

Assessing Eli Broad's Assault on Public School System Leadership

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ABSTRACT

Eli Broad's approach to reforming urban public education does not recognize his own self-interest in promoting changes within such educational systems, a classic problem of misrecognition. The Broad agenda is an assault on the notion of the mission of public education as a service instead of a for-profit enterprise concerned with making money for the owners and stock holders. This article examines the backgrounds of the graduates of the Broad Superintendents Academy and raises critical issues such as how can Broad claim that graduate preparation in educational administration is unnecessary when at least half of his own graduates already have advanced degrees from universities in the field and occupy high-level central office positions? Broad's remedies harken back to those advanced by Frederick Winslow Taylor, the creator of scientific management.

This article is a response to:

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THE PROBLEM WITH Eli Broad and his colleagues is that they don't know what they don't know. We have to believe that he is sincere. The evidence shows that if he is not, the millions he is pouring into "fixing" urban public education constitutes one expensive illusion, or perhaps delusion, as the case may be. We use here the definition of *misrecognition*, advanced by Pierre Bourdieu as

The form of forgetting that social agents are caught up in and produced by. When we feel comfortable within our roles within the social world they seem to us like second nature and we forget how we actually have been produced as particular kinds of people. (Webb, Schirato, & Danaher, 2002, p. xiv)

Misrecognition is a common malady among neoliberal pundits and reformers such as Broad and two of his most notorious paid wordsmiths, Chester E. Finn Jr. at the Broad-funded Thomas B. Fordham Institute and Frederick Hess of the American Enterprise Institute, who is a consultant to the Broad Prize. These two Broad acolytes have penned numerous pieces disagreeing with licensure for educational leaders, advocating opening up the pipeline to school leadership jobs to noneducators (Broad Foundation and Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2003), and attacking

schools of education and school-system leadership preparation. Hess has even created his own criteria to attack courses offered in such programs by using their course syllabi against them (Hess & Kelly, 2005). Their agenda has been to discredit, demean, and denigrate university leadership preparation and the entire apparatus that defines and controls access to educational leadership. In short, theirs is an agenda to deprofessionalize educational leadership preparation (see English, 2004, 2010; English, Papa, Mullen, & Creighton, 2012).

What Broad and his agents miss is an understanding of their own self-interest in their crusade—and it is a crusade, not a polite conversation. Neoliberals like Broad play by their own rules, and they have nothing but contempt for academic rules of conduct. They have no qualms about doing shoddy research and going directly to the press with the results. The National Education Policy

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Center at the University of Colorado Boulder has consistently exposed that neoliberal think tanks bypass traditional academic venues where research can be vetted and conclusions debated (see Horwitz & Keefe, 2012). This leaves neoliberals with only themselves to comment on their own work, and their blind spot is how they see their own work:

The logic of self-interest underlying all practices—particularly those in the cultural domain—is misrecognized as a logic of ‘disinterest.’ Symbolic practices deflect attention from the interested character of practices and thereby contribute to their enactment as disinterested pursuits. This misperception legitimizes those practices and thereby contributes to the reproduction of the social order in which they are embedded. Activities and resources gain in symbolic power, or legitimacy, to the extent that they become separated from underlying material interests and hence to misrecognized as representing disinterested forms of activities and resources. (Swartz, 1997, p. 90)

The article by Vachel Miller (2012) is a reasonably accurate portrayal of the rise of the Broad venture into educational administration. We disagree with Miller’s premise that the Broad agenda is some new attempt at school system centralization. Callahan (1962) and Tyack (1974), among others, have documented school system centralization as a phenomenon for the past century. The Broad agenda differs in its determined attack on boards of education, teacher unions, and schools of education as places or forums of dissent. Those promoting the agenda are clear about demonizing the practices, agencies, and locations of resistance to their plan to crack open what they see as a harmful monopoly.

Miller (2012) was quite correct in pointing out the tenets of machine bureaucracy and that the solution to almost all problems from this perspective is “tighter control” (Mintzberg, 1983, p. 167). He is not alone in visualizing the Broad venture as an assault on keeping the public in public education (see Anderson & Pini, 2011). He and such critics as Ravitch (2010) have pointed out that Broad is not accountable to anyone, and they consider his autocratic self-anointed educational vigilantism a fundamental threat to democracy.

Assessing the Results of the Broad Venture in Educational Management: Some Tentative Perceptions and Patterns

Broad’s assault on educational management and his work to discredit contemporary university programs can be understood from a perspective proffered by Bourdieu (1990) about competing fields and the logic of practice in those fields. Miller correctly pointed out that Broad’s background is in the private sector, where the tenets of machine bureaucracy are primal. Because there is no supra agency to bestow legitimacy, it remains a highly contested environment:

Legitimacy is indivisible: there is no agency to legitimate the legitimacy-giving agencies, because claims to legitimacy drive their relative strength, in the last analysis, from the strength of the groups or classes whose material and symbolic interests they directly or indirectly express. (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000, p.18)

Those who have greater material and cultural capital are at an advantage in this contestation. Broad’s millions, his ability to buy respectability and fund and buy avenues of influence, enables his particular perspective to find traction in the op-ed pages of the *Wall Street Journal* (Riley, 2009) and through the creation of whole organizations, such as the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. The bottom line is that, in a capitalistic economy, money tilts the scales of legitimacy in favor of those whose interests and agendas are the beneficiaries.

In attempting to assess Broad’s impact in the existing educational leadership field, we should look to the track records of the graduates of the Broad Superintendents Academy, including length of tenure, major controversies and conflicts, and student performance data, and the graduates’ backgrounds and current and past connections to university programs.

The on-the-job performance data that exist are spotty. To date, there have been no serious, objective third-party evaluations of Broad’s efforts and no comprehensive, reliable, and impartial published accounts of what the alumni of his Superintendents Academy have actually accomplished. The Broad venture remains a highly individualistic project of a well-financed eccentric.

Our initial effort to assess the graduates of Broad’s Superintendents Academy was based on data procured from the Broad website, professional social networks, school district websites, state department of education websites, press releases, traditional press sources, and an array of blogs. These disparate sources yield some interesting patterns, but the analysis has to be considered tentative, given the lack of a uniform source. Following are just a couple of our findings.

Educators vs. Gunslingers: Who Really Are the Broad Leaders?

Our Internet research shows 146 Broad Superintendents Academy graduates, at least 50% of whom were educators before their exposure to the Broad corporate curriculum, many in high-level central-office positions. By our determination, 20% were from the military and 15% from the corporate sector, with 5% from various public administration roles. In 10% of the cases, prior occupations were unknown. If half of the Broad graduates were educators when Broad selected them for admission, then how can we determine what value the Broad curriculum added to the educators’ skills? And how can we support claims that it doesn’t make any difference if an educator has had preparation in traditional college or university programs prior to using Broad’s academy as an alternative route?

Eisinger and Hula (2008) have called nontraditional school administrators “gunslingers” because they are unaware of the traditional narratives that appear to shape educators, and “they have not shaped their professional identity by championing particular education approaches or practices” (p. 113). Gunslingers have no loyalty to professional norms and are not concerned about their next positions in education. They cast themselves as outsiders. In this respect, Broad casts himself as a gunslinger, but an analysis of his graduates show otherwise when half of them entered his program as educators. This fact makes it extremely difficult to

directly tie the accomplishments of Broad graduates to their exposure to Broad's ideology.

An interesting initial pattern discerned from the data indicated that some Broad graduates moved a lot and would most likely conform to the "gunslinger" profile. Broad graduates often pass through the same school districts. The New York City Department of Education, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (North Carolina), Prince George's County Public Schools (Maryland), East Baton Rouge Parish School System (New Orleans), the Chicago Public Schools and, in particular, districts recently plagued with controversy and acrimony such as Atlanta, Kansas City, and Detroit Public Schools and the School District of Philadelphia consistently appear on the resumes of Broad graduates. While networking among professionals is an understandable result of attending the Broad Academy, the relationships that lead to these similar jobs, as well as the relationships between Broad graduates in executive positions and those in private and nonprofit leadership positions, should be explored in greater detail in order to determine the degree of influence these relationships have on public school expenditures and hiring practices.

The military model vs. public management: A matter of transferability.

By our calculation from Internet sources, at least 20% of the Broad graduates are former military officers. There appears to be a natural overlap between Broad's professed top-down, corporate-management style and the hierarchical structure of the military. Public education is a "loosely coupled" bureaucracy (Weick, 1976) that might not provide the correct context for such a leadership philosophy. An examination of the postmilitary careers of these members of the Broad cohort might reveal the degree to which the Broad model is applicable in public education settings where the norms of a professional bureaucracy are at odds with that of a military command structure. That there is a difference in orientation has been supported by some empirical work (Nestor-Baker & Hoy, 2001), with military leaders having a system-level orientation as opposed to an interpersonal orientation.

The record of military officers as school superintendents is mixed, from the data we examined. For example, one former U.S. Army colonel was unanimously terminated by his school district's board for a "material breach" (Volzke, 2009) of his contract. In a public statement, he indicated that he had "received 60 allegations of misconduct from trustees on March 4, and he and his attorney had refuted them in a 22-page letter back to the district. He declined to release either document, saying it remained a personal matter" (Volzke, 2009).

The For-Profit Mindset vs. the Pursuit of Civic Virtue: The Issue of Public Accountability

Broad graduates' backgrounds are a mixture of corporate for-profit mindsets and career-oriented professional perspectives. The first orientation is about making money. The second is about providing a service. The common good in the private sector is that which makes money for the stockholders or owners of an enterprise. This is not the definition of the common good in public service. A public

service enterprise may not make money and still be valuable (see Boyle & Burns, 2012). A number of Broad graduates have executive experience in the corporate management organizations that run publicly funded charter schools. Charter schools are a central piece of current reform agendas and, in the interest of transparency, an investigation into the relationship between leaders of the charter school movement and leaders in high offices of public education certainly appears warranted. Such an investigation could dig deeper than simply naming the players and further explore the level of influence charter school proponents are able to bring to bear as they work from inside state agencies or as they develop public private partnerships with state officials.

We believe the mixing of private and public is dangerous and erodes and harms the nature of civic virtue and the nature of the common good. But as Miller (2012) pointed out so eloquently, Broad could care less. That is why he and his notions of "fixing" public education are so dangerous. The warning by Ravitch is grim: "With so much money and power aligned against the neighborhood public school and against education as a profession, public education itself is placed at risk" (Katz, 2012, p. B7).

We can think of no better example of this than the case of a graduate of the Broad Superintendents Academy who resigned as superintendent amid great controversy (Higgins, 2010) after she had been given a vote of no confidence by district teachers, among other setbacks. Broad had given funds to the district through his Center for Reform of School Systems to assist in his notion of educational reform. However, Broad canceled his support when the superintendent abruptly resigned. Clearly there is only one way to reform schools, the Broad way or the highway.

Summary

Billionaires such as Eli Broad are immune to the usual accountability measures, even though the funding decisions and actions his foundations take affect a public service. There are few mechanisms in place that ensure that Broad's biases are subjected to a vigorous public discussion before his opinions are implemented. Broad has decided not to play by the usual rules of public accountability that his competitors, such as university preparation programs, which are subject to rigorous review by state departments of education and national accreditation programs, must play by. The power to ignore such processes means that the public has no protection if Broad's antidotes prove to be misguided or outright wrong. There have been enough examples from the history of education that well-funded and politically popular antidotes not only were wrong but set public education back decades—among them, the opinions of Frederick Winslow Taylor, the nation's first well-paid management guru and father of scientific management, proved to be wrong and unable to improve public education (Kanigel, 1997). There is a compelling similarity in today's context with respect to the managerial notions of Eli Broad.

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