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An Assessment of the Business Model Paradigm Shift in Education

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In the ancient world, most people regarded education as an *end* in itself. Disciples of Socrates, Aristotle, Jesus, or Confucius did not show up for the teacher’s lectures in order to fulfill a requirement for graduation or to achieve a professional certification. If you asked a follower of Socrates, “Why are you following this teacher around everywhere listening to his words?” he would not have answered, “I need to get a passing grade in this course in order to be a certified chariot driver.” The chief end of education was *being educated*. Education was not just a *means* to an end, but a worthy goal in itself, regardless of the economic value thereof (Lianeri, 2011, 124).

Emphasis on the intrinsic virtue of education lasted into the early history of the American Republic. According to the founders of the United States, religion, character, and education were interdependent and essential to a healthy nation. Therefore, they legislated that, “Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.” (U.S. Government, 1787). Children were educated mainly in order to be virtuous people and good citizens.

When the industrial revolution emerged, education shifted to target practical economic goals. Factory work was the principal focus of training. As Sir Ken Robinson wrote, “Public schools were not only created in the interest of industrialism, they were created in the image of industrialism. In many ways, they reflect

the factory culture they were designed to support” (Robinson, 2009, 230). However, beginning in the late 20th century, another cultural shift occurred that transformed education as well as most every corner of American life. This event might be labeled the *Business Model Revolution* (hereafter *BMR*), a social paradigm shift where nearly all activities are assessed with quantitative data and economic measurements, and where most institutions take corporate practices as their paradigmatic model (Madrack, 2011). Adherence to a “business philosophy of everything” played no small role in the 2016 selection of the President of the United States of America. The electorate chose a quintessential businessman who professes to be all about “making deals” and being a Business Model expert. The primary objectives of the Business Model are 1) profit growth, 2) efficiency, and 3) outperforming competitors. The idol of the corporate world is **quantitative data**. Some teachers are greatly discouraged by this revolution. A teacher who will retire at the end of this year wrote his lament of the Business Model infecting education, “I’m retiring, not because I no longer have a passion for it, but because I cannot understand or support the direction we are moving. I know that there are always cycles in education, but this one seems to be more of a paradigm shift than a cycle.” (Doucette, 2017)

The *BMR* paradigm shift in education is well underway. It might be at a point of no return. In the years to come as the history of education is retold, it seems likely that this

transition will be described as a pivotal epoch, unless, of course, reformers with a different model soon change the trajectory.

Co-opting Family, Church, and School as Business Endeavors

Prior to about 1980, there was a rather clear line of demarcation between business/corporate organizations and institutions that exist for the well-being of society in general. Society was somewhat concerned about insulating the *family*, the *church*, and the *school* from the potential “greed” of corporate interests. The *BMR* changed that. According to Sylvia (2014), the corporate world has “hijacked” public education. Though the focus of this study is education, it must be first acknowledged that the *BMR* is a broader cultural phenomenon that has infected many corners of contemporary life.

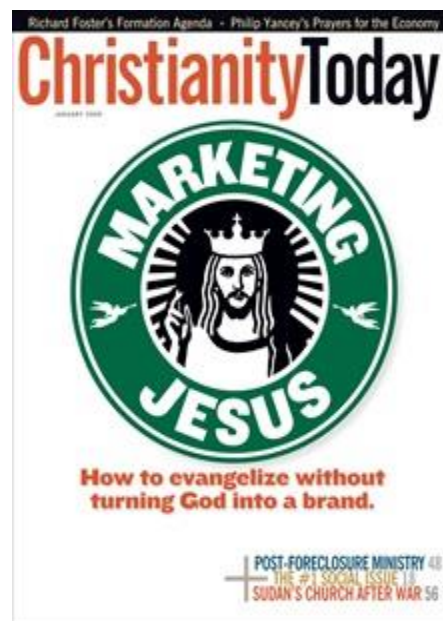
The BMR and Family

In terms of family, gone are the days when most spouses meet for the first time face-to-face at church, school, or a chance encounter at the roller-skating rink. Four years ago, *The Independent* reported, “It’s likely that, soon, the majority of people will be meeting their future spouse online” (Randall, 2013). *Eharmony* advertises that people can now *custom order* a mate based on 29 compatibility features (Ford only has 24 categories for custom ordering a truck). About one-third of all people courting today “custom order” their mates via corporations such as *eHarmony.com* and *Match.com*. These online corporations advertise that you can place your order for your future husband/wife with a 29-factor checklist. There is little difference today between ordering a new pickup truck from the local dealership, with all desirable accessories, and ordering your husband on a corporate website like *eHarmony*, with all desirable accessories (Heffernan, 2011). In this convenient new process, perhaps we

overlook what normally happens when our shiny new automobiles become old, rusty, and broken down, and how that may become the same approach we take with our custom-ordered spouse.

The BMR and Religious Institutions

In the mid 1980s, the business world also began to infect religious institutions more strongly than ever before. The emergence of the “mega-church” was a result of business leaders teaching ministers and preachers the tricks of “focus-groups,” “surveys,” “marketing,” “spreadsheet analysis,” and “SWOT analysis.” Business executives convinced many pastors to change the old principle of “preach what the people *need* to hear” to “preach what the people *want* to hear”—and it worked. Megachurches now have thousands of informally dressed participants every Sunday, and inside some churches are a McDonalds and a Starbucks—provided as a result of the market demand as indicated by the young adult demographic focus groups (Brown, 2002; ABC News, 2005; Gite, 2001). *Christianity Today* addressed this trend in their January 2009 edition (see image one).



The BMR and Schools

The principal institution *this* article is concerned with is education. Success in education more and more is determined by the analysis of quantitative outcomes generated through efficient computer-manufactured data. Efficiency goals have diminished the value of brick-and-mortar schools and led to a nearly frenzied obsession for online education (Christiansen, 2011). The obsession with data brought about by this trend is perhaps the most salient of issues. More than ever before, students are becoming data-points evaluated for retention, progression, and graduation. Outsourcing, canned curricula, and digitization of all processes characterize the nature of teacher preparation today. The nature of a student as a “customer” is an issue that has changed the relationship and dynamic between the teacher and the student (Sorrell, 2013).

The move toward the BMR for education began in earnest in the 1980s. Now the shift is still in progress. The move toward entirely consumer-oriented education is approaching completion.

Consequences of the BMR for Education

What are the consequences of the *BMR*? How has it affected the way in which educators are prepared, teach, and measured? What are the far-reaching consequences to society, to the nation, and to the world? Is this a paradigm shift that needs to be reversed? Is it possible to reverse it? Let us endeavor to answer these and several other questions related to this important historic revolution in American education.

Students as Data Points

I began teaching in a state university education department in 2009. In the past eight years, I have experienced a dramatic shift in the way in which teacher candidates

are prepared. The shift is most notably characterized by the fact that students are increasingly regarded as data points. There is a much heavier reliance on “rubrics,” and computer data applications targeted towards “efficiency” and “standardizing” educational processes. Sir Ken Robinson prophetically cautions against “a culture of testing and standardization that has narrowed the curriculum and sees students as data points and teachers as functionaries rather than as living breathing people” (Robinson, 2013). Is it within our constitution to reduce students to “data-points”? A former superintendent recently interviewed teachers to find out why so many are retiring. One explained his principal concern, “Drop the ‘data driven’ sham. Data are not sensitive to context and kids are not data” (Arnold, 2017).

Outsourcing

One of the most overt symptoms of the shift is the way in which teacher preparation programs are now, for the sake of efficiency, **outsourcing** their assessments. What used to be a personal, relational, and subjective process is becoming a clinical, sterile, and objective function of assessors with no relationship to the student. A prime example of “outsourced” assessment is the national trend toward yielding to the *edTPA* process, an agency that remotely evaluates student teachers. The outsourcing of assessments to business corporations such as Pearson, Inc. nearly eliminates professors’ need for expertise and aptitude as assessors. The Pearson Corporation has processes in place to “calibrate” assessors to make sure that, regardless of who the assessor is, all come to the same evaluation of any given student’s performance with *edTPA* (Pearson, 2017). *EdTPA* may be efficient and standardized, but Vigon (2015) who teaches education at Northeastern Illinois University argues persuasively that the *edTPA* assessment is not effective at predicting teaching performance.

As it goes with most businesses, efficiency dominates the decision-making; outsourcing is generally regarded a highly efficient strategy, but at what cost?

Academic Dishonesty

Since education is rarely thought of anymore as an end in itself, but only a *means* to an end of a diploma, degree, or certificate that entitles the holder to a paycheck, educational cheating has become an industry in itself. Most educators agree that academic cheating is currently an epidemic. Businesses now exist that will sell students guaranteed “A” papers (Stevensen, 2001); other businesses will have one of their own take an online class in the customers name and guarantee an A grade (boostmygrade.com); still others will just sell the customer a diploma. Today students can essentially purchase an otherwise legitimate degree through a multitude of vendors. Little to no learning is required of the consumer.



The Student as “Customer”

The main issue that the *BMR* brings to the schools is an obsession with the “bottom line.” In business, the “bottom line” refers to the quantifiable data that indicates profit, economic growth, and financial performance. Business people are trained to maximize profit and minimize costs. Efficiency is one of the most important means towards business profits. At the university level, a new efficiency creature emerged a few decades ago that has radically affected the nature of college

education everywhere: the “for-profit online university.” These “universities,” among which are notably the University of Phoenix, Virginia College, and Southern New Hampshire University, are wizards at marketing and offering quick and easy paths to a degree. Their television ads routinely invite potential customers to get your degree “in your pajamas” in just “two years” (Education database online, 2017). These for-profit businesses have drawn students away from traditional public universities, and in response, public universities have been scurrying to mimic many of the practices of the for-profit institutions such as online courses and streamlined programs. Many administrators are now speaking in terms of students as “customers” (Sorrell, 2013). University administrations are more than ever focused on marketing and retaining their “customers” as a result of the competition they face from the corporate universities who are experts at the Business Model.

Perhaps the most important data-point for the public universities as they try to compete with the for-profit schools is the enrollment numbers. They are perhaps the first concern of a typical university president trying to improve his or her campus. Marketing, recruitment, and retention have, therefore, taken a more central role not only for administrators but also for professors.

But there is another means by which enrollment may be increased. If the admissions process is loosened, if GPA standards are lowered, if grades are inflated, and if poor performance is overlooked, schools can admit more and keep more students with tuition dollars. I am personally aware of at least a dozen examples of students “getting away with” less than honorable student activity as a result of the school’s concern not to “lose” another customer.



Businessman Albert S. Humphrey developed the SWOT analysis that is now embraced by many educational institutions.

The Bottom Line is the Bottom Line

One of the most important ways that businesses increase bottom lines is by eliminating poor performers within their operations. Poor performers harm the data, the bottom line. In a K-12 school setting, the poor performers are the students who struggle the most. It helps the “bottom line” of a school when such students are “eliminated” (Bennett, 2013). Elimination means expulsion, drop out, or transfer. But is that what we want? This business technique exacerbates the insidious “school-to-prison pipeline” problem that many caring educators are intent on remedying. The school-to-prison-pipeline begins with poor performing students being expelled (usually justified as a disciplinary measure) and sent into an unsupervised environment where gangs and other risks often pervade (Heitzeg, 2016). From there it is but an escalator ride to incarceration.

The Inefficiency of Teaching Higher-Order Skills

The *BMR* demands data. The result is that the central focus of education has become the student’s ability to do well on a multiple-choice test graded by a Scan-tron? Should education not have broader goals than that? Should schools be concerned with students’

ability to think critically? To be courageous? To be kind? To be open-minded? Those used to be integral to the aims of public education. The problem is that those factors are very difficult to “quantify” digitally. As a result, the *BMR*, has radically altered the goals of education. The only outcomes that the *BMR* considers valid are those which are “measurable,” and that means data-collection. Those important unquantifiable “intangibles” (kindness, integrity, creativity, etc.), which used to be so central to a well-rounded education, are necessarily avoided as *inefficient*.

Perhaps the most notable formulation of the many objectives of education was provided by Benjamin Bloom (1956). “Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives” is classically represented as a pyramid upon which students move from lower order skills to higher order skills, culminating in their ability to think innovatively.

Bloom’s objectives begin with the student *memorizing* information, then *understanding* what they have memorized. Those are the “lower order” thinking skills. But Bloom felt it was ludicrous to end with those objectives. Next, according to Bloom, the student should be able to *apply* what she has memorized and understood. And then the highest order of skills is the student thinking for herself: her ability to form an opinion about an issue that requires a theory, and her ability to make value judgments based on what she has learned. Finally, Bloom wants a student to be able to think outside the box—go beyond the teacher—*innovate*. Attaining that goal has been the hallmark of America’s educational superiority (Hughes, 2004).

What the *BMR* does, however, is effectively chop off the top half of Bloom’s taxonomy. For the sake of efficiency, a computer program is the assessor, and a

computer cannot assess higher-order or creative thinking. Therefore, to serve the *BMR*, half of the classic goals of education (perhaps the most important ones) are necessarily discarded. A strong case has been made that standardized tests, which are also idols of the *BMR*, do not and cannot evaluate critical thinking skills (Gardiner, 2012). Insofar as teachers naturally target their teaching for test success, the result is that critical thinking is now devalued by many, eliminated by others.

The Business Model, with its demand for efficiency, steers clear of higher-order skills so that a computer can do the job of assessing (grading). The highest of high-order thinking is innovation, ingenuity, and creativity (Bloom, 1956; Anderson, 2001). With the heavy emphasis on memorization and teaching to the test, students are no longer invited to do innovative thinking. It is inefficient, the Business Model insists, to waste class time discussing anything that is not going to be on the test. This top level of educational objectives, however, is the garden from which genius like Edison's sprouts. Also, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce (2012), this is the resource from which the United States has historically drawn its most valuable commodities. The Business Model stifles innovation and in doing so threatens the lifeblood of our national economy. It was the absence of an emphasis of higher-order objectives in education that led Albert Einstein to offer his scathing critique of schools:

School failed me. I wanted to learn what I wanted to know, but teachers wanted me to learn for the exam. I felt that my thirst for knowledge was being strangled by my teachers; grades were their only measurement. How can a

teacher understand youth with such a system? ... from the age of twelve I began to suspect authority and distrust teachers. (Einstein, 1932)

To be sure, Einstein attended school before the *BMR*; but his concerns were prophetic. If he were a student today, we can imagine that his rant would have been more passionate. The most significant element of education sacrificed on the altar of business efficiency is critical thinking.

Sir Ken Robinson highlights a study of students' ability to "think outside the box," a process he called "divergent thinking." What he discovered was that this ability is not one that improves with the education under the Business Model, but ironically is extinguished by this type of education.

There was a great study done recently of divergent thinking. It was published a couple of years ago... in a book called *BreakPoint and Beyond*, and on the protocol of the test if you scored above a certain level you'd be considered to be a genius at divergent thinking.... Now you need to know one more thing about them - these were kindergarten children. So what do you think? What percentage at genius level? 98%. Now the thing about this was it was a longitudinal study, so they retested the same children five years later aged 8 to 10. What do you think? 50%. They retested them again five years later, ages 13 to 15. You can see a trend here can't you?... this shows two things: one is we all have this capacity and; two, it mostly deteriorates. Now a lot of things have happened to these kids as they've grown up, a lot. But one of the most

important things that has happened to them I'm convinced is that by now they've become educated. They've spent ten years at school being told there's only one answer it's at the back... and don't look. (Robinson, 2010)

Robinson claims that the explanation for this deterioration in innovative thinking is, paradoxically, education. According to Robinson, there can only be one answer because the Scan-tron can only be programmed to assess one answer. On the altar of the Business Model our young people's ability to think differently is sacrificed. There is surely a high societal price that we are beginning to pay, but I fear that the dire consequences still lay ahead.



Socrates teaching before his execution; his crime was teaching students to think critically. Has that become a crime again?

The Inefficiency of Tenure

The *BMR* has had a great impact on the status and role of university faculty. Since efficiency and cost-saving is so important in the *BMR*, now, more than ever, faculties are comprised of a large quantity of part-time and adjunct instructors. These “human resources” are valuable in the Business Model as they require fewer benefits, can be terminated at will, and will never result in a tenure line that might put the institution in a financial commitment for the life of the

professor. Tenure, a lifetime appointment to a professorship, is fundamentally at odds with the *BMR*. The original goal of tenure was to free up a professor to be an objective truth-seeker not worried about pandering to any monetary or political forces. They were encouraged to be risk-takers, to think outside of the box, and to be academic mavericks. The *BMR* needs professors who will teach the views that the institution wants it to teach for the sake of the market. It needs professors who score high on student (customer) surveys. So what is happening with tenure? A stronger emphasis is now being placed on “post-tenure review.” And some post tenure review standards now include rubrics such as “collegiality” and “team player.” In other words, is the professor conforming to the consensus of her colleagues who have embraced the *BMR*? Is the professor critical of the processes that that Business Model mandates? Some suspect that in the *BMR*, post-tenure review is “going up for tenure, the sequel.” This is a way to prevent a tenured professor from engaging in too much non-conformity—i.e., being a pest to the *BMR*.

Teaching as a Science, not an Art

Academia has traditionally divided disciplines into the Sciences and the Arts. Universities usually classify Physics, Chemistry, Astronomy and the like as sciences. Music, Sculpture, and Theater are the Arts. But what about Teaching? Where does that belong? In order to determine that, we must delineate the difference between science and art.

Sciences, by nature, are formulaic. When one studies the courses of the stars, for example, one learns to predict, with near precision, outcomes based on formulas that nearly all practitioners of the science may agree upon. Even when

studying the complexities of biology or psychology, the scientist seeks predictive outcomes based on patterns established through research, though oftentimes their conclusions are statistical (statistics is a science of its own). Sciences are formulaic and seek uniformity of outcomes. A good scientist should be able to have her study replicated by another good scientist and derive the same conclusion.

Arts, by nature, are idiosyncratic. No two great artists perform their craft exactly alike. Singer Michael Bublé can be deemed an excellent performing artist with his rendition of “Georgia on My Mind” while Beyoncé can also be adjudged a stellar artist with her rendition of the same song. All the while, the two renditions differ greatly from each other. More importantly, the way in which teachers teach, develop and perfect the arts involves far less formulas than the sciences. In general, students learn, hone, and refine arts through practice. An art teacher may present a few fundamentals to her students, but the student learns the art mostly with paintbrush or microphone in hand. No two world-renowned artists have the same stroke or the same sound. No one who copies another artist exactly is considered respectable anyway, other than for novelty purposes (e.g. the Elvis impersonators).

The Business Model of Education leans heavily to the side of teaching as a science. According to the outsourced assessment process of *edTPA*, if a teacher candidate fulfills the expectations of the five rubrics within Tasks 1, 2, and 3, she can expect not only to receive high marks but she will end up being a good teacher. Within the Business Model, where teaching is a science, teachers are interchangeable human resources: individuality is discouraged. In the district

where I live all teachers are required to begin their classes uniformly with a “smart start” (also called a “do now,” or a “bell ringer.”) Teachers may not deviate. This is to insure *uniformity* in the “science” of good education. As long as they implement the proper formulas for teaching, follow the script, and teach the premanufactured lesson, they will do well. In many schools today, therefore, all teachers in the same disciplines are expected to teach the same material (standards), at the same time (pacing guides), with the same methods (“pre-packaged” lesson plans). It seems almost extraneous that such teachers would have to be educated in anything more than the ability to follow directions. According to Robinson, all of these measures take us in the “exact opposite direction” than where good education leads.

If you are interested in a model of learning you don't start from this production line mentality. This is essentially about conformity. Increasingly it's about that as you look at the growth of standardized testing and standardized curricula. And it's about standardization. I believe we've got go in the exact opposite direction. That's what I mean about changing the paradigm.” (Robinson, 2010)

Jim Arnold, a former Georgia school superintendent, writing for the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, asked teachers who are prematurely retiring in record numbers, why? Here are some answers which reflect concerns that are directly related to the *BMR*.

“Stop micromanagement and buying every [computer] program that comes along,” requested a teacher who has given up, “The curriculum is now scripted and there is no opportunity for creativity.” Another observed, “Teachers enter the profession because they love teaching. Paperwork, testing, test prep, unpaid duties, larger classes and micromanagement make it impossible to find the time to actually teach.” (Arnold, 2017)

Buzzwords of the BMR in Education

The Business Model of Education is not just a paradigm, it has taken the character of a religion. It has dogmas and doctrines that must be adhered to if one wishes to be considered orthodox. For example, here is a list of buzzwords and concepts that are so sacred within the Business Model, to dissent or criticize any one of these idols may be risky to one’s livelihood as an educator. Below are ten idols adherents to the Business Model venerate, and the doctrine that each of these buzzwords dictate.

1. **Rubrics:** Teacher candidates must learn to provide clear and precise expectations for students, making it abundantly obvious to their students what is expected to earn an A, B, C, etc. Creativity, which is inherently subjective, by definition cannot be part of a rubric. To criticize the concept of rubrics is akin to heresy.
2. **Data/Outcomes:** If you wish to demonstrate that you are an effective teacher today, you will be required to provide objective, quantitative outcomes-based data that demonstrates your value. Intangibles like student character, insight, kindness, courage, ambition, and curiosity cannot be quantified as data, and are therefore relatively insignificant. And data cries out to be analyzed. Teachers must data-mine: analyze data and improve instruction based on that data.
3. **Standards:** Teachers today are taught to teach—no matter where, no matter when, no matter whom—the *same* content material within the discipline. The list of standards is a hallowed document that must be consulted daily, posted or written on the whiteboard, and strictly adhered to.
4. **Standardized Tests:** When it comes to testing, no matter where, no matter when, no matter whom, students must encounter an identical testing instrument manufactured by a third-party test-making institution. For efficiency and data-production’s sake, these tests need to be graded by a computer program, and thus must consist of a #2 led pencil answer sheet graded by a Scan-tron machine.
5. **Quantitative Results:** Numerical data does not lie. All decision making regarding assessment and improvement must be grounded in quantitative data, which is conveniently generated by the Scan-trons, Qualtrics, and computers.
6. **Student Learning Outcomes:** Teachers shall be abundantly clear as to what students will be able to do and, more importantly, that the data shows they are able to do it, after the teacher has taught them.

7. Research-Based Strategies:

Teachers shall only use strategies, methodologies, and pedagogies that are supported in the journalistic literature of the field. Hence, when a lesson plan is created, the teacher shall explicitly indicate which expert in the field has proven with quantitative studies the efficacy of the proposed method (e.g., this is a requirement of *edTPA*).

8. Pacing Guide: Teachers shall be teaching the same material at the same time as all of her teaching colleagues in the same discipline across the department. This keeps all students on the same page and ensures that the teacher will complete all of the standards within the year. The classic educational concept known as the “teachable moment” which relies on flexibility, adaptability, and modifying instruction to meet serendipitous events, has to be avoided.

9. Value-Added: This is a tricky way to skew data. Teachers are not only to be judged against external measures, but against the measurements made of their students before they entered the class: a “pre-test” as it were. This has naturally led to teachers encouraging students to do poorly on the pre-test.

10. Benchmarks: Teachers must provide students with opportunities to check their progress toward passing a standardized test by giving them smaller portions of the test material along the way.

The *BMR* for education is having disastrous effects on the future of the nation. It is resulting in a generation of American citizens who are severely handicapped in their ability to think critically. It is producing a generation of American citizens who are educational “hoop-jumpers” who find buying a term paper from a third party an activity entirely consistent with the *BMR* (and logically so). It is creating a generation of American citizens who have no real interest in education for education's sake, but only as an economic credential. Life-long learning is devalued. Character education is devalued. Personal interaction is devalued. Creativity is devalued. This is but a short-list of the negative consequences of this paradigm shift.

Reversing this trajectory must start at the top. The *BMR*'s intrusion in education is a byproduct of the fact that businessmen and women dominate many educational boards. If we wish to have a new reformation in education, it will only take place if the citizens demand of their leaders that their boards be comprised of people who are not by nature, devotees of the *BMR*. Legislative acts to repudiate the *BMR* would be a significant step in the right direction. The essence of such legislation would define the composition of the School Board to include members from various stake-holding areas other than Wall Street. Boards of Education should deliberately be composed of students, retired faculty, teacher education professors, non-profit administrators, parents unaffiliated with corporations, and members of faith communities. A very limited number of business-affiliated persons should be involved.

Though this perilous paradigm shift seems all but a *fete accompli*, those who are designated to prepare and mentor the

In Conclusion

next generation of educators must not lose faith. More than ever before, courageous protestors are needed to put education on a different trajectory. I write this to bring the dark side of the *BMR* into the light and confidently trust that others who are persuaded will take the necessary risks with me to begin a new educational Reformation.

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