

Book Review: “When Schools Work” by Bruce Fuller—Decoding Democratic Educational Reforms by Interdisciplinary Research Methods

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Abstract: *This essay reviews “When Schools Work: Pluralist Politics and Institutional Reform in Los Angeles” by Professor Bruce Fuller, a comprehensive examination of educational reform in Los Angeles. Fuller’s work, rich in interdisciplinary research methods and grounded in democratic education principles, critically analyzes the initiatives of the 1990s, the rise of charter schools, and the unique socio-political context of Los Angeles. It highlights the importance of community engagement, equitable resource distribution, and the role of grassroots organizations in driving reforms. Fuller’s meticulous approach to research methodology, integrating qualitative data and considering ethical implications, underscores the complexity of educational reform. The book’s insights into the transformative potential of educational policies make it a valuable resource for policymakers, educators, and scholars, offering universal lessons applicable beyond Los Angeles.*

Keywords: Educational Reform; Democratic Education; Interdisciplinary Research; Policy Analysis.

In “When Schools Work: Pluralist Politics and Institutional Reform in Los Angeles,” Professor Bruce Fuller explores educational reform initiatives in Los Angeles, a metropolis of significant scale in California. This scholarly work, published in hardcover by Johns Hopkins University Press on March 1, 2022, delves into the multifaceted challenges and strategies pertinent to enhancing urban education. It is a seminal resource for policymakers, educational practitioners, and academic researchers. Fuller articulates his objective as furnishing civic reformers with an arsenal of organizational tools and policy alternatives that effectively catalyze public institutions. He posits that enduring institutional transformation is rooted in emergent civic politics that foster impactful reforms and a disciplined approach to their execution. The “new pluralists,” as identified in this book, emerged from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, forging a political ethos based on mutual respect and a shared passion for innovative policymaking.

Fuller presents his beliefs and thoughts based on his “study of politics and institutional change in Los Angeles over the past quarter century” (p.4). In the 1990s, California experienced a significant shift in educational policy, marked by the introduction of standards-based accountability and robust monitoring systems like Romer’s “Open Court” (p.63). These reforms, aimed at enhancing curriculum rigor, coincided with an overall improvement in student performance, suggesting that organizational changes within the education system can positively impact student outcomes. However, these reforms were not without controversy. Critics, particularly from within the teaching community, voiced concerns about the top-down nature of these changes and their potential stifling effect on teacher and student creativity, encapsulating the belief that education had become overly focused on test performance. Notably, despite overall improvements, disparities in achievement between different racial groups persisted (p.64-66). The rise of charter schools in Los Angeles since 2002 signified a new educational diversity and innovation era (p.94). This growth represented a shift towards organizational competition and a break from traditional public school models, driven by a group of reformers known as outsiders. These outsiders, backed by influential figures and corporations, championed charter schools to introduce market-oriented educational dynamics. By 2021, nearly 300 charter schools were established in Los Angeles, reflecting a belief in the power of competition to drive educational reform. The interaction between traditional academic insiders and these new outsiders led to a hybrid approach to reform. This approach involved transferring control of some schools to external, often more autonomous entities, creating a diverse and decentralized educational landscape. The result was an expanded range of educational options for parents, aligning with the neoliberal ideology of free market principles. However, between 2002 and 2016, an intriguing trend emerged: the growth of charter schools coincided with a decline in private schools (p.100). This situation, while not explicitly evaluated as positive or negative, underscored the complex impact of charter schools on educational choice. While expanding options, their

proliferation paradoxically led to a decrease in private school enrollment, suggesting a shift in parental preference towards charter schools and potentially challenging the initial objective of diversifying educational choices without displacing existing ones. Among all the changes and uncertainties, a constant emerges the potential of new politics to allow diverse groups to shape institutions and drive novel policies, as witnessed in the transformation of LA education.

The efficacy of educational reforms implemented in Los Angeles prompts an inquiry into their potential replicability in other urban contexts and countries, considering their broader implications. Upon meticulous examination of the text, it becomes apparent that while the reforms in Los Angeles were distinctly tailored to its unique socio-economic, cultural, and political milieu, marked by diverse demographics and a rich history of activism, these specific conditions may not be universally present. Consequently, the direct replication of these reforms might not yield identical outcomes in differing metropolitan areas. Nevertheless, certain fundamental elements of Los Angeles' reform strategy hold universal applicability and can be adapted by other cities and nations. Crucial to the success in Los Angeles was the formation of diverse coalitions and the establishment of robust community engagement, wherein the perspectives of parents, students, and local organizations played a pivotal role in shaping policy decisions. This participatory approach was effectively augmented by political advocacy and synergistic collaborations with unions, which balanced the momentum of reform initiatives with safeguarding educators' rights and professional development. Additionally, the reforms strongly emphasized inclusive policies centered on racial equity and holistic support, encompassing academic needs and the broader necessities of students and their families, including cultural and linguistic considerations. Leadership in this context was distinguished by its adaptability and commitment to balancing rigorous standards and accountability measures with a deep respect for teachers' professional expertise and creativity. Such an approach necessitates a long-term commitment to transformative change, underscoring that meaningful educational reform is an enduring endeavor rather than a transient effort.

The future of democratic education, as seen through the lens of Los Angeles' transformation, offers critical insights for other cities and countries. First, Los Angeles' experience underscores the importance of addressing the disproportionate distribution of educational resources. A notable achievement was the significant improvement in the academic performance of Black students, illustrating that successful reform means elevating the performance of all students, not just those already excelling. Second, grassroots organizations and community engagement in Los Angeles are highlighted as crucial in driving educational reform. This contrasts sharply with cities like Shanghai, where I lived for a long time, and where the political system and constraints on non-profit and civil organizations limit similar grassroots involvement. The success in Los Angeles was partly due to the influence of diverse communities and organizations in shaping education policy. Finally, the criteria for evaluating educational success are crucial. In Los Angeles, true success was measured by test scores and equitable advancement across different racial groups. This focus on inclusive progress, rather than just improving already privileged groups, was central to the reforms. It's emphasized that for other cities to replicate Los Angeles' success, they must embrace the foundation of democratic education, which prioritizes equal opportunity and inclusive advancement for all students, irrespective of race, gender, or nationality.

Fuller's work exemplifies the necessity of critically engaging with the policy implications of research findings. This aspect of his methodology acknowledges that academic research is intrinsically linked to real-world applications and consequences. Throughout his analysis, Fuller maintains a rigorous research style, meticulously avoiding premature conclusions and initiating critical discussions on various outcomes, such as the varied effects of educational reforms. This approach underscores the importance of thorough investigation and cautious interpretation in academic research. Fuller's exploration of Los Angeles' educational landscape teaches the importance of acknowledging and embracing the complexities inherent in educational reform. His work transcends a simplistic narrative, delving into the multifaceted aspects of these reforms by considering political, social, and cultural dimensions. This methodology highlights the necessity of looking beyond surface-level explanations and seeking a deeper understanding of the multiple variables in educational settings. For instance, Fuller points out the need for additional research to gauge the long-term effects of pro-choice policies in education, emphasizing that correlation does not imply causality. This insistence on a nuanced approach is a hallmark of Fuller's research style and serves as a guiding principle for future academic inquiry. Furthermore, the research is not confined to a single academic discipline; it intersects with sociology, politics, economics, and education, demonstrating an interdisciplinary approach that enriches the analysis. This method offers a more holistic view of the educational reforms in Los Angeles, demonstrating how integrating different academic lenses can provide more nuanced and complete insights. Fuller's commitment to scholarly research is evident in his engagement with various theoretical perspectives, as seen in his discussions referencing diverse thinkers and works. Qualitative data, including

interviews, case studies, and observations, is another critical aspect of Fuller's methodology. This approach underlines the value of qualitative research in understanding complex social phenomena. While quantitative data provides important statistical insights, qualitative research adds depth and context, exploring the reasons behind or possible explanations for unexpected outcomes. This method allows for a more nuanced understanding of people's experiences and perceptions, offering a richer and more complete picture of the educational landscape. Lastly, Fuller emphasizes ethical considerations and humanistic care in educational reform. This perspective speaks to the crucial impact of research during pluralism, advocating for empathy and understanding. By highlighting the human aspect of educators and institutions, Fuller's research underscores the need to consider the human impact of research subjects and outcomes. This humanistic approach is essential in guiding future research, ensuring that it is conducted with an awareness of and sensitivity to its broader implications.

Professor Bruce Fuller's book is an outstanding and invaluable contribution to educational reform. Thorough in its analysis and rich insights, this book is particularly beneficial for policymakers, educators, and scholars interested in the complexities of urban education reform. Fuller's critical engagement with the challenges and strategies of educational reform in Los Angeles and his nuanced understanding of the socio-political context makes the book compelling. It demonstrates how integrating different academic lenses can offer more nuanced and complete insights. This book reflects Professor Bruce's solid and passionate commitment to educational research for decades. As readers, we engage in rich conversations with Calvinist jurist Johannes Althusius (p. 157), the Czech playwright Václav Havel (p. 163), and philosopher Victor Muñiz-Fraticelli (p. 157;176), capturing insights about the "contested differing economic and religious interests of Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and Thomas Jefferson" (p. 158); even profoundly the involvement of other books, *Organizations Man*, *The Lonely Crowd* and *The Graduate* (p. 160). While its specific focus on Los Angeles might limit its direct applicability to other contexts, the underlying principles and methodologies offer universal insights. It is a book that enriches current academic discourse and is poised to impact how educational reforms are understood and implemented in diverse urban settings.

Author Profile

Yi Wu, currently studying at the School of Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley, brings a multifaceted academic background encompassing engineering, economics, law, and public policy analysis. With a decade of entrepreneurial experience in the education sector and a history of leading research projects on digital education as the principal investigator, Wu has developed extensive expertise in education, science and technology, and policy analysis.