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Jumping Between Theory and Practice

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The World We Created at Hamilton High, by Gerald Grant.*

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Gerald Grant’s study of an American high school, The World We Created at Hamilton High,¹ attempts to straddle two broad genres of recent writing on education reform. The first genre is exemplified by books by Allan Bloom, Diane Ravitch, Chester Finn, and E.D. Hirsch,² and is supported by Reagan-era political pronouncements such as William Bennett’s vociferous speeches against Stanford University’s decision to replace its Western Culture course with a course entitled “Cultures, Ideas, and Values.”³ The largely ideological arguments made by authors working within this genre tend to take the form of modern-day Jeremiads, heralding the decline of the American Empire.⁴ Each contains a revisionist view of the 1960s in which excellence is seen to have been sacrificed to arbitrary student demands, while “the basics” of content were let slide by wishy-washy liberal teachers.

The second genre of writings is characterized by books by Theodore Sizer, John Goodlad, and by Ernest Boyer’s report to the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.⁵ It is supported by community-

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† Director, Another America, a nonprofit New York-based secondary-school curriculum development group, and Curriculum Connections, a curriculum distribution company.
3. See Graubard, Bennett Misreads Stanford’s ‘Classics’, N.Y. Times, May 2, 1988, at A19, col. 1 (quoting Bennett in recent speech as saying “[Stanford University had been] brought low by the very forces which modern universities came into being to oppose—ignorance, irrationality, and intimidation.”) Bennett’s point was that the new curriculum at Stanford is worse a priori because it contains fewer classics.

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based efforts such as the Effective Schools Movement. The main thrust of these arguments is less ideological than structural. American schools, these writers argue, do not treat teachers professionally, and do not allow for the self-expression of teachers or administrators. In addition, they are unduly hierarchical and non-participatory. At issue is not just curriculum, not just the end product of "what our 17-year-olds know," but also process: how our schools function. If the ideology-based efforts have gained more popular currency, the structurally-based arguments have had a greater impact on schools, perhaps because their proponents have operated as inside reformers instead of as outside critics.

In The World We Created at Hamilton High, Gerald Grant starts off Jeremiad-like, attributing the decline of American public education in the post-sixties era to the full range of reactionary fears: relativism, sexual permissiveness, federal intrusion, bureaucratic legalism, judicial activism, the ACLU, the decline of religion, "deconstruction," and the rise of "an adolescent life-style that includes heavy expenditures on cars, stereos, clothes, records, and drugs." Then, after some two hundred pages of Jeremiad, Grant parts company with Bloom, Hirsch, Bennett, and company. Grant leaps from his analysis, which would seem to imply a need for centralized authority and lists of "Great Books," to conclude that there are "two essential reforms" needed in public education. These reforms, surprisingly, are process-based and decentralized:

First, authentic local control—local in the sense of the school itself, not the district or the city—must be provided, to enable teachers and principals to create schools with a strong positive ethos. Second, the teaching profession must be reformed so teachers can assume genuine responsibility for their practice.

A number of positive, structural suggestions follow. Among them are increased teacher pay, extensive teacher and parent participation in decisionmaking, and broadened opportunities for students to pursue specific interdisciplinary interests in depth rather than being obliged to enroll in a fixed sequence of courses. Grant's suggestions, though not without echoes of the "cut-back-student-choice, cover-the-course" arguments,

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6. The Effective Schools Movement has challenged the assumption that nothing schools do will help underprivileged children. Research is used to identify structural qualities associated with schools that are successful in poor communities; reformers then target these elements for improvement in local schools. For a brief synopsis of the movement, see A. Bastian, N. Fruchter, M. GitteI, C. Greer & K. Haskin, Choosing Equality: The Case for Democratic Schooling 115-19 (1985).
7. P. 206.
move towards creating a truly nurturing learning environment, an agenda that, for instance, the Effective Schools Movement might endorse. However, Grant’s proposals and conclusions appear to have been plucked out of thin air, unsupported by the evidence he has presented. The problem with Grant’s work lies not in his conclusions but in his analysis.

I. The Research Method

One of the most promising aspects of *The World We Created at Hamilton High* is the methodology of the research reported. Grant took the time to get to know this high school: its students, parents, teachers, and administrators. With a team of five research assistants, Grant spent a full year studying Hamilton High.

After lecturing and writing about this research, Grant returned to teach a class in urban anthropology for two consecutive years at Hamilton. In the class, Grant asked students to become active researchers by studying the example of the social structures of their own school. Grant approached the idea by asking:

[W]hy not teach the students to be anthropologists? That is, teach them how to observe, to take notes, to interview, to analyze data—and then guide them in analyzing life in their own tribe, so to speak. Their findings could be used to raise critical questions about how to improve the quality of life in the school.9

The research, in other words, came from inside the school, by way of a participatory analysis of the community by its own members.

In addition to the information-gathering advantage gained through Grant’s participatory research strategies, his study of the educational experience at Hamilton itself provided an educational experience at Hamilton. Students had a rare opportunity to study a subject that felt real and valuable to them and learned in the process broader “social studies” skills: developing hypotheses, collecting and analyzing data, observing individual and group behavior, and reporting results. In keeping with his participatory methodology, by teaching this class Grant became himself a part of the school system. He was not an outside observer but a participant researcher.

After collecting and synthesizing his data, Grant brought together school administrators, teachers, and other staff to discuss the picture the data presented, what they would change to make it more accurate, and

what implications this study held for their day to day work at the school.\textsuperscript{10} The results of their collaborative effort may prove the most exciting aspect of Grant’s work. Unfortunately, this experiment in reform is only partially reported in the epilogue of \textit{The World We Created At Hamilton High}. The best part, the implementation of the group’s plan, is still to come.

II. The History of Hamilton

In spite of an impressive methodology and persuasive practical suggestions, the historical analysis Grant presents is oddly skewed. His story of Hamilton High nostalgically romanticizes the 1950s, attributes the school’s supposed decay to the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and presents a picture of Hamilton in the 1980s that is so harmonious it stretches the reader’s belief to the breaking point.

Oversimplifying more than one hundred pages of his own wandering argument, Grant states, “[T]he ethos of Hamilton High changed radically over time. The close-knit world adolescents encountered there in 1965 was frayed almost beyond recognition five years later. Then the black separatism of the mid-1970s gave way to racial harmony in the 1980s.”\textsuperscript{11}

According to Grant, from 1953 to 1965, Hamilton was as “an elite public school,” “an ideal place to teach.” That ideal meant:

The school was orderly; hallways glistened and lateness to class was a rarity. Students showed deference to teachers and seldom needed more than a stern glance to correct misbehavior. In fact, students vied to serve teachers, releasing them from onerous policing tasks. One could readily distinguish the students from the teachers—male teachers wore jackets and ties, female teachers wore dresses or skirts. A teacher would never be hugged in the hallway. The dress code reflected social distance and respect for authority.\textsuperscript{12}

Grant admits that there was racial segregation, even that there might have been some, albeit unconscious, racial prejudice. When Grant refers to this period as a time when parents trusted teachers and the community generally agreed on the moral and intellectual ethos of the school, he can only

\textsuperscript{10} The consensus reached by this group of school actors was that:
They wanted the school to emphasize dignity and respect for all persons . . . to develop a strong community spirit and encourage everyone to do his or her best, and to value the basic virtues of honesty and integrity. Finally, they saw a need for a school that was a learning community for faculty as well as students, one that provided for the growth of faculty both intellectually and socially.

P. 253.

\textsuperscript{11} P. 117.

\textsuperscript{12} P. 18.
be talking about the white parents and the white community. If the black community also felt satisfied with the educational system, Grant offers no evidence of it.

From the elite school era, Grant passes to the era of the “Deconstruction of the Old World,” a period he places from 1966 to 1971. Like Alan Bloom in The Closing of the American Mind, Grant sees “the 1960s” as a time of radical change that caused a decline in the country’s moral and educational systems. For Grant, the 1960s were not a time of innovation or ferment but merely a period of disruption and irresponsibility. In the end, Grant admits that legal desegregation was a positive outgrowth of the civil rights movement, although he vastly overstates its success in claiming that racism is not an issue today. But he cannot reconcile himself to the “deconstruction” of the status quo of the 1950s.

Grant claims that as a result of the disruptions of the 1960s, a proliferation of “soft” elective courses displaced serious core curriculum courses (Bennett’s “cafeteria-tray” choices) and teachers lost all authority. The picture Grant tries to paint is that some “good” (meaning “tough”) teachers withstood the winds of change at Hamilton, while the majority either caved in to student demands, or were younger teachers “eager to teach experimental courses they had experienced in college.”

In addition to general “softness,” Grant deplores what he sees as the new “legalistic” system, arising from the rebellious 1960s, that established new standards for student rights. A teacher’s authority and autonomy, Grant complains, are undermined if a student can invoke laws or legal rights against teachers. A teacher, in Grant’s view, should stand as


14. Grant’s use of the term “deconstruction” is extraordinarily sloppy. Grant is not referring to a development in modern philosophy or literary theory. He simply takes the term to be a synonym for “destruction” with negative associations with the movements of the sixties and seventies. His intentions are revealed when he slips from his “euphemism” to say “the social movements that swept through Hamilton destroyed [not, as earlier, “deconstructed”] the old order . . . .” P. 182.

15. See A. Bloom, supra note 2.

16. Although throughout the book Grant portrays the 1960s only as a time of terror and anarchy, he does allow two dissenting voices from Hamilton High to express a different view in the epilogue. In describing the reaction of two black teachers to his portrayal of the school, Grant reports: “[B]oth spoke of that era as the most exciting and fulfilling period in their teaching careers. They had developed new courses, became spokespersons to some degree for minority students, and felt energized as never before.” P. 243.

17. P. 67. An ironic aspect of Grant’s argument is that the urban anthropology course he taught at Hamilton would be disallowed as “soft” under his own analysis. The very fact that his methodology is so good undermines his analysis.

18. Grant, significantly, is dismayed at the conclusions reached in the 1968 ACLU document Academic Freedom in the Secondary Schools. Grant objects to language declaring that:

[students and their schools should have the right to live under the principle of rule by law as opposed to rule by personality. . . . Students have the right to know the extent and limits of the faculty’s authority and, therefore, the powers that are reserved for the students and the responsibilities that they should accept.
authority above the student, not as equal to the student—even under the law.

The last phase Grant maps out at Hamilton, 1980 to 1985, is a remarkable, even miraculous, transformation of this scattered, deeply divided community into one that is harmonious, studious, and improving on all fronts. Grant attributes this change in part to the influx of Asian students as a “good” minority group (as opposed to the blacks who, Grant implies, brought the school down and broke it apart) and to the mainstreaming of handicapped children. Little convincing evidence is presented to support Grant’s rather extravagant claim that racial harmony reigns in the 1980s or that handicapped students have been successfully mainstreamed.19

One gets the impression that Grant is not so much misrepresenting the facts as satisfying himself too easily with small gains in social justice. The vast majority of schools in this country are certainly more equitable places for black and handicapped students than they were twenty years ago. But discrimination still exists, and to ignore it is to completely discount the experience of students in school today.

III. The Rhetoric of the 1980s

There are many problems with the historical picture Grant tries to draw of Hamilton High, but the most surprising and frustrating is the degree to which his depiction rests on vague implication, repetition, and imprecise use of data. Grant meanders through his material, frequently reiterating his points and digressing into gratuitous historical commentary. Rhetorically and structurally, Grant’s research on Hamilton is used more as a source of appealing anecdotes than as a rigorous case study.

Anecdotes are a powerful means with which to instill in readers a point of view. The very fact that anecdotes are not logical arguments is what makes them persuasive. Grant’s seemingly amiable rambling discussions about problems individual teachers encountered or events that took place at Hamilton take on the status of a mythology akin to the type of advertisement discussed by Neil Postman in his article Critical Thinking in the Electronic Era.20 Postman writes:

P. 51 “In every area of discipline,” Grant remarks with disdain, “the ACLU statement took a lawyerly view of the need to reduce adult latitude and discretion in favor of specific definitions and rules.” P. 51.

19. In fact, Grant reports teachers’ comments that they do not feel comfortable with the handicapped students and a former student’s remarks that the handicapped students are not understood and are ostracized. Pp. 247–48.

The fact is that advertisers just about stopped using propositions seventy-five years ago. Today, the truth or falsity of their claims is simply not an issue. A McDonald's commercial, for example, is not a series of testable, logically ordered assertions. It is a drama, a mythology, if you will, of handsome people selling, buying, and eating hamburgers, and being driven to near ecstasy by their good fortune. Is this a claim? Is this true or false? . . . One can like or dislike a television advertisement, but one cannot refute it.21

Grant's recitation of the history of Hamilton High is, in Postman's terms, high drama, a mythology. He never makes the claim that Hamilton High is like other schools at the time; instead, he repeats appealingly gripping stories about Hamilton (for example, the student who said "don't you dare touch me or I'll have you arrested," the teacher who is investigated for sexual discrimination because of "supposedly" biased examples in a spelling class; the drug counselor who smokes a marijuana cigarette with students) and hopes to construct an image of public schools that will correspond with the experience of others. Like Reagan's speechmaking or McDonald's advertising, Grant's storytelling is a recounting of an allegory: it is up to the reader to draw the implied conclusion.

What makes Grant's case study particularly difficult to swallow as an allegory is that only he can decide what evidence about Hamilton is admissible. "Hamilton" is in fact a pseudonym. The cloak of anonymity distances the reader from the research. Does racial harmony really reign at Hamilton? Are handicapped students accepted into the mainstream? Doubts about such matters are effectively removed from the reader's questioning: we are to know nothing about Hamilton except what Grant tells us.

Grant's position, in this sense, is analogous to the appropriate role he sees for classroom teachers. As he believes teachers should be, he is knowledgeable about the material, a fact he establishes through explanation of an impressive research methodology. But once Grant has established his authority, like students we must trust that he is telling us all we need to know. He does not have to make explicit the links between his research and his conclusions. He is the link between research and conclusions.

Conclusion

After wading through a version of the history of the last three and a half decades to which I cannot subscribe, I was thus surprised to find that I would endorse most of the proposals Grant makes in the form of conclu-
sions. Some seem to fly in the face of his historical analysis, and one wonders where they came from.

One possibility is that Grant's own practice has steered him toward a different approach to school reform than his ideologically driven analysis. Grant's class in urban anthropology, for instance, where he taught students to research, analyze, and write about their own school and social situation, seems to have drawn him towards process-based reforms. Although Grant gives little specific account of his experience in this class, bits and pieces of information indicate that this was an exciting opportunity for students and teacher to explore a real and important intellectual pursuit in a collegial manner.

The second example of Grant's practice is his organizing of the forum of teachers and principal of Hamilton in forming a sense of community for collaborative problem-solving. There he pays careful attention to assuring that teachers of all perspectives participate, that what the group decides is not imposed on other teachers, and that the principal comes into the group as a leader of a team effort, not an authoritarian decisionmaker who makes his decision clear and broadcasts it to those below him.

*The World We Created at Hamilton High* is a very mixed bag. Its methodology is excellent, its analysis of a particular school is confusing and at times unbelievable, and the proposals it presents for creating a strong sense of community as the basis for school reform are, by and large, very good, if unconnected to either the logical analysis or the mythological world-view upon which they are supposedly based. In the end, perhaps the best aspect of the book is not its description of "Hamilton High" but the model it sets up for participatory research; the methodology of the study, Grant's class on urban anthropology, and the multi-constituency forum Grant created to facilitate collaborative shaping of the future of a high school.