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Collecting to the Core-Late Twentieth Century Education Reform

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Collecting to the Core — Late Twentieth Century Education Reform

by **Nancy P. O'Brien** (Professor of Library Administration and Head of the Education and Social Science Library, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; Education Co-Editor, *Resources for College Libraries*) <npobrien@illinois.edu>

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Column Editor's Note: The "Collecting to the Core" column highlights monographic works that are essential to the academic library within a particular discipline, inspired by the *Resources for College Libraries* bibliography (online at <http://www.rclweb.net>). In each essay, subject specialists introduce and explain the classic titles and topics that continue to remain relevant to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — AD

The late twentieth century saw a strong interest in improving education in the United States. The 1983 **U.S. Department of Education** report *A Nation at Risk* was the pivotal publication that brought many previous reports and research to the fore and spawned a decade or more of investigations into how to improve American schools.¹ This essay draws on the work of a few authors who have had a significant impact on the educational reform movement of the late twentieth century. While there are many notable authors, **Joel Spring**, **John Goodlad**, **Jonathan Kozol**, and **Paulo Freire** are recognized leaders in the effort to chronicle and improve education for all. One indicator of the importance of these authors is that their work has been reprinted, translated, issued in new editions, and is often checked out from libraries. In high demand and marked by enduring scholarship, their work is core in any education collection.

In 1981 the **National Commission on Excellence in Education** was created by the **U.S. Secretary of Education** to develop a report on the quality of education in America. The completed report was issued in 1983 and widely distributed as *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. Not only was the report made available in print, it was immediately included in the ERIC database as a microfiche document, and a Spanish translation was issued by the **U.S. Department of Education** in 1984. This report was the catalyst for decades of reform literature and initiatives in education. It is a critical piece of education history that continues to influence reform efforts. Evidence of the lasting impact of this report appears in the ERIC database where a title search of *A Nation at Risk* results in ten dozen articles, reports, and essays spanning the years 1983 to 2012. Publications focus not only on reform in public education but also on specific areas such as music instruction, higher education, libraries, assessment, and financial management. A key phrase in the report, "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of

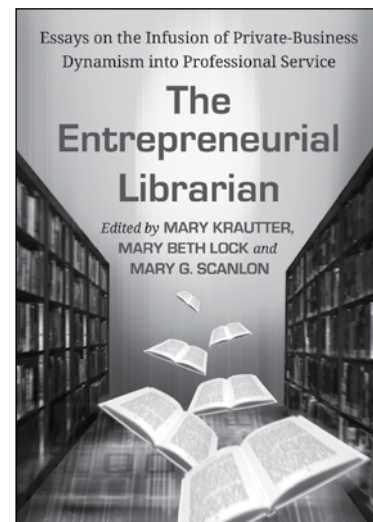
mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people," (p. 5) became a catch phrase found in other reports such as "'Stemming the Tide' of Mediocrity: The Academic Library Response [to] 'A Nation at Risk.'"² Twenty years after its publication, books such as *The War Against Excellence: The Rising Tide of Mediocrity in America's Middle Schools* were still referring to the report, highlighting its impact on American education.³ The fact that *A Nation at Risk* remains available online through multiple venues such as the free federal version of the ERIC database and is archived on the **U.S. Department of Education** Website further attests to its importance. This report is essential in understanding the ongoing efforts to reform and improve American education, whether through initiatives such as the most recent "back to basics" movement of the last two decades of the twentieth century or the *No Child Left Behind* legislation enacted in 2001.

The cry for reform in American education occurred earlier than *A Nation at Risk*, as can be seen in **Joel Spring's** 1978 *American Education: An Introduction to Social and Political Aspects*.⁴ Written as a textbook for teacher education students with an emphasis on the social foundations of education, this work provides a context for the political, economic, and social issues that affect education. Now in its 15th edition (2012), this text is revised every two years and considered to be one of the authoritative sources on American education. Updates have increased emphasis on the historical and the legal aspects of education to reflect changes in society. The chronicle of twentieth and twenty-first century education in the U.S. is recorded in this work, and at least one edition should be on hand in a library for students, faculty, and others.

John Goodlad's 1979 *What Schools Are For* addresses the central issue of the purposes of schools and the ways in which educational institutions fall short of those purposes.⁵ With its focus on both social aims and educational goals, this book promotes the importance of schools as a social good. One of the criticisms leveled by **Goodlad** is that the amount of non-instructional work required of school teachers and administrators detracts from education. This criticism presages existing concerns about the emphasis on testing, filling out forms, and other compliance issues associated with educational mandates like *No Child Left Behind* that consume time which could otherwise be spent on teaching. **Goodlad's** work focuses on the importance of and need for public education. His other publications continue this theme in

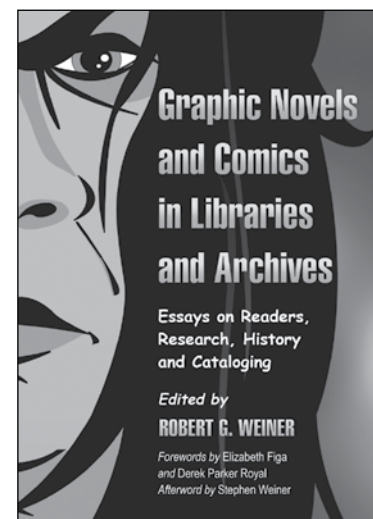
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book chapters such as “The Problem of Getting Markedly Better Schools” (1983) in **Kappa Delta Pi’s** *Bad Times, Good Schools* or his 1994 monograph *Educational Renewal: Better Teachers, Better Schools*.^{6,7} His message is one of hope for educational reform tempered by the reality of political, legal, social, and economic constraints.

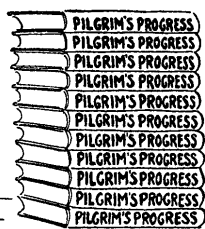
In 1991, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools* further highlighted disparities in America’s educational system.⁸ Author **Jonathan Kozol** shares his findings about segregation in schools based on economics and geographic indicators rather than racial segregation, which was supposedly eliminated through federal legislation in the 1960s. Focusing on the 1980s, **Kozol** reports that impoverished urban schools were primarily populated by children of color, while more affluent suburban schools were predominantly white. This sobering account of the local economic impact on schooling for children resonates today when the same issues are discussed in terms of social justice. Twenty years later, this indictment of U.S. education still offers a rationale to address inequities across school systems and improve schooling as a benefit to future growth.

American education has been profoundly influenced in the past few decades by the work of Brazilian educator and philosopher **Paulo Freire**. Just as the civil rights movement in the 1960s created an environment that encouraged social change, **Paulo Freire’s** work on social justice issues within the Brazilian

education system became a rallying point for many around the world, and especially in the United States. Since the 1970 publication in English of the revolutionary *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, it has become critical that libraries make his books available.⁹ Focused on the power and politics of education and the possibilities for social transformation through education, **Freire’s** monograph addresses the same concerns that American educators were discussing in the late twentieth century. A call for justice, equity, dignity, and compassion for students of all ages is interwoven with recommendations for how to accomplish these goals. **Freire’s** work emphasizes student engagement and educational awareness, enabling students to actively transform society. **Freire’s** books are so popular that it is typical for libraries to

hold multiple copies since they are used by educators, sociologists, and philosophers. His seminal work in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* remains foundational to his later publications.

From a landmark national report commissioned by the **U.S. Department of Education** to the pedagogical theories of a Brazilian educator, these works exemplify the ongoing role of education in providing equal opportunities to citizens. The late twentieth-century focus on educational reform mirrors other contemporaneous social issues and illustrates the intertwined and often interdisciplinary nature of education texts. This list of essential education reform titles provides a basis for understanding current issues in education, and for researchers interested in earlier reform movements, these works echo and inform previous cycles of education reform. 🌱



Endnotes

1. United States. National Commission on Excellence in Education. *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform: A Report to the Nation and the Secretary of Education, United States Department of Education*. Washington, DC: National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983. * <http://eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED226006.pdf>
2. **Dougherty, Richard M.** “Stemming the Tide’ of Mediocrity: The Academic Library Response [to] ‘A Nation at Risk.’” Washington, DC: Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1983. (ERIC Document Number ED243888).
3. **Yecke, Cheri Pierson.** *The War Against Excellence: The Rising Tide of Mediocrity in America’s Middle Schools*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003.
4. **Spring, Joel H.** *American Education: An Introduction to Social and Political Aspects*. New York: Longman, 1978.*
5. **Goodlad, John I.** *What Schools Are For*. Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1979.*
6. **Goodlad, John I.** “The Problem of Getting Markedly Better Schools.” In *Bad Times, Good Schools*, edited by Jack Frymier, 59-80. West Lafayette, IN: Kappa Delta Pi, 1983.
7. **Goodlad, John I.** *Educational Renewal: Better Teachers, Better Schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994.*
8. **Kozol, Jonathan.** *Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools*. New York: Crown Pub., 1991.*
9. **Freire, Paulo.** *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Translated by **Myra Bergman Ramos**. New York: Herder and Herder, 1970.*

Editor’s note: An asterisk () denotes a title selected for *Resources for College Libraries*.

Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — GPS

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One Sunday afternoon this past month a new colleague flew to Buffalo, New York from company headquarters in Nashville, Tennessee. The purpose of her trip was to visit our office in Niagara Falls, Ontario, which is about a 30-mile drive on the New York State Thruway and Queen Elizabeth Way, two highways connected by the Peace Bridge, which joins Buffalo to Fort Erie, Ontario across the Niagara River.

Monday morning at the office, I asked how her trip had gone. Not so well, in fact. Because this was her first trip to the area, arriving after dark, she brought her own GPS along so as not to get lost. She punched in the office address and let the GPS take over. “I was in Springville, New York before realizing,” she told me, “that I was driving in the wrong direction.”

Springville, for those readers unfamiliar with the area, which must be nearly everyone,

is some 35 miles due south of Buffalo on US Route 219, a pleasant village in the heart of the Buffalo area’s snow belt. While due south is not the direct opposite of the shortest route to Canada, since Fort Erie is actually due west of Buffalo, my colleague had indeed been right about her direction being wrong.

It’s a good thing she stopped and turned around. Otherwise, she’d have had a long night ahead. Actually, a long night and more ahead, since she realized something was off when the GPS indicated that her arrival time was the following afternoon. But the GPS hadn’t been wrong on that, since it was set to find routes without tolls, thanks to a recent vacation trip to Florida my colleague had taken with her husband and their GPS. The Peace Bridge is a tollway, \$3.00, and the GPS knew that.

So, south to Springville was the first leg of a toll-free and thankfully speculative journey

that could have veered west at some point to outflank Lakes Erie, Michigan, and Superior, then a northward turn toward Duluth with an eye on some remote border crossing in northern Minnesota leading into Ontario west of Thunder Bay, and then all free highways from there, east through Sault Ste. Marie, to Sudbury, then south to Toronto, east again at Hamilton, and then the home stretch, finally on the QEW, and Niagara Falls.

On the other hand, the GPS might have chosen to head east past Springville along the southern tier of New York State, and then north on Route 81 through Syracuse to the Canadian border, which is the St. Lawrence River there. To avoid a bridge toll, she’d drive east past Ogdensburg until the international border became a free land crossing on the other side of Massena, and turn north probably

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