as a poignant backdrop for the disquiet. Particularly as the traditional nuclear family came under duress, first with fathers off to war and then mothers permanently working outside of the home, many worried that unsupervised children were vulnerable to all sorts of social ills and unfamiliar temptations. With the onset of a youth consumer market that targeted teens for everything from hula-hoops and poodle skirts to comic books and rock 'n' roll, adult anxiety only intensified. Parental fears were aroused further when the classroom ostensibly became the laboratory and arena for bringing about significant so-

cial change. And while the Supreme Court's mandate on public school desegregation was a necessary remedy to educational inequality, it also set in motion a series of controversial actions and reactions that encompassed "white flight" from working-class urban neighborhoods to middle-class suburbs, busing, and the proliferation of private schools. The long-term ramifications of such events for public education were tremendous: a depletion of human and financial resources, a growing deficiency in community involvement and activism, and the consequential physical and psychological deterioration of inner-city schools. The almost daily journalistic accounts of schools that must sustain overworked teachers, increased violence, decreased literacy rates, and under-achieving and "misunderstood" students again leaves one feeling traumatized. What has happened to our schools?

In *Urban Schools: The New Social Spaces of Resistance*, Mickey Lauria (Urban Geography, Clemson University) and Luis F. Miron (Educational Policy and Social Theory, University of Illinois) frame their study around this chronic question. They conclude that, above all, fifty years of far-reaching urban school reform has failed. And that failure, they insist, is due to the clash of two competing principles that underlie reform efforts: community autonomy and corporate-directed state centralization. Community autonomy involves the exercise of local control with an emphasis on cultural empowerment in classroom dynamics and decisions. State centralization entails a government-imposed curriculum stressing the technical skills needed in a global economy and gauges its success through the use of standardized exam formats. Community concerns have uniformly been subordinated to the latter "entrepreneurial coalition," thus creating a classroom environment of indifference, if not hostility. The authors assert that the two seemingly conflicting ideologies can be reconciled. As such, they propose that reform which recognizes the strengths of each position would create a vibrant dialogue

between the mission of the school and the values of the local community. This two-way communication would thus esteem both technical ends (corporate goals) and human interests (local needs). The trick is to break the historical tendencies that place such values in binary opposition. The two, they argue, should be viewed as mutually dependent.

Lauria and Miron reached this conclusion by gathering student opinions from four New Orleans inner-city schools (pre-Hurricane Katrina). The four schools represented slightly different student bodies. Two were low-income black institutions perceived as "easy schools" where expectations were low (graduates generally do not go to college), the propensity for violence was high (students do not respect teachers or authority), and instructors either were fresh out of college and new to the profession or resigned veterans unable or unwilling to teach elsewhere (they are seen as babysitters keeping young people off of the street). The third school was one that received corporate support, maintained a diverse student body, employed test-based admission policies and contented teachers, and was perceived as a city-wide institution for solid students with moderate college aspirations. The premier school for the black middle class comprised the fourth school in the survey. It boasted a test-based admissions policy, competed academically with private institutions, and included motivated teachers who expected their students to gain entry into elite colleges and universities.

From the surveys they conducted, the authors present a varied sampling of student reactions to a corporate-influenced academic environment. This environment seemed more concerned with producing an anonymous and mechanical workforce for a global economy than with inculcating higher levels of thinking and critical analysis. (In one chapter written with David J. Dashner, Lauria and Miron convincingly demonstrate with comparative tables how curriculum guidelines

evolved over a thirteen-year period to represent corporate rather than humanistic goals.) Using cultural studies methodologies and terminology (which are occasionally obscure), Lauria and Miron construct a theoretical interpretation based on the student responses. They contend that students are engaged in identity politics to resist their marginalization by an increasingly impersonal system that does not acknowledge their value as human beings. The youths are attempting to claim agency and power in a classroom space determined to classify them as stereotypes. Such actions frequently lead to conflict and misunderstanding, as their attempts to create spaces for themselves often are at odds with what authority figures perceive as "proper decorum" and "good" behavior.

Yet Lauria and Miron are determined to grant students a legitimate voice, claiming that the say of those who wield authority has been privileged to the point of shutting off dialogue within the schools. Indeed, they maintain that teachers and administrators, in emphasizing the "professional" character of their positions, establish an invisible yet impenetrable barrier between themselves and students. This "divider" prevents any substantive interaction between the two. Student responses to author-prepared questionnaires certainly reveal what seems to be a serious disconnection between teachers and pupils (one caveat: the specific question concerning teachers that students were asked may have been somewhat directed to producing a negative response: "What don't you like about the way teachers and administrators treat you at school?" p. 161). Unfortunately, the authors did not canvass teachers for their input. While problematic, this omission apparently adhered to their purpose of empowering students. Thus the reader does get to "hear" students express their opinions about a wide range of topics that affect them everyday: attitudes, conduct, and performance expectation of teachers, school policy, classroom behavior, violence, disruptive students, homework, class work, racial stereotypes, societal conditions,

and post-graduation expectations. In gathering these viewpoints, the authors intimate that appreciating the perspectives of students can contribute to the formation of educational reform that encompasses technical ends and local needs.

They are not, however, interested in utopian or romantic resolutions that simply turn the existing situation on its head. There are no suggestions of completely yielding the schools to restless renegades. *The Blackboard Jungle* remains buried in a Hollywood vault, occasionally to emerge only on cable television. They do not, for instance, canvass their subjects indiscriminately. "Resistance" in this context does not refer to those students who have completely abandoned the system or become nihilists. They instead focus on young people who, for lack of a better term, are playing by the rules. Yet it would have been interesting to get the perspectives of teachers; as educators at various levels across the country can probably attest, uninformed or misinformed students apparently feel more entitled in this day and age to occupy an authoritative space in the classroom. Hopefully Lauria and Miron have in mind a larger plan recognizing that instructors do have educational and experiential backgrounds that provide them with an authority as yet unattained by most of their students. As the collected statements presented in this book indicate, young people, despite thinking otherwise, do not necessarily understand everything that is going on around them. Nevertheless, the authors' point that students deserve a more amplified role in their own education is an issue that should be given cautious consideration.

Going back to the drawing board and creating a new, more inclusive educational model that corresponds to a changing social and urban terrain, Lauria and Miron insist, should not be considered a tragedy. Persisting down a path littered with classrooms that are devoid of trust, cooperation, and respect by all involved, however, very well will be.

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