

Timeless Learning: How Imagination, Observation, and Zero-Based Thinking Change Schools: A Review

Chelsea T. Morris*
University of West Georgia

Lindsey A. Chapman
University of Florida

*Corresponding Author: cmorris@westga.edu
Received : 2019-01-10
Accepted : 2019-04-23

How to cite this paper: Morris, C. T., & Chapman, L. A. (2019). Timeless Learning: How Imagination, Observation, and Zero-Based Thinking Change Schools: A Review. *Journal of Culture and Values in Education, Volume 2 (1)*, 113-118.

Abstract

This review provides a broad discussion related to how the authors of *Timeless Learning: How Imagination, Observation, and Zero-Based Thinking Change Schools* speaks to ongoing institutional practices that limit and oppress learner's leadership, imagination, and self-exploration. The book's focus on the biodiversity of learning is highlighted within the review as a necessary strength to the humanization of students and to seeing the value of student-driven learning.

Keywords: Student-Centered Learning, School Leadership, Student Voice

Bibliographic Citation: Socol, I., Moran, P., & Ratliff, C. (2018). *Timeless learning: How imagination, observation, and zero-based thinking change schools*. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Brand. ISBN: 978-1119461692 (Print, 320 pages).

Most educators have seen the image. A child stands on the ground, two others at her side, the latter unable to see a ball game due to their height and the unwavering fence that stands between. Under this image, the term "equality." In a juxtaposed image, the height-blinded two children are propped by one- and two-crate supports so that they also can now see the ball game. Under this second image, the term "equity." While the metaphor is our own, in their new book, *Timeless Learning: How Imagination, Observation and Zero-Based Thinking Change Schools*, three authors ask a provocative question, what if, perhaps, the fence is the problem (Socol, Moran, & Ratliff, 2018).

This book precariously critiques education: the authors recognize schools as a place of grand potential for change while simultaneously acknowledging the historical and sociopolitical factors that may prevent them from ever being such. *Timeless Learning* argues that the

narrative of schools today is one based largely on more than a century of inequity, “rinse and repeat” models of reform, and the politicized nature of education. The authors beg that this narrative change in the schools we build for learners, dappling with complex questions such as how to respond when such change does not match strategic plans currently restricting local schools and school districts. To that end, *Timeless Learning* offers a pathway for educators to identify what would make them feel safe enough to buck tradition. The authors argue that the first step is for educators, both individually and collectively, to reckon with the ways culture limits the growth of their students and embrace the freedom for students to think individually and originally:

That kind of [learning] space – where education’s best idea generators, designers, builders, engineers, and makers can collaborate and challenge everything – might be our nation's best investment – but it would also be our biggest threat to the status quo – the status quo of schooling and thus the status quo of our sociocultural and economic environments. (p. 126)

This emphasis requires educators to analyze the ways in which school culture is a delimiter to reform and how the traditional narrative of schools creates a barrier to change. The result of such analyses would likely lead to the conclusion that it makes good sense that, in order to do what is necessary, productive critical thought on the part of both educators and students must occur.

With chapters that include phrases like “All Means All”, “Liberating Learners and Learning”, and “The Education World Learners Want,” the book authors, Socol, Moran, and Ratliff, amplify the belief that education should be student-centered. *Timeless Learning* provides a believable rationale for actualizing of school change through a complete mindset shift on the part of educators, “from classroom to learning space, from teacher to facilitator, from school to education” (p. 69). Perhaps intentionally, even the written form of the book dismantles the ongoing cultural norms of expertise passed to learner. Chapters can be read alone or out of order and readers are invited to actively share ideas with the authors through social media platforms, stop mid-chapter to observe children, and examine their community’s culture before proceeding. The linearity of a traditional book is forgotten. As an added dimension, every chapter ends with a provocation, a structured inquiry, a reflective pause, and a list of immediate action that can be taken for changing school culture.

The introduction outlines the authors’ vast experience in the field and is followed by an overarching commitment to inclusive settings for all learners in Chapter 1. Chapters 2 and 3 examine and question the purpose of schools in order to offer a new lens through which to view the concepts offered throughout the remainder of the book. They note that these two recommended perspectives, *kidwatching* and *risk-taking*, are never mutually exclusive for, to do either effectively, educators must question norms and traditions, which the authors argue have emerged over time from a Ford Model of schooling. This model suggests schools have not changed much over the last century and resemble the goals and structures of factory settings (e.g., desks in rows, bell schedules, age-based classrooms, top-down teacher control), a

comparison that has been made by others who have promoted reform of America's public schools (Gatto, 2001; Robinson, 2010). The authors argue that the colonization of schools has resulted in a system of compliance-driven education where students and educators continue to follow norms uncritically. "To change the story, we must change the narrative of the schools we build for learners" (p.21), they note, adding that educators must grapple with why they participate to help "create a narrative that often refutes the belief that we truly value all children" (p.21).

Chapters 4 through 6 describe the driving forces that should cause educators to engage in bringing about deep change in the instructional process that would include, among other things, the empowerment of students, hesitation by teachers and administrators before dismissing new ideas, and work to develop learning pathways that reflect respect for the learner as a capable being. This departure from compliance-driven schooling represents a change for the cultural norms of schools by placing an emphasis on student voice and choice. Many of the book's reflection and prompts for these chapters suggested to readers in these chapters focus on consideration of the future: the greatest challenges for educating children for life readiness, preparing students for jobs we don't know exist. This requires putting school content into student context, not the student into school contexts.

In its final chapters, *Timeless Learning* elevates to the pedagogy behind how to realize the school change process and ends with a call to break down walls, both physically and metaphorically: "The walls of schools are a contrived barrier that keeps kids and teachers apart within the system. The walls of schools keep new practices, tools, and strategies out and traditions in" (p. 251). The stories that are intertwined throughout the book serve to create an umbrella of timelessness and zero-based design in learning. By this device, the authors drive home the need to teach students and educators to be proper critics of school culture and too, the need for education to serve in the liberation of its learners.

Perhaps the most impressive feature of *Timeless Learning* is the way it offers solutions for change without becoming a "how to" book similar to so many current education books on the market, a goal achieved of which the authors are proud of (personal communication, October 23, 2018). In regard to this principle, they include a section titled, "There Are No Simple Recipes Really" and wrestle with being unable to write a "list of eight things to do" (p. 185). Instead of a prescriptive program, this book is about individual change and the context in which change might occur as well as how educators can, by working within such contexts, realize the change process. Likewise, this book is about redefining opportunities for students. Growing evidence supports increased achievement and development of civic values when students are supported to make decisions about their education (e.g. McCombs & Miller, 1997; Morgan & Streb, 2002). This is admirable in a largely top-down, accountability driven educational system which necessitates a philosophical shift that places value on every individual's passion and ambition. Despite the magnitude of the changes recommended, they do not require an entire system change to implement -- they are mainly about changes in the way participants in the educational system think and act -- making them actionable steps for educators who can bring about the change process within their individual classrooms immediately.

Finally, for some, *Timeless Learning* may appear a seemingly radical approach and draw questions such as, *Is it realistic? Is it possible? What about in my school?* Indeed, it is easy to misinterpret *Timeless Learning* as an overly idealistic or a “burn it down” approach to educational reform, especially when the authors make statements like “structurally there isn’t much in the traditions of schooling that we believe is worth saving” (p. 136). However, the greatest strength of the book is the accounts and anecdotes from the author’s own work as school and district leaders that make change visible. Rather than isolated suggestions, they offer readers an invitation to join the movement that they have already started.

No one book could be a comprehensive vision of change in education, but it is necessary to point out one glaring omission in the book. Despite strong statements of belief in transformative education being for *all* learners, *Timeless Learning* does not adequately nor explicitly address the issue of student difference. In Chapter 6, a story congratulates a librarian for making change that she previously feared could not be implemented “because there were one or two kids who might have a problem” (p. 163). The reality remains that after the change, those students still existed and yet, the authors did not discuss whether the change was, indeed, a problem for them. Also, in Chapter 5, and throughout the book, universal design for learning (UDL) is emphasized as a “path available to all learners, not just as a special accommodation” (p.135). However, the argument that a new approach to UDL meets the needs of students with disabilities is logical fallacy. At times this approach seems to outright dismiss the notion of difference, positioning dis/ability merely as a social construction that need not be regarded. Relatedly, issues related to inclusion and classroom management (mentioned explicitly) or racism and classism (mentioned implicitly) are positioned as issues suggested to disappear if learning is student-driven and project-based. We contend that the education’s “-ism” issues are far more complex than this assertion and that the failure to recognizing student diversity beyond stereotypical assumptions of student interest perpetuates exclusion rather than fostering inclusion.

Critique aside, *Timeless Learning* has profound implications for broader conversations about educational equity. The authors remind us that “at the microlevel of beliefs and missions, educators must work to ensure all children know that their voice matters, that they have agency in making choices and decisions, and that they can be responsible for their own learning” (p.26). As educators, the authors of this review must admit that it is difficult to think these ideas, offered by Socol, Moran, and Ratliff, are possible given that our system in its current form does not even afford these same opportunities for autonomy and decision-making to teachers. It can be hard to be optimistic about change in a time where most reform translates to scripted curriculum initiatives (Cucchiara, Rooney, & Robertson-Kraft, 2015; Eisenbach, 2012) and waning autonomy (Zeichner & Hollar, 2016). However, as teachers and teacher educators, we share the belief that change is so desperately needed and *is absolutely possible*.

To end, we return to the image of the children and the fence offered at the beginning of the review. If we never question why seeing over the fence – *that specific fence* – is the expectation, students will continue to require crates in order to see. Instead, when learning is placed in the hands of students, we may just find that they know better. Perhaps they will cut eye holes in

the wood, make a fence out of transparent materials, or remove the planks all together to catch a better view of the game. Or perhaps more importantly, if they turn and face the other direction, they may discover that the baseball game isn't what they are meant to be watching at all.

References

- Cucchiara, M. B., Rooney, E., & Robertson-Kraft, C. (2015). "I've never seen people work so hard!" Teachers' working conditions in the early stages of school turnaround. *Urban Education, 50*, 259-287. doi:10.1177/0042085913501896
- Eisenbach, B.B. (2012). Teacher belief and practice in a scripted curriculum. *The Clearing House, 85*, 153-156. doi:10.1080/00098655.2012.663816
- Gatto, J. T. (2001). *The underground history of American education: A schoolteacher's intimate investigation into the problem of modern schooling*. New York: Oxford Village Press.
- McCombs, B. L., & Miller, L. (1997). *The learner-centered classroom and school: Strategies for increasing student motivation and achievement*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Morgan, W., & Streb, M. (2002). Building citizenship: How student voice in service-learning develops civic values. *Social Science Quarterly, 82*, 154-169. doi:10.1111/0038-4941.00014
- Robinson, Ken. (2010). *Changing education paradigms*. TED Ideas Worth Spreading.
- Socol, I., Moran, P., & Ratliff, C. (2018). *Timeless learning: How imagination, observation, and zero-based thinking change schools*. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Brand.
- Zeichner, K., & Hollar, J. (2016). Developing professional capital in teaching through initial teacher education: Comparing strategies in Alberta Canada and the US. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community, 1*, 110-123. doi:10.1108/JPC-01-2016-0001