HIGH-STAKES STORIES:
AMERICAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS’ CRISIS NARRATIVE AND DIANE RAVITCH’S
REIGN OF ERROR

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By

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ABSTRACT

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While many in the United States have direct experience with the American public school system, few have an actual understanding of its intricacies. Accordingly, many rhetors use narrative in the social discourse of America’s public schools in order to provide an organizational schema that makes such a complex system understandable to a mass audience. The dominant narrative regarding America’s public schools is that they are failing and in desperate need of reform. However, many have grown discontent with the dominant narrative of America’s “failing schools” – contending that this narrative is inaccurate and prompted by the would-be reformers’ self-interest rather than goodwill. Thus, this study explores both the failing schools narrative and the counter-narrative of America’s public schools. Specifically, Diane Ravitch’s book Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to
America’s Public Schools is analyzed as a counter-narrative in response to other key cultural texts. In considering narrative rationality as a means of rhetoric, Ravitch asks her readers to entertain literary indeterminism, that the reformers may not have a perfect and final view of the public school system and its problems, and may therefore not have the correct corresponding solutions. She brings the codes of the dominant narrative to the surface – reminding her audience that stories, while compelling, might be more appropriately called “myth.” However, the counter-narrative she provides re-orient the audience in narrative rationality. In this way, Ravitch rejects the reformers’ narrative, but affirms narration as a tool for understanding. This interplay between narrative and counter-narrative demonstrates how rhetoric performs its work in shaping an audience’s values and intentions. By analyzing how both narrative and counter-narrative are mobilized to create the political will to act or resist, a more broad understanding of narrative rationality (both its power to persuade and its utility in political struggles) is revealed. This thesis argues that while narrative rationality should always be questioned, narration is so deeply embedded in human epistemology and persuasion that telling a “better story” is often more effective than merely dismantling a dominant narrative. Thus, counter-narrative emerges as a viable means of challenging hegemonic cultural narratives.
Chapter One – Introduction

In Defense of Public Education: A Brief Autoethnographic Sketch

Of course I noticed. I saw the what, but I didn’t know the why. I was half-breed, mestiza, a hybrid girl. I wanted to fall into the ease of sameness, but my skin usually sold me out. I picked up a tan more readily than my blond cousins and white classmates, prompting some at school to ask my fair-skinned brother, “Why does your sister look Mexican?” (His answer always was, “Because we are.”) There were a few others like me, the occasional brown-skinned or black-skinned classmate, and we knew we were the minority even before we understood what a “minority” was. We wore it on our skin, and we felt it in our bones, even when our language, our manners, our learned culture sought assimilation. The others like me learned to blend. The melting pot boiled down our difference.

But I noticed, nonetheless. It was a running joke in high school, that you’d better not be too brown or too black. Emphasis on the wrong syllable, use of the wrong slang, or wearing of the wrong belt buckle would have you marked as other, un-Christian, un-American, a gang member, a threat. I was adaptable, good at survival, and mitigated my difference without questioning the system that prompted me to do so. I sometimes had the “pass factor.” My hair bleached out in the summer; my surname was as gringo as my father, and my English was as perfect as my Spanish-speaking maternal grandparents could have hoped.

It wasn’t until I left my private, religious K-12 education that I began to understand why there were so few racial minorities among my peers at school. It wasn’t until receiving a public college education that I learned about the wealth gap, the
opportunity gap, and the institutionalized classism and racism that I witnessed in my K-12 experience. As I reflected, I started re-assembling the pieces from my memory. Those who could not afford it would never enter through the private school doors, and the racialized wealth gap in America at large assured that those who could afford it were mostly white. For the few racial minorities who did make it, no administrator, teacher, or student overtly spewed racist hate, but it was as though we were told, “You may enter our doors, but we’re watching you. You must prove you are one of us.”

So those of us who felt our difference proved that we belonged in a world that wasn’t ours by giving the right answers in Bible class, by piously raising our hands in worship at mandatory weekly chapels, by regurgitating one-sided history lessons on tests, by making professions of faith in order to be admitted, and by participating in intrusive interrogations when it was suspected that we may have violated the behavior code (a code whose reach extended even into the most private, off-campus behavior). All this perfectly combined with culturally biased dress codes in an attempt to ensure that we all came out looking the same, thinking the same, believing the same, loving the same, talking the same, and voting the same. How could this not be the result when the students lived in a constructed microcosm, daily attending classes in which they rarely had to encounter difference?

It wasn’t until years later, as a teacher in the public school system, that I began to ask, “What are the students learning of democracy?” I was teaching English at a public high school (which, coincidentally, was right down the road from the private high school I attended as a student), and I was working on clearing my teaching credential. Of course I noticed how different this environment was from my experiences as a student. I noticed
the various races, religions, languages, ability levels, and economic backgrounds. This was society under one roof, rather than a contrived collection of sameness. I was reading the work of John Dewey and encountering for the first time foundational ideas about the relationship between democracy and education. And I thought, “Of course! Why did I not see it earlier?! THIS is why public education matters.”

This epiphany, born from years of experience in both private education as a student, and public education as a teacher, has stayed with me, and informs my work as a teacher, and as an intellectual who studies the rhetoric of privatization and education “reform.” Public education matters because it is foundational to a healthy democracy. As students interact with others of different belief systems, economic classes, sexualities, gender identities, family structures, ethnicities, languages, and abilities, they learn to function in a pluralistic society. To tell all children that despite differences, all are entitled to an education is a powerful message indeed. To teach them to both speak their perspective and listen to others with different perspectives is a difficult lesson, but an essential one. It lays the foundation for believing that all are entitled to a voice in other aspects of society as well, and gives them the lived experience of sharing public space. It demonstrates that society belongs to everyone, not just those who look and think and live like them.

To be sure, equitable education is a promise America has yet to deliver to all its schoolchildren, but public education makes democratic representation its aim, while private schools exist for very different reasons. Private schools exist to shelter students from the different others they may encounter in the larger society. They exist because some parents think their children will benefit from being surrounded by those with more
money, or those with the same religious belief, or maybe even those with the same color skin. In my experience, private schools do not exist in the best interest of equality and democracy. They are exclusionary by nature, and therefore predispose a student to be less understanding of human difference, and less able to function in a diverse society. With the currently raging debate over public education, privatization, charter schools, vouchers, school choice, and education reform, Dewey’s words are as relevant as ever, “It is the aim of progressive education to take part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation, not to perpetuate them” (Democracy and Education 92). When delving into this debate, I ask myself, “Which vision of education corrects privilege? Which vision interrupts rather than perpetuates inequality? What tools of rhetoric are available to help shift American schools towards the direction of valuing diversity and serving the needs of all?”

**Statement of the Problem and Research Question**

A simple internet search for “America’s failing public schools” will produce an abundance of sources that recount the same narrative – America’s public schools are failing and in desperate need of reform. It is a story told and re-told so often that it is hard to locate its exact origin, though countless examples proliferate. One such example is an article entitled “The Failure of American Schools,” published in The Atlantic in June of 2011 (Klein). The title is a proclamation few readers resist, as the article merely repeats what they have already heard on numerous occasions – test scores and graduation rates are abysmally low, and even increases in education spending have not produced results. Furthermore, this failure is a threat to America’s economic dominance because “While America’s students are stuck in a ditch, the rest of the world is moving ahead”
(Klein). If effective interventions are not made soon, foreign nations will become more productive and prosperous. Abundance and all its advantages (perhaps the most essential elements of Americanism) are at stake.

One does not have to look very far to confirm that this crisis in American education is the default assumption for many Americans. A 2012 headline reporting on Gallup poll data declares “Confidence in U.S. Public Schools at New Low” (Jones). According to the poll, confidence was highest in 1973, when the poll first began, and has trended downward ever since. Surely the crisis must have a cause. Who is to blame for the failure of the American public school system and the sure doom it spells for America’s prosperity and future? The Atlantic and many other sources that echo the crisis narrative are quick to provide an answer; they blame “those defending the status quo—the unions, the politicians, the bureaucrats, and the vendors” (Klein). These politically and financially powerful forces are in collusion to protect their jobs and their failing educational system, even at the expense of America’s children and the future they represent (or so the story goes).

Accordingly, many reforms have been proposed, and those reforms are in various stages of implementation. Specifically, publically funded charter schools are one piece of the reforms on the rise. These schools operate on public money yet make decisions like private businesses. Their financial and operational decisions are made by executives (as opposed to publically elected school boards), they are not typically held to the same regulations on how certain monies can be spent, and they do not typically offer their teachers the same protections as the public schools’ teachers unions (Rosenberg). Those who champion charter schools claim that these differences allow greater efficiency,
innovation, and control over the quality of teaching in the classroom. The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools reports that 2.9 million children now attend publically funded charter schools in the U.S., and new enrollment in the 2014-2015 school year is up 14% from the previous year (“Public Charter School Enrollment Nears 3 Million”). Clearly, the rhetoric of reform is succeeding, at least in part, as evidenced by expanding enrollment in non-traditional schools such as charters.

Another proposed change is a school voucher system, wherein families can take public money to a private school of their choice, religious or non-religious. This reform has been proposed in an effort to offer families an alternative to their local public school. According to the rhetoric of reform, if public schools are failing, vouchers can offer students a way out, a pass off the sinking ship. Several states in the nation have approved some form of a voucher system, while still others are considering such proposals. The National Conference of State Legislatures reports on recent efforts to expand voucher programs (most of which were successful) in Wisconsin, Florida, Washington, D.C., Utah, and Indiana (“School Vouchers”). The growing popularity of voucher systems is indicative of educational reform’s advancement towards its goals.

Furthermore, teachers unions in traditional public schools can no longer rely on unwavering support from Democrats. Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education under President Barack Obama, is likely the most recognizable example of this shift. While his rhetoric attempts to appease teachers, his positions and policies support evaluation of teachers based on students’ test scores, competition between schools, and weakened worker protections for tenured teachers – positions that most teachers oppose, and positions traditionally held by Republicans (Layton). While many educators resent
significant time taken out of instructional minutes in order to administer standardized
tests, politicians of both parties have increasingly emphasized standardized testing in a
push for “accountability.” Once again, the reform movement is succeeding in
accomplishing its priorities – in this case, replacing the professional opinions of
educators with the decision-making power of politicians.

The grand sum of these changes is that the school reform agenda is advancing.
By using a narrative of crisis and failure, reformers advocate for fundamental changes in
the way schools are funded and the way teachers are treated. Reformers believe that the
racial and economic achievement gaps of America’s school children are due to a
bureaucratic public education system that is slow to change, teachers who fail at their
duties, and the unions who protect these derelict teachers. In this vision, it is the “soft
bigotry of low expectation” (Bush) that keeps students underperforming. If only schools
and teachers would expect more of their students, set higher standards, work harder, and
be held accountable, student performance would improve. In this vision, “school choice”
is championed as a solution. If governments would open up the marketplace and allow
students and families to take their “business” to any school of their choice (public or
private, religious or non-religious), the competition would force schools to improve.

However, a counter-narrative has emerged in recent years, one that
challenges the rhetoric of reform. In this second vision, achievement gaps are due to
inadequate social support, unfair and unequal spending, and the overall failure of
American society to end poverty and its pernicious, racialized consequences.
Proponents of this viewpoint call attention to the fact that most funding for schools
comes from local property taxes – thus, poorer neighborhoods have poorer schools.
The result is that poor children not only come from homes who cannot afford “luxuries” like pre-schools, tutors, and enrichment programs, but also suffer from a public school system that invests thousands of dollars less per year on their education in comparison with that of their more affluent counterparts. For example, education researcher and activist Jonathan Kozol has documented that poor schools offer their students less access to resources such as technology, and are more likely to employ underpaid and less experienced teachers (The Shame of the Nation). In this vision, it is not the teachers and schools who are to blame for having “low expectations,” it is the larger society (those in positions of power and privilege) who tolerate and even perpetuate gross inequalities. Accordingly, “choice” is not the answer; more resources for the poor and traditionally underserved is.

As is the case in any political battle, the side that can make the best case, tell the best story, and persuade most effectively, will shift public opinion and public policy in the direction it desires. Thus, this research project contends with the rhetoric of school privatization, and the rhetoric in defense of public schools. While exhaustively analyzing this rhetoric would encompass literally thousands of cultural texts such as movies, op-ed articles, political speeches, books, and television shows, one recent publication was selected. Diane Ravitch’s book, Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America’s Public Schools is the primary focus of this study, as it illustrates the larger rhetorical battle currently being waged over the future of education in the United States.

In Reign of Error, Ravitch refutes the first view of advocating school reform and promotes the second view of strengthening existing public schools. Ravitch
summarizes the reform agenda, connecting the dots between business leaders, investors, politicians, and producers of popular media in order to show how they have collectively advanced the crisis narrative of America’s public schools. She then follows with a detailed, well-researched defense of the public school system and offers the solutions she believes will actually work. In this way, her text offers a unique window into a vast array of influences – both those who accept and those who resist the reform agenda. The text is therefore especially useful for analyzing the broad social discourse that encompasses the rhetoric of school reform and of its detractors. When first published in late 2013, the popular response to *Reign of Error* was as might be expected – it sparked much debate. Those invested in the reform agenda were resistant, while those who mistrusted the reform agenda now had a new central text to articulate their objections. Thus, the central research question explored in this thesis is:

- *How does Ravitch rhetorically construct her refutation of school privatization, and mount a defense of further investment in public schools and public school children?*

**Significance and Justification**

Diane Ravitch is a compelling voice in the public discourse over education reform due to her very public renouncement of her previous positions on school choice and testing. In addition to being affiliated with prominent American think tank The Brookings Institute for more than a decade, she was Assistant Secretary of Education under George H.W. Bush, and subsequently served on the National Assessment
Governing Board. After years of advocating for accountability measures and charter schools, she observed the distance between educational reform in theory versus practice. Specifically, she noted that accountability measures “created a punitive atmosphere in the schools,” and that charter schools often did not enroll students with special needs or other challenges while delivering “very little performance difference” (“Why I Changed My Mind About School Reform”). Currently a professor at New York University’s Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, her publications regularly garner an impressive readership, with Reign of Error debuting at number ten on the New York Times’ Best Seller List when it was released in 2013. Ravitch has found vocal supporters for her defense of America’s public schools, such as education blogger Valerie Strauss of the Washington Post and Josh Eidelson of Salon. Likewise, her detractors, such as the pro-voucher Friedman Foundation, respond as well, but with predictable defensiveness (Enlow). Such responses have prompted Motoko Rich of The New York Times to refer to Ravitch as a “folk hero to the left and passionate scourge of pro-business reformers.” Given these facts, Ravitch’s positions and the arguments to which she is responding warrant scrutiny.

As Ravitch argues, public education in America is the subject of contentious ongoing debate with costly ramifications. The prevailing story propagated by private and government entities alike is that America’s public schools are failing due to lack of accountability, bad teachers, and powerful teachers unions. Ravitch herself labels the work of reformers as “narrative” – acknowledging that a powerful story can do important rhetorical work, even if the logic on which it is built is faulty. Ravitch argues that this “false crisis narrative” sets the stage for reformers to cast themselves as heroes, perched
and ready to fix what ails the public school system by offering solutions such as privatization, charter schools, and vouchers. While Ravitch’s *Reign of Error* has performed important work in investigating and evaluating the reformers’ rhetoric, little critical work has been done to consider how Ravitch builds her case against reform rhetoric. As such, this project works to fill a gap in the scholarly literature around her work and the reform movement more broadly by considering Ravitch’s use of counter-narrative as a rhetorical technique for changing the conversation about America’s public schools.

Using the lens of narration, it considers the devices she uses to make the reformers’ narrative appear as myth, and investigates her use of rhetorical strategies to create a more believable counter-story. As a powerful shaper of public perceptions and educational policies that are enacted due to those perceptions, rhetoric is a significant resource in American society. Ravitch understands this, and works diligently not only to refute the reformers’ story, but to replace it altogether with another “high-stakes story.” She recognizes that the story deemed more believable will ultimately be the story acted upon.

In addition to understanding how Ravitch crafts her rhetoric so that it has wide public purchase, this project demonstrates the importance of counter-narrative as a potential means of resistance to hegemonic stories. In this case, Ravitch uses counter-narrative to shift the debate away from privatization and back to strengthening public schools. Understanding the rhetorical tools with which this task is accomplished should prove useful for both critical study and engaged activism. In total, this study affirms the effectiveness of both narrative and counter-narrative in a discursive process that creates
meaning at important sites of political struggle. Additionally, it offers insight as to how public debates play out in society – how a story coalesces intertextually into a dominant narrative, and how other rhetorical works can enter the debate, complicate the dominant narrative, and perhaps shift the public course of action implicated by a culturally hegemonic story.

Methodology

This project employs the work of several theorists whose ideas are closely related. Specifically, the contributions of narrative theorist Walter Fisher, literary theorist Kenneth Burke, and narrative researcher Michael Bamberg prove most useful. While Burke offers that human language is an invention that falsely provides order through symbolic action and drama, Fisher adds that human beings are essentially story-telling animals. Together, these concepts help explain the human impulse to narrate even those events and systems that do not conveniently fit a narrative arch, and help reveal the constructed nature of narratives people tell themselves and others. While people are “separated from [their] natural condition by instruments of [their] own making” (Burke, “Language as Symbolic Action” 13), such separation between reality and perception is inevitable, for a narrative rationality permeates all human thinking. Thus, a rhetor who wishes to alter human understanding can most effectively do so not through destroying a dominant narrative, but through providing a compelling counter-narrative. Michael Bamberg has explored the rhetorical work of counter-narrative, both its form and function, and his contributions aid this analysis. This project joins the concepts of these three theorists to investigate and explain the rhetorical work of both education reformers and Diane Ravitch, who resists reform rhetoric.
Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm

In describing how people order their world into an understanding that uses narrative elements, Walter Fisher outlines a method of deconstructing a text in search of its narrative features and functions. Notably, narration is not just used in traditional stories (novels, plays, and other works of fiction), but in communication meant to describe real-world events. This concept is central to Fisher’s narrative paradigm – that a “narrative rationality” is so embedded in the human means of understanding the world, that even real world events that may not exactly have a narrative arch are interpreted in a narrative fashion (Fisher, “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm” 293). Thus, in using the narrative paradigm as a method of analyzing communication about non-fiction events, the researcher will not only be looking for elements of narration (characters, conflict, resolution, etc.), but also will “measure the distance” between the way events unfold in the world and the way they unfold in the corresponding stories told about the world.

Robert Rowland’s essay on “The Narrative Perspective” extends Fisher’s narrative paradigm by establishing a model for its application in the analysis of texts. In three steps, he outlines a method for attending to form, function, and the overall effects narration has on audiences. First, in analyzing narrative form, a rhetorical critic will look for the key players in a story and ask what roles they play. Specifically, characters can be protagonists (heroes or heroines), antagonists (villains), or supporting characters. Usually, the focus of a narrative is on the conflict between protagonist(s) and antagonist(s), and it is important to note that forces, not just individuals or groups, may fill these roles. For example, in this thesis, individual teachers, activists, politicians, etc.
may be cast as heroes or villains, but so too might larger groups (such as unions) or forces (such as poverty).

The other important elements in analyzing form are setting, plot, and theme. When evaluating the setting, a rhetorical critic will look for ways in which a narrator creates a specific time and place, or conversely, creates a diffuse time and place. Setting can be intentionally created to make a message hit “close to home,” or it can transport an audience to a different world altogether. The third element, plot, is the action of the story. Plot concerns the events as they happen in a particular sequence, with certain events causing (or leading to) others. A traditional narrative plot will include a conflict that bends the events into a narrative arch that leads to a climax and, finally, a resolution. Last in the analysis of narrative form is theme – the message of the narrative. Analyzing theme can be a task that ranges from easy to quite difficult, depending on the theme’s explicit or implicit nature (Rowland 120).

Once form is analyzed, the job of the rhetorical critic then becomes to ask “Why? For what purpose are particular characters cast into particular roles? For what purpose is a setting either close to an audience or far away? Is the plot manipulated to support a particular theme? Is the theme defensible or misleading? What is the intended effect?” All these questions move into function. No longer is the critic merely attending to what the story says, but what the story does in the world. Analyzing function reveals the rhetorical work narratives perform on audiences. According to Rowland, Fisher considered narratives as functioning epistemologically, as a vehicle for how people come to know what they know about the world. But Rowland adds that narratives also function
persuasively, as a means not only for understanding, but for moving into action or into a particular view (Rowland 122).

In studying the function of narratives, the rhetorical critic must consider four key narrative functions: to garner attention, to create identification, to transcend the individual experience of the audience, and to appeal to values. Rowland calls this first function the power to “energize an audience,” and it is essential – for stories that do not captivate an audience will not survive to go on to perform the other three narrative functions. After capturing the audience’s attention, a narrative must then create identification by aligning audiences with particular characters, forces, or causes. If audiences can be moved to feel with certain characters they might then be led to also act with those characters. For example, a hero might inspire an audience to act in a similar fashion, or a sympathetic villain might persuade an audience to, even temporarily, take on a different perspective. Identification functions on a psychological level, and skillful narrators can appeal to those elements of identity to create a bond, unity, or empathy with a character who then channels the audiences’ thoughts, feelings, and actions in a particular direction (Rowland 122).

The third function of narration performs its work similarly, but by creating an attachment between the audience and the setting (rather than the audience and a character). By “ripping us out of our time and culture and placing us in another culture” (Rowland 122), individual experience is no longer the only lens through which people can understand. Suddenly, audiences have another social landscape, and can mentally “transcend” the social norms of their time. This can sometimes persuade audiences to either appreciate or reject their own experiences, depending on if they deem the
narrative’s social landscape inferior or superior to their own. In this way, a skillful narrator can prompt people to be content with or defiant of the status quo in which they live.

The final function of narration, tapping into an audience’s values and needs, strikes right at the heart of narration’s functional superiority over rationality, for the exact same information laid out in purely statistical or factual form may not elicit the same emotional response from an audience, and therefore may not function as powerfully to prompt a change in perspective or action. A story that reaches either an audience’s culturally learned values or universal needs will more successfully perform its rhetorical work. Here, it is important to note that stories may perform their work with varying degrees of explicitness. In fact, narratives that more cleverly disguise their emotional appeals are often more effective because the audience is not guarded against being persuaded. Narratives work so well because they can use events, conflicts, and characters to tap into the audience’s pre-existing values, and therefore perform their function in a way that feels organic rather than manipulative (Rowland 122).

Once the rhetorical critic has tended to the details of a narrative’s form and function, the last step is to link form and function into a coherent analysis. With all elements accounted for, is the story compelling? That is, does it inspire or move an audience? This is an altogether separate question from whether or not a story is true – for a misrepresentation can still capture an audience, and, conversely, a factual account can fail to garner any interest at all. Nonetheless, a compelling story will resonate. In this final analytical step, a critic must also reflect on the extent to which all four narrative functions were met. If they were, there is every indication that the story is coherent.
(Rowland 129). And finally, a critic must consider the likelihood that the story will be credible to a particular audience, or even to multiple audiences. If a story is accepted as both coherent and in alignment with the audience’s experiences, it is likely to be believed. Understanding that different audiences might have different experiences, values, and biases may even lead a critic to conclude that a particular narrative will be credible to one audience and not another. In this way, the same narrative can perform its work differently to different people.

**Narrative in the Discourse Regarding America’s Public Schools**

This project utilizes the methods of narrative analysis because Ravitch herself positions her book in opposition to what she calls the “false crisis narrative.” While narrative analysis can be used with fictional dramas, real-life events can be and often are framed in a dramatized fashion. In this case, Ravitch claims that the “attack” on America’s public schools is based on a story narrated by the reformers who wish to vilify teachers and their unions and cast themselves as “heroes.” However, while refuting the reformers’ narrative, she conceals her own methods of counter-narrative. The fact that she also uses the language consistent with drama and narration reveals that she herself employs the same narrative rationality as those whose framing she critiques, and that narrative analysis is appropriate as a means of understanding her response to the rhetoric of reform.

As Ravitch notes, her book is not possible without the reformers to which she is responding. They too use the language of drama and narration to order reality in a particular fashion for the public and politicians to understand. The film *Waiting for Superman* is an apt example of an entry in the crisis narrative to which Ravitch responds,
as the language of the title alone reveals its dramatized aspect. In order to thoroughly understand the counter-narrative Ravitch offers, one must understand the narrative that prompted her response in the first place. For these reasons, narrative analysis was used for both Ravitch’s book and key cultural texts to which she responds. This is a very large undertaking indeed, but *Reign of Error* cannot be understood without that broad contextualization.

Ravitch wants her audience to know what rhetoric constitutes the false crisis narrative. In Chapter 3 of *Reign of Error*, she identifies myriad individuals and organizations who play some role in producing or perpetuating the narrative. To be sure, analyzing every speech, essay, article, film, and utterance of every person and group Ravitch mentions in Chapter 3 would be a daunting task, but among the many, she identifies the few who are key players. Milton Friedman is mentioned as the originator of the charter school movement; the Gates Foundation is noted as “by far the largest foundation in the United States and possibly the world” (23); the Bush II and the Obama Administrations are cast as important players due to their political power to enact federal oversight; and filmmaker Davis Guggenheim is recognized for his access to large popular audiences. Therefore, discussions and analyses of these figures and/or texts are included to outline major ideological, economic, political, and cultural forces that work to advance the crisis narrative of America’s public schools.

**Kenneth Burke’s Symbolic Action and Dramatism**

While Fisher’s narrative paradigm is the primary method used in this study to analyze both Ravitch’s *Reign of Error* and the crisis narrative to which she responds, Kenneth Burke’s theories of symbolic action and dramatism are also used to demonstrate
the devices used to reconfigure the social world into a something akin to a theatrical production. Given that Burke’s ideas laid the foundation for the development of Fisher’s narrative paradigm, these additional insights offered from a Burkean perspective are a natural complement to a narrative analysis. In their essay on Burke’s dramatism, Anderson, King, and McClure explain how “Burke reminds us that symbols are shortcuts to realms of experience; they arouse emotions and desire, and that is why artists use them” (145). Furthermore, Burke’s concept of dramatism offers the insight that “life (is) drama,” and rhetorical critics can thus apply the same tools for analyzing fictional dramas to real life events (146). Specifically, real people can be cast as heroes who rise to fame or fortune, who fall into shame or destitution, who are mortified or shunned, and who seek redemption through a scapegoat – all Burkean concepts that prove helpful in this analysis. One can see how these theories led Fisher to the narrative paradigm – the ultimate expression of symbols (language) being used as drama (narration).

Michael Bamberg and Counter-Narrative

Additionally, Michael Bamberg, Co-Editor of the journal Narrative Inquiry, offers useful insights for understanding the rhetorical work performed by counter-narrative. His work builds on the foundational methods of narrative analysis established by Fisher, and extends them into theorizing both counter-narrative’s methods and effects on the audience. In “Considering Counter-Narrative,” he explains that instead of obliterating dominant narratives altogether, counter-narratives leave “certain aspects of dominant stories…intact, while others are reshaped and reconfigured.” In order to do this, speakers must “juggle several story lines simultaneously” – the dominant narrative and its re-configuration. Additionally, he uses “positioning theory” to explain how
audiences form a sense of identity through how they position themselves in relation to dominant narratives and counter-narratives. Bamberg distinguishes between an audience member “being positioned” by a story, versus “positioning oneself” in relation to a story. In the former instance, the dominant narrative determines the position of the audience member and thereby shapes the listener’s identity into one of compliance or support. In the latter instance, the audience member self-determines a response. In most cases, this self-determined choice leads an audience member to position himself or herself (at least partially) in opposition to the dominant narrative, and the person thereby takes on a contrarian identity. Such concepts help to illuminate both the dominant crisis narrative and Ravitch’s counter-narrative, as well as explain how audiences position themselves as they do. Therefore, after discussion of the crisis narrative, an analysis of Ravitch’s counter-narrative *Reign of Error* follows.

Limitations and Contributions of the Critic’s Lens

Given that Fisher’s narrative analysis, Burke’s dramatic analysis, and Bamberg’s counter-narrative are all methods that depend on close reading to illuminate narrative and dramatic elements, these methods will always be subjective in nature. That is, the resulting analysis may differ from one critic to the next, especially in accordance with the individual critic’s values and propensity to believe narratives that match individual experience. While this could be seen as a limitation of the method, it is also a strength. The very act of deconstructing symbolic meanings reveals new meanings; by foregrounding the codes or the “inner workings” of how symbols work on audiences, an alternate perspective emerges. And while an individual cannot and should not claim that his/her analysis reveals the final truth of a particular text, each new deconstruction offers
its own unique contribution. The following analysis of the crisis narrative surrounding America’s public schools and Ravitch’s response offers but one critically-grounded interpretation of this discourse – how it has been rhetorically constructed to choreograph American public thought on one of America’s most pressing public matters.
Chapter 2 – Literature Review

An Introduction to *Reign of Error*

Diane Ravitch wastes no time and minces no words in *Reign of Error*. The subtitle calls the privatization movement a “hoax” and frames it as a “danger to America’s public schools.” Thus begins the invective tone of the 325-page book, which dedicates a bit more than the first half of its pages to decimating the “false crisis narrative” – the story of America’s public school failure. Ravitch first historicizes the topic by accounting for the origins of the crisis narrative and tracing it to modern-day calls for reform. She then identifies the political, economic, and cultural forces that intertextually tell the crisis narrative to a popular audience who largely has believed it. And then, she meticulously documents “the facts” about test scores, the achievement gap, international test scores, high school graduation rates, college graduation rates, and the correlation between teachers and test scores.

In total, six full chapters are dedicated to presenting the audience with facts they think they know from the redundant crisis narrative they hear often, but this time with Ravitch’s guidance. She carefully recounts commonly heard refrains and counters with evidence in the form of charts, statistics, studies, and re-interpretations of data. For example, in quoting noted social scientists who have found that two-thirds of student achievement is based on non-school factors (such as socioeconomic status), she highlights details that reformers often minimize or eschew altogether. If so much of student achievement is dependent on factors beyond the schools’ control, why does the reform movement focus so singularly on schools? In this way, Ravitch calls the
foundational tenets of the crisis narrative into question. A bit more than half-way through the book, Ravitch leaves the crisis narrative decimated.

On page 224, she begins to offer full explanations of the solutions to which she has been gesturing all along. In the ruin of the false crisis narrative, she re-constructs a story in a new image. Again, she uses facts and expert opinions, this time to assert that the answers have been self-evident all along, yet the political will to honestly confront them is lacking. She quotes Linda Darling-Hammond of Stanford University:

> It’s not as though we don’t know what works. We could implement the policies that have reduced the achievement gap and transformed learning outcomes for students in high-achieving nations where government policies largely prevent childhood poverty by guaranteeing housing, healthcare and basic income security (225).

In this way, Ravitch confronts her audience with an inconvenient answer, one that does not offer quick fixes. However, Ravitch hopes her rhetoric will inspire at least some of that political will she claims is lacking – the resolve to create a more equitable society.

**The Rhetoric of Reform: A Branch of Neoliberal Ideology**

While the rhetoric of reform comes from many overlapping sources, Ravitch attempts to name the key players, the purveyors of the popular discourse to which she is responding. Chapter 2 of *Reign of Error* is dedicated to answering the question “Who Are the Corporate Reformers?” She clarifies that she uses the term “corporate reformers” because “the advocates for this cause seek not to reform public education but to transform it into an entrepreneurial sector of the economy” (19). With that premise established, she goes on to identify political leaders past and present who have advanced the rhetoric of
reform – former Presidents Ronald Regan and George W. Bush, current President Barack Obama, former Governor of Florida and Presidential hopeful Jeb Bush, and current Governors such as Bobby Jindal of Louisiana and Rick Snyder of Michigan. She explains that these political leaders subscribe to a reform agenda “that has its roots in an ideology that is antagonistic to public education…. As a matter of ideology, they do not believe that government can do anything right” (20).

Ravitch then uses this foundation to introduce a highly influential University of Chicago Economist, Milton Friedman, as the ideological ancestor of the corporate reform movement. Friedman was the pioneer of the voucher movement, a movement that promotes the idea that parents should be able to take public money and use it for their child’s education at private schools. In an interview published on the Friedman Foundation website, Milton Friedman argues that vouchers introduce the element of competition between schools, an element he frames as positive for education. He also refers to the current system of education as “technologically backwards,” and contrasts it with “a system of free choice…which would change the character of education.” Friedman and other voucher advocates view the public school system as socialist – a system that, unlike a market-driven model, produces inefficiencies, high costs, and an inferior product. Furthermore, he considers school choice an equality issue, and argues that people from low-income neighborhoods, especially racial minorities, are the most hurt by the status quo of the public school system. It is they, Friedman argues, who have the most to gain through the voucher system.

It is here that a broader understanding of economic policies and recent geopolitical history becomes instructive, for Ravitch’s *Reign of Error* enters a
conversation that has been developing over the course of decades. In some ways, she is not only responding to the most recent corporate reform movement in American education, but also to a general neoliberal push to privatize every facet of life and make the ethos of the marketplace one and the same with the ethos of the larger American culture. Like Ravitch, many others have entered this conversation, albeit with different emphases. For example, David Harvey is one who provides a broader outline in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, and his contributions are useful in understanding the current debate over the American educational system. He defines neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2).

Presently, neoliberal philosophies pervade all aspects of American society in one way or another. This faith in the market to propel society can be seen in institutions such as the growing prison-industrial complex (which has increased the prison population while garnering hefty profits for private business) and the military-industrial complex (which outsources certain military tasks to for-profit private contractors), as well as in proposals to privatize public goods such as social security and water supplies. In general, neoliberalism has become the common sense of both political powers and the general populace – a folkish article of faith that regards free markets as good for individuals and good for society (Harvey 3). In understanding neoliberalism’s growing influence, one begins to see the rhetoric of education reform as a branch of a larger tree. And while Ravitch does not directly reference neoliberalism by name (likely due to the fact that her
book is intended more as a focused discussion of educational policy for a popular, rather than a scholarly, audience), she certainly questions the logic of the free market as applied to education. By prompting her audience to consider that some vital democratic institutions are not well-served by a for-profit model, she undermines neoliberal values.

Ravitch’s *Reign of Error* is also timely, for it enters the conversation at a critical moment. Currently, the 2008 financial crisis is a recent enough memory that readers are likely more willing to question economic policies that allow free markets to operate without checks and balances. Readers are likely to have heard voices like that of Lance Freeman, an Associate Professor of Urban Planning at Columbia University. Writing in the midst of the banking crisis of 2008, he offers, “With the whole system under strain…the notion that reducing government and deregulation is the answer to all our problems seems laughable now.” Thus, Ravitch’s response to the rhetoric of reform is part of a broader willingness to consider the consequences of unfettered capitalism at a time when those consequences are increasingly demonstrated.

In addition to Ravitch, others also have critiqued the rhetoric that undergirds neoliberalism. Economist Thomas I. Palley writes, “the ultimate spark of neoliberal dynamism is to be found in…failure to develop public understandings of the economy that could compete with the neoliberal rhetoric of ‘free markets’” (21). In this manner, Palley recognizes that policy often hinges on the success or failure of rhetoric, rather than on the merit of policy alone. While neoliberalism has created more wealth for an economic elite and contributed largely to racialized economic inequality (Harvey 19), it has enjoyed broad political and public support due to its dominance in rhetorical battles. As has always been the case with all major social and political movements, a compelling
story that captures the collective consciousness of the public can be used to mobilize directed action, regardless of whether or not that compelling story is accurate.

In this case, the revered concept of freedom in America was mobilized in service of the neoliberal vision of free markets. As Harvey notes, “The assumption that individual freedoms are guaranteed by freedom of the market and of trade is a cardinal feature of neoliberal thinking” (7). Yet, the past decades since the neoliberal turn should call that assumption into question. Harvey draws on the philosophies of Karl Polanyi, who, in 1944, noted that freedom has two sides. While freedom of speech, assembly, religion and other freedoms are rightly revered, absolute freedom in the marketplace may come to mean:

the freedom to exploit one’s fellows, or the freedom to make inordinate gains without commensurable service to the community, the freedom to keep technological inventions from being used for public benefit, or the freedom to profit from public calamities secretly engineered for private advantage (qtd. in Harvey 36).

Americans hold the notions of personal “choice” and “freedom” so dear that the words themselves come to take on an unquestioned positive connotation. If an advocate of neoliberal economic policies needs to make his case, he will not speak of greed or exploitation, he will speak of the “free market,” or government interference with “growth” and “prosperity.” Neoliberal rhetoric succeeds when audiences do not question what the market is free to unleash on the vulnerable in society, and do not investigate who is included or excluded from the benefits of growth and prosperity. So then, while the rhetoric of school choice and equality are intrinsically appealing, critics of
neoliberalism echo the doubts of Polanyi. Where they see the unquestioned values of “freedom,” “choice” and “equality” used in service if an agenda that perpetuates inequality or anti-democratic values, they resist.

Presently, the rhetoric of school reform has advanced to the point that the neoliberal focus on privatizing public schools is no longer a fringe concept. Through decades of advocacy, the education reform movement has made its way into many political agendas and many business leaders’ priorities. In fact, although there is some resistance to the notion, reform has become a refrain on both the right and left sides of the political divide in America. Most notably, Obama’s Race to the Top evidences the continuity of educational policy from Republican President George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind to the current Democratic administration. Both parties largely promote the same narrative and have adopted some of the same “solutions.” Both No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top embrace a free-market model of education reform that encourages the proliferation of charter schools and voucher programs, and greatly emphasizes high-stakes testing (Hayes 61).

And in addition to enjoying political popularity, education reform is a major aim of many business leaders, most notably, Bill and Melinda Gates. From the mid-1990s, Bill Gates was very personally involved in philanthropy, beginning with a focus on technology in education and ensuring equal internet access for all. The Gates Foundation was formed in 2000 and through strong urging of Tom Vander Ark (who is now at the helm of the Foundation’s education pursuits) began doling out grant money for progressive pursuits such as building smaller schools. At that time, the Foundation had a “change from within the system” approach to school improvement. They worked closely
with superintendents and supported coaching models to improve performance. After these endeavors were deemed failures, Vander Ark convinced Bill and Melinda Gates to more actively fund charter schools. The Foundation now funds both traditional yet progressive schools, and newer models such as charters. Additionally, they fund research on school choice and other market-inspired ideas such as competition and performance-based funding (Hill). They are, according to Ravitch, one of the leading funders of the reform movement.

Finally, Ravitch responds not only to political and business leaders but also to leaders in popular culture who amplify the rhetoric of reform. Many movies, television shows, and other popular texts have contributed to the false crisis narrative and the calls for privatization. Most notably, Davis Guggenheim’s popular documentary *Waiting for Superman* was released in 2010 to publicity and fanfare unusual for a film of its genre. By presenting teachers unions as barriers to progress and charter schools as the hope for students trapped in failing public schools, *Waiting for Superman* provides a powerful entry in the rhetoric of school reform, one that made the political and economic arguments of the reformers more accessible to a wider audience. In *Reign of Error*, Ravitch is responding to a barrage of voices, those of politicians, business leaders, and popular texts, that have coalesced around a single story.

**The Rhetoric of Resistance**

Those who resist the neoliberal turn and its effects on education see these reform efforts not as a move that offers parents and students more freedom or choice. Instead they see it as an all-out “attack by those forces that view schools less as a public good than as a private right” (Giroux, *Education* 1). Henry A. Giroux and Diane Ravitch are
among the most vocal defenders of public education. While Ravitch writes work that is read by both academics and laypeople alike, Giroux is more widely read by academics. His work offers a strong theoretical framework for understanding the resistance the academy is mounting against neoliberalism in general, and for understanding the counter-narrative that Diane Ravitch constructs specifically in opposition to the neoliberal educational reformers.

Giroux sees the reformers’ efforts as leading to a “less functioning democracy and more of a third-world style oligarchy” (Education 7). He writes of a “corporate pedagogy” that increasingly pervades the culture of public schools. With an emphasis on narrow results demonstrated in student performance on standardized tests, the “corporate pedagogy” of the public schools teaches students to value results rather than process, standardization rather than creativity, and deference to authority rather than engaged, active citizenship. Additionally, the increase in scripted curricula, the replacement of teachers with educational software, and undermining of teachers’ collective bargaining power evidences the disdain politicians have for teachers. Under this system, teachers are not public intellectuals whose job it is to engage with their communities and guide public consciousness; rather, their job is reduced to that of technicians – easily replaceable if they do not effectively deliver an increasingly corporatized and authoritarian agenda.

When faced with proposals such as Obama’s Race to the Top, which rewards schools for test performance, Giroux points out that this system “pits teachers against each other through the use of monetary rewards” (Education 43). And while that type of competition might work in a market-based economy, what effect does it have on
classrooms, schools, and the students who inhabit them? In the free market, some business survive, and others go under; there are winners and there are losers. Is that the system that works best for the nation’s children, or would they benefit more from a system that encourages collaboration rather than competition?

Economic Darwinism with its ruthless survival-of-the-fittest ethic is more legitimated both through an outright attack on teachers, public servants, and unions, and by a mode of pedagogy in which humiliation is used to wage war on one’s opponents, preventing any attempt to create the conditions for thoughtful dialogue, exchange, and debate (Education 23).

In this way, students are taught to value the ethos of the markets, and neglect the open exchange of ideas that is fundamental to a healthy democracy. Giroux, like Ravitch, asks readers to consider not the freedom of the market, but its cutthroat nature instead. Therefore, Giroux’s writings are helpful in studying how the rhetoric of resistance shifts the focus of the discourse.

Additionally, Giroux is a strident critic of Bill and Melinda Gates, and other corporate education reformers. Pointing out that these private investors stand to gain quite a bit of money by promoting their educational products, or that they make windfall profits by abusing tax credits to finance the building of new charter schools then renting them out to public school districts, Giroux writes, “It is morally and politically irresponsible because it represents a form of hostile generosity that serves to expand the power of the corporate rich over public schools while offering the illusion that they are enriching public life” (Education 18). Here, again, Giroux performs the rhetorical work of resistance by way of revealing what is hidden in the rhetoric of reform. While
corporate reformers frame their work as charitable, those who resist see the reformers as motivated by self-interest.

**Popular Response to Reign of Error**

Diane Ravitch’s *Reign of Error* received much popular press when it was released in 2013, although it was less often covered by conservative media. Of the reviews that were published, responses were mixed and often fell in alignment with party lines or predisposition of the reviewer. For example, the *Wall Street Journal*, whose readership tends to be politically mixed but decidedly pro-business, calls Ravitch’s perspective a “mixture of stridency, selectivity, and spin” while conceding she has “important things to say.” In an attempt to push back against Ravitch’s claim that public schools are not failing, the author, Trevor Butterworth, argues that American public schools are not able to meet the demand of a labor market that needs more workers with analytic and quantitative skill – an argument that demonstrates Butterworth’s prioritizing of marketplace needs over other possible aims of education. He concludes that while Ravitch is right to resist the rhetoric of crisis, she unjustifiably “defends public schools at all costs.”

Conversely, reviews published in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, both with more liberal readership, are more favorable. For *The Washington Post*, T. Rees Shapiro characterizes Ravitch’s voice as “compelling” due to the fact that she herself was once a reformer, yet accuses her of sometimes slipping into hyperbole with her claims. Writing for *The New York Times*, Jonathan Kozol (who, as mentioned earlier, has also written books similar in tone and theme to *Reign of Error*) approvingly summarizes Ravitch’s central ideas. He welcomes the book alongside all those “who have grown
increasingly alarmed at seeing public education bartered off piece by piece” and concludes by calling the book, “fearless…a manifesto, a call to battle.”

Alongside the popular attention given Reign of Error, trade journals for professional educators also commonly reviewed the book, mostly through a favorable lens. Brigitte C. Scott, a professor of Education at Virginia Tech, published a book review in Educational Studies that typifies the response among those who know well the challenges of public education. Echoing Ravitch’s broad understanding of the myriad influences that factor in to how America’s public schools function, Scott affirms that “for readers with a cursory understanding of the social, political, historical, and economic influences operating within education today, the book is an excellent and accessible resource” (92). Scott’s sole criticism is that Ravitch’s polemical tone is likely to continue the polarized nature of discussions about education, rather than invite meaningful consideration. Nonetheless, Scott, and many others, agree with Ravitch’s claims about both the dangers of privatization, and the alternate solutions of strengthening social support systems in America today.

The Media’s Role in Building Consent for the Rhetoric of Reform

With the reform movement enjoying substantive support with politicians and business leaders alike, one must ask – why? Why is it that neoliberal theory as applied to education is so popular? And how is the rhetoric maintained to bolster public support for such measures? Here, Harman and Chomsky’s notion of manufacturing consent is useful. Given the highly mediated world in which nearly all Americans now live, “the mainstream media plays a major role in how people view the state of the nation or, in this case, the state of public education” (Goldstein 546). Examining media artifacts such as
news articles, op-ed pieces, popular movies, and television shows reveals the dominant narratives that pervade representations of America’s school systems and manufacture public support for certain educational policies. Fortunately, much work has been done to assess the media’s treatment of the issue of education.

In 1983, the U.S. Department of Education released a report on America’s schools ominously titled *A Nation At Risk*. The tone of the report was equally dire, threatening that “a rising tide of mediocrity” in public schools was undermining American prosperity and promise for the future. The document cited, among other things, declines in student achievement on standardized tests and the troubling rate of illiteracy. Interestingly, the report implied that these statistics were bleak not because an educated populace was in the best interest of democracy, but because an uneducated populace threatened America’s technological and economic dominance. In 2008, Greg Toppo of *USA Today* wrote a retrospective on the report, calling it “a true Cold War document,” noting that it famously stated: "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war." Writing in 2014, Lauren McDonald (a sociologist who studies public policy and education) notes that education policy became a greater concern for politically conservative interests after the publication of *A Nation At Risk*, and that the report contributed to education being defined as a “national crisis” (846).

While she begins with a discussion of *A Nation At Risk* as a watershed moment in educational policy, McDonald develops her research from there, demonstrating how, over the course of approximately the last thirty years, the conservative movement has gained entry into the arena of education policy, using think tanks, the media, neoliberal ideology,
and neoconservative ideology to reframe the central concerns of public education, which
has traditionally been thought of as liberal territory. Like Harvey, McDonald recognizes
neoliberalism as unflinchingly endorsing free-market approaches in all aspects of society
(including education), but she adds that neoconservativism adds a punitive layer of
government accountability. In the case of education policy, neoconservative
“accountability” means standardized testing along with rewards for students, schools, and
teachers who measure up, and punishments for those who do not. And while these
differences are substantive on some level, both neoliberals and neoconservatives “support
privatization, charter schools, vouchers, and a role for business in public education. They
are similarly critical of teacher’s unions and hostile to bilingual education,
multiculturalism, and progressive pedagogy” (849). Thus, neoliberal and
neoconservative thinking applied to education policy work in concert to counter
progressive educational aims.

Here, again, are the questions of how? and by what means? What are the
mechanisms that have been deployed to manufacture consent of changing education
policy – both in the minds of the politically powerful and of the public? McDonald
provides a portion of that answer by examining the role of conservative think tanks that
address education policy. Starting with a list of think tanks compiled by Andrew Rich in
2004, she updates that list by referencing current directories of think tanks and
organizations and classifying them according to ideological leaning. She traces their
existence and development from 1915 to 2005, showing that “the largest period of growth
for think tanks with education policy divisions was during the 1980s and 1990s” (859),
and the vast majority of these new tanks and divisions were ones with conservative
leanings. Furthermore, conservative think tanks have re-defined the “research” that traditional think tanks produced, now issuing policy briefs, memos, and reports that do not meet the standards of rigor of traditional academic study, and many of the “experts” issuing these documents are those with no background in the field of education. These facts, combined with the quantitative measure that “conservative and centrist think tanks receive far more coverage on education issues than do liberal think tanks” (863), help McDonald demonstrate that conservative think tanks have used the media as a “legitimating tool and a means for quick entry into the field of debate” (846). Simply put, conservative think tanks that cover the field of education have proliferated, are issuing reports of questionable accuracy, and are presenting their positions to the public through the news media more often than their progressive counterparts.

Other studies reveal similar biases in news media reporting on educational policies. Goldstein examined the New York Times and Time Magazine’s handling of education policy and found that “the media has visually and textually framed and reinforced No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and market reforms as the only solution to address the failures of public education by attacking teachers’ unions and individual teachers” (543). Goldstein shows that this happens due to the news media’s unwillingness or inability to question the narratives and the policies promoted by the politicians. For example, the Bush II administration had a vested interest in promoting NCLB and sought to generate positive news coverage and public approval of Bush’s years in office. With the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent, costly, ongoing wars that followed, the Bush Administration sought to divert the public’s attention and hoped NCLB would become the “cornerstone” of his legacy (567). In that
interest, the Bush Administration used federal money to hire a public relations firm to study how news outlets were reporting on NCLB, and to produce video news releases (VNRs) for distribution (“Department of Education”). The United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) later determined that the VNRs were a misuse of funds and warned the Department of Education to leave partisan content out of future media analysis (“Department of Education”), but the fact that these practices occurred in the first place means that the Department of Education, under President Bush II, understood the role of the media in shaping public opinion.

While the ethics of a political entity feeding the news media pre-packaged stories are certainly troubling, perhaps even more troubling is the news media’s “failure to critically engage with the sources of their information” (Goldstein 549). Whether this occurs due to lazy journalistic practices or the simple fact that reporters are too unfamiliar with the complexities of the issues about which they must report, the end result is that “the media continues to ‘present’ the story” rather than interrogate it (566). In the case of NCLB, “the mainstream media played the role that the Bush Administration and its supporters wanted it to…because it failed to present multiple sides of the story” (567). Specifically, by repeating the Bush Administration’s claim that NCLB was a piece of civil rights legislation, audiences were led to believe that those who opposed it must have been “just like those who blocked the schoolhouse doors in Little Rock, AK…they denounce the foundations of individual freedom, and by extension, equality, justice, and the opportunity to engage in the marketplace” (567). Essentially, the Bush Administration and the news media together set up an either-or logical fallacy, in which it seemed that anyone opposed to NCLB must be a racist, a hater of freedom and equality.
And as news media did not challenge the Bush Administration’s framing of NCLB, the viewing public too was then fed the dominant narrative. As Bourdieu noted in *On Television*, media have a “peculiar capacity to produce what critics call a reality effect. They show things and make people believe in the reality of what they show….The simple report, the very fact of reporting, of putting on record as a reporter, always implies a social construction of reality that can mobilize (or demobilize) individuals or groups” (21).

Gerstl-Pepin found a similar result in her analysis of how the media (mis)represented education in the 2000 presidential election. By examining television, newspaper, and radio coverage, she was able to determine that “the media, at best, represent shallow depictions of educational issues, which tend to be tightly controlled by how candidates define educational problems” (37). An interesting part of Gerstl-Pepin’s contribution to this discussion is when she notes that analysis of bias in the media is often focused on rooting out liberal or conservative slant, research that is useful but also obscures third-party concerns. So then, in a presidential campaign, when the focus is on the two major political parties, there may be important third-party criticisms or questions that go unvoiced and unanswered. This perspective is especially relevant to discussions of educational policy, as both major political parties publically accept the assumptions that America’s educational system is failing and claim that the problems can be fixed with federal education policy. Thus, education reporting is often hegemonic, uncritically repeating the dominant cultural narrative, and “excluding the concerns of the economically disadvantaged, minority groups, or other marginalized groups” (40).
In the case of the 2000 presidential election, Bush was reported as taking a position more traditionally aligned with Democrats, since he favored increased educational oversight at the federal level. And in many regards, the two candidates were in agreement, both emphasizing testing and accountability. In this way, the dominant narrative that education is broken and that the solution is more incentivized standardized testing goes unquestioned. Absent are the voices of teachers, students, parents, and researchers who may take issue with standardized testing for myriad reasons. Questions of cultural bias written into the tests, “teaching to the test,” low-level thinking encouraged by standardized learning – all these concerns and more go ignored by candidates and the news media alike. The real consequence of such shallow media coverage of educational policy is that the actual problems that plague America’s public schools are overlooked in favor of quick-fix solutions. As Gerstl-Pepin puts it, “long-term, substantive changes such as addressing poverty, racism, and gender discrimination are rendered invisible in shortsighted campaign rhetoric” because “as media consumers, we often do not want to hear that the key to solving problems would involve long-term sacrifice and commitment (e.g. addressing racism and poverty)” (50-51).

In addition to news coverage that frames educational policy issues for the public, entertainment can be a powerful part of the rhetoric that helps manufacture public consent of neoliberal and neoconservative policies in education. Henry Giroux refers to popular culture texts as offering “public pedagogies” – an understanding of how schools, teachers, and students work, what problems they face, and what solutions might be found. He refers to films about the educational system as working to “legitimate some meanings, invite particular desires, and exclude others” (“Breaking into the Movies” 78). These
“important sites of political and pedagogical struggle” must be examined if the manufacturing of consent in education policy is to be understood ("Breaking into the Movies" 78).

Tillman and Trier’s analysis of the television drama *Boston Public* serves to provide such examination. One of the most pervasive themes they found in this series depicting Boston public schools was the “anybody can do it” view of the teaching profession, as shown in characters who decide (seemingly on a whim) that they want to teach, and are immediately hired despite being untrained, uncertified, and inexperienced. According to the drama, a teacher shortage and a lack of parental involvement make this arrangement possible, for who else will do the job? And what parents will care anyway? Tillman and Trier compare this televised representation with the reality that “individuals who begin their careers without student teaching leave the profession at rates twice as high as those who have had such practice teaching” (130). So then, the “anybody can do it” message does not match the real challenges of teaching, and if audiences are to believe that message, they fundamentally misunderstand a major part of a foundational public institution.

Perhaps this misunderstanding of the need to effectively prepare teachers for the challenges of the classroom leads to policymakers’ willingness “to fill vacancies by lowering standards so that people who have had little or no preparation for teaching can be hired, especially if their clients are ‘minority’ and low income students” (Darling-Hammond qtd. in Tillman and Trier 131). If the viewing public truly believes that anyone can teach, regardless of preparation, not only are the problems of public education perpetuated, but the voice of educational experts, namely teachers, are silenced.
on issues of educational policy. Why consult teachers when anyone can do what they do? If teachers do not need to be trained or have any special knowledge of education, then virtually anyone can be considered an “expert,” even if they have no classroom experience. Thus, the “public pedagogy” that results from an uncritical viewing of Boston Public allows for non-educators, neoliberal and neoconservative ideologues to garner legitimacy and listenership on matters of educational policy.

In addition to the small screen, educational policy issues are frequently portrayed in feature-length films. Movies such as Stand and Deliver (in 1988), Dangerous Minds (in 1995), Freedom Writers (in 2007), and the very recently released McFarland USA (in 2015) all depict students in various situations of social disadvantage alongside the teachers who work to help the students overcome their disadvantages. These films have all enjoyed popularity and high box-office sales, and accordingly contribute to the “public pedagogy” Giroux believes shapes public perceptions and positions on educational policy. Giroux notes, “film constitutes a powerful force for shaping public memory, hope, popular consciousness, and social agency, and as such invites people into a broader public conversation” (“Breaking into the Movies” 693). While the above films are dramatized narrations based on real teachers, 2010’s Waiting for Superman was a bit different. Unlike most of the movies about education, this movie was billed as a documentary, and entered the public debate over charter schools in a very bold way.

In Waiting for Superman, the director, Davis Guggenheim, chronicles the lives of young students making their way through both traditional public schools and charter schools. He juxtaposes their emotional stories with statistics about the overall shortcomings of the public school system, as documented by standardized test scores,
data on teachers unions and their policies, and testimony from educators, school children, and their families. The overall purpose is to advance the crisis narrative of public schools, leading the audience to believe that these deserving children are “waiting for superman” or a collection of heroic figures to rescue them and their uncertain futures from a system that cannot lead them to success. While the film is popular and compelling, Swalwell and Apple argue that the documentary is “simplistic” and “naïve”—omitting vital information, unfairly placing blame on teachers unions, and uncritically presenting charter schools as a hopeful alternative. Taking a stronger stance than those who simply admit that the film is flawed, Swalwell and Apple contend that the film is so irrevocably flawed that it does nothing but “predetermine how any subsequent conversations will unfold” (376). As popular as this film was, Waiting for Superman is a major contributor to the false crisis narrative, and interestingly, features Bill Gates and other corporate reformers who have helped shape the “public pedagogy” about America’s schools.

Waiting for Superman is but one entry in a list of many texts that places the blame for America’s “failing” public schools squarely on the shoulders of teachers unions. A Time Magazine cover in late 2014 featured the image of an apple below a judge’s gavel perched and ready to strike. The cover read, “Rotten Apples: It’s Nearly Impossible to Fire a Bad Teacher,” and while the article itself (titled “The War on Teacher Tenure”) presented a far more nuanced and balanced view of the recent Vergara v. California case that ruled against teacher tenure protections, the cover art and text spoke for itself. That image in combination with those words makes the argument that there is a crisis in America’s public schools and teacher-bashing is the answer. The message drew much
attention from the general public and educators alike, with Randi Weingarten, President of the American Federation of Teachers responding, “Instead of hammering teachers, let’s smash inequality and underfunding.” The Time Magazine article acknowledged that the case was brought on by a “Silicon Valley muckety-muck who lives in one of the fanciest ZIP codes in America.” This is noteworthy because it helps readers understand the criticism from those who see a profit motive, as the efforts to weaken public schools and worker protections may lead to CEOs and CFOs making decisions about teachers not based on quality but on profitability. But while the text of the article itself was more willing to acknowledge the complicated nature of this debate, the cover image was commonly interpreted as anti-union and anti-teacher, yet another message that shapes public consciousness and creates a crisis narrative.

While the Time Magazine article was published after Ravitch’s Reign of Error, it is yet another entry in the ongoing public discourse over America’s public schools. This same article correctly recognizes the Vergara case in California as “a powerful proxy for a broader war over the future of education in this country,” a war that will undoubtedly continue for the foreseeable future. This war of ideas is being fought in political debates and campaigns, in movies and television shows, in courts and board meetings, and in the consciousness of individuals and the public. Both those who defend public schools and teachers unions, and those who argue for reform firmly believe, or at least claim to believe, that their position is in the public interest. And this is where Diane Ravitch’s Reign of Error comes in, as a highly researched yet highly readable work, entering the conversation and hoping to alter its course in rejection of privatization and in favor of strengthening public schools.
Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm and the Need for Alternative Frames

Walter Fisher’s narrative paradigm, the idea that people order their world according to narrative rationality, provides a helpful framework for understanding the discourse over America’s public schools. In order to best understand Fisher’s narrative paradigm, one must study the work of his theoretical predecessor, Kenneth Burke. In *Language as Symbolic Action*, Burke outlines his theory of dramatism, stressing that language is a system of “symbolic action,” and calling into question the realities that language creates for its users. For, “if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality” (45). So then, through language, people enact symbols that give the world preferred meanings. Word choice itself gives preference to certain aspects of the world symbolized in language, and in giving preference to those aspects, devalues other aspects. This leads Burke to his theory of “terministic screens,” the idea that language filters human understanding, attention, and intention. Burke’s concepts remind people to question the rhetoric in the world around them, for if “any nomenclature necessarily directs the attention into some channels rather than others” (*Language as Symbolic Action* 45), what are the unexplored channels? What is highlighted and what is obscured when filtering reality through a particular symbolic system of language? In the case of the rhetoric on public education in America, what meaning is created and what is ignored in the discourse?

Expanding on Burke’s ideas that language is a system of symbolic action, Fisher proposes that narration is a specific type of symbolic action, one that people are naturally disposed to understanding and creating. This “narrative rationality” intrinsically prompts
humans to make sense of their experiences in narrative format, complete with characters, conflicts, and resolutions. While this process sounds harmless, again, it is important to ask which understandings are preferred and which are excluded in the process of shaping experiences into stories. Like Burke’s terministic screens, stories act as filters. Narrative theorist Wallace Martin notes that stories are culturally bound: “The shapes of narrative are then instances of general cultural assumptions and values – what we consider important, trivial, fortunate, tragic, good, evil, and what impels movement from one to the other” (87). So then, the stories that are told and repeated about America’s public school system not only shape the public’s perception of schools, they also demonstrate cultural values. An analysis that fully attends to the details of any narrative will then not only ask what meaning is created in the codes of narration, but also what the codes of narration reveal about the larger culture that produced it.

Additionally, the narrative paradigm must be understood in relation to other paradigms. In Human Communication as Narration, Fisher posits his narrative paradigm against the philosophical work of Aristotle and Plato and the technical discourse of Francis Bacon. While Aristotle’s rational world paradigm emphasizes the persuasive power of logic and reason, Fisher argues that “humans as rhetorical beings are as much valuing as reasoning animals” (57). This means that, while argumentation is a powerful force for persuasion, narration is at least as effective (if not, more effective) as traditionally taught logical reasoning in persuading an audience into a particular belief or course of action.

In “Narration as Human Communication Paradigm,” Fisher rejects the idea that communication must be argumentative if it is to be considered rhetorical. When stories
“satisfy the demands of narrative probability and narrative fidelity” (291), they are incredibly effective in creating preferred meanings and interpretations of reality. “Narrative probability” refers to how a story coheres together as an internally believable plot, and “narrative fidelity” refers to how well the story matches an audience’s pre-existing understandings of the world. Therefore, when a story sounds believable both in itself and in comparison with other stories and experiences, it becomes rhetorically effective.

In an essay entitled “How Primordial is Narrative?” Michael Bell echoes this idea of narrative fidelity in his assertion that narrative requires an audience’s “consent” – that is, that “meaning exists dialectically in the tension between its world and the world of the reader” (197). Yet, Bell acknowledges that language is powerful in creating preferred meanings, in stretching the reader’s world towards one that exists in the symbols of the text. His discussion of the difference between the labels of “myth” and “narrative” illustrates:

The advantage of the word ‘myth’ is that it insists, sometimes embarrassingly, on its problematic status and large claims. ‘Narrative,’ on the other hand, may give a misleading impression of avoiding such problems while effectively sneaking myth in through the back door (173).

Thus, while an audience must consent to believing the stories told them, either in books, movies, news reports, or other cultural texts, that consent is often more freely given if the symbols used (most importantly, the symbolic system of language) are cleverly chosen to bend in the direction of the preferred meaning.
In application to the competing ideas about America’s public school system, it would follow that the vision of what is happening and should happen to the nation’s schools will be determined by what story the American public can be led to believe. Thus, while the general public, business leaders, judges, educators, students, and every other party invested in the future of America’s public school system would be wise to attend to facts, reason, and rational arguments in order to make informed decisions, Fisher’s narrative paradigm holds that the most persuasive argument will be the best story. Could it be that many have given their consent to a narrative that more appropriately should be called “myth”? Diane Ravitch believes so, and Reign of Error is a major offering in her attempt to problematize the meaning created in the crisis narrative constructed over the course of many cultural texts.

This problematizing happens in the context of an era when dominant narratives, counter-narratives, and anti-narratives can and do simultaneously exist. Narration works because the symbolic and value-driven codes through which stories are built go undetected by the audience, who is led to view the version of reality presented to them as truth, but counter-narratives sometimes can arise to challenge the preferred meanings. As Nash puts it in “Slaughtering the Subject: Literature’s Assault on Narrative,” it is likely that “no century has ever been so good as ours at producing reasons for being in doubt about what we can know and how we can ever know anything” (200). And while counter-narratives tell different stories, post-modernist anti-narratives “bring the codes themselves to the foreground of our critical attention, requiring us to see them as codes rather than aspects of human nature or the world” (Sholes 207). Instead of telling different stories (as counter-narratives do), anti-narratives, in effect “tell on themselves.”
Even so, in the presence of both counter-narrative and anti-narrative, preferred meanings, power elites, and dominant narratives still exist because people are limited in their ability to understand the world, and the language system they use to filter their experiences, is, in itself, a determiner of meaning. So then, when a dominant narrative forms and galvanizes over the course of decades, especially a narrative about a social institution as important as the American public education system, it is important to call the narrative into question. As Goldstein argues:

It is not enough for the educational researchers, particularly those concerned with school reform, teaching, and students (regardless of where they fall in the debate), to continue conducting research, simply reporting that research to grant-givers, at conferences, or in peer reviewed academic journals. They can expand their audience to more effectively include more members of the public and introduce multiple and alternative frames for how members of the public view school reform, teachers, and teachers’ unions (569).

Ravitch hopes to provide that “alternative frame,” and in doing so, calls into question the dominant crisis narrative surrounding America’s public schools, and more broadly, draws attention to the constructed nature of narratives themselves.

Yet, Ravitch not only refutes the dominant narrative, she also replaces it with a new story, one that has garnered much attention. Clearly, Diane Ravitch and *Reign of Error* are well-known. Book reviews abound, but more scholarly analysis of her work is scarce. Reviewers have widely responded to Ravitch’s claims in an agree-or-disagree type fashion, but none have deconstructed those claims with a focus on examining the symbolic action or narrative rationality Ravitch employs. This research project performs
such work – to first contextualize *Reign of Error* as a response to other narrative codes, and then to reveal Ravitch’s own narrative code. The reader will be challenged to consider not only Ravitch’s claims but her methods, a task that will reveal how counter-narrative can be mobilized to interrupt a dominant narrative and re-direct a major social institution.
Chapter 3 – Analysis

The Prison House of Language and Ravitch’s Counter-Narrativity

Although human language undergirds much of human action and accomplishment, many post-modern theorists posit that language forms a boundary for human thought. They call this boundary the “prison house of language,” and argue that language takes priority over perception and deems certain thoughts “unthinkable” as those thoughts exist beyond the walls of linguistic representation (Scholes 202). Accordingly, many Americans besieged with the ubiquitous crisis narrative of America’s public schools may be trapped in the prison house of reform rhetoric, having no means of thinking contrary thoughts. Through reform rhetoric, audiences may actually come to believe that they are defending freedom and choice when they are actually defending oligarchy of the elite. They may actually believe that they are reformers when they are actually defenders of the status quo. To be fair, however, all are likely trapped in the “prison house of language,” the question simply is – which house? Undoubtedly, all codes give preference to certain meanings and obscure others. And if a narrative rationality is so entrenched in human nature so as to be inescapable, the question is not if narrative structure is useful for representing reality, but instead – which stories should people tell?

Ravitch’s rhetorical work performed in *Reign of Error* aims at breaking open the doors of the reformers’ prison house of language and allowing for possibilities other than the definitions and solutions they provide. Yet, Ravitch cannot successfully accomplish this work without providing an alternate story, an alternate “prison house.” Nietzsche famously suggested that any effort to escape from the prison house of language only
builds the walls higher because a critic is subject to the same limiting structures of the language used by the works she seeks to deconstruct (Ankersmit 83). Thus, Ravitch’s attempt to dismantle the reformers’ rhetoric does not necessarily liberate her readers from the prison house of language, so much as it provides another story or house to occupy. Her counter-narrativity is both strategic and inescapable, for storytelling is:

too deeply rooted in human physical and mental processes to be dispensed with by members of this species. We can and should be critical of narrative structuration, but I doubt if even the most devoted practitioner of anti-narrativity can do without it (Scholes 208).

Ravitch uses this potential to be critical of narrative structuration in her favor by asking her audience to doubt the crisis narrative, but then re-instates narrativity in her counter-argument. While she hopes her audience will see her rhetorical moves as more factual, the evidence she presents serves the ultimate purpose not to destroy narrative rationality but to tell a better story.

Like Ravitch’s book itself, this chapter begins with a discussion of the reformers’ narrative and Ravitch’s attempt to dismantle their story (break open the “prison house”), and then follows with a more thorough accounting for Ravitch’s counter-narrative. Throughout the analysis of the crisis narrative, this thesis embeds Ravitch’s response in order to demonstrate Michael Bamberg’s observation that, “Speakers do not present a simple counter-story but seem to be juggling several story lines simultaneously.” More specifically, Ravitch juggles her discussion of the reformers’ rhetoric along with her counter-narrative to sow the seeds of doubt. While fact-checking the reformers’ version of the story, she leads her audience to believe that her counter-story is a more accurate,
rational presentation of events. This tactic of appealing to reason cleverly obscures Ravitch’s own narrative methods. While the reader confronts the plethora of evidence Ravitch provides, she casts herself in the role of sage narrator, and the reformers become unreliable narrators. Later, these unreliable narrators are perfectly positioned to take the role of chief villains in her counter-narrative. Despite the appearance of rationality, narrativity is the chief means of communication, in both the reformers’ rhetoric and Ravitch’s response.

Culturally Bound and Intertextually Constructed Narratives

To answer the question of why the general public believes the false crisis narrative of America’s public schools, one might consider how individuals in society come to develop their cultural beliefs in the first place. Much of what people value and accept is not explicitly taught – rather, it is absorbed through subtle ways of living and implied messages. Such is the nature of hegemonic ideas. They are so ubiquitous that they both go unnoticed and yet also become core assumptions about the way the world is and should be. Ravitch makes the argument that the false crisis narrative has gained such weight in modern American culture that it has become the default assumption of the average American, all while the real story of what is happening in and to America’s public schools has gone unexamined. She explains, “Right and left, Democrats and Republicans, the leading members of our political class and our media elite seem to agree: Public education is broken” (3).

Ravitch is just about as thorough as anyone could possibly be in identifying the sources of this ubiquitous cultural narrative, as she identifies myriad sources and texts, yet many sources of this narrative will never be documented. In casual conversations
between parents nervously discussing where to send their children, in friendly (and not-so-friendly) debates at social gatherings of friends and family, and in countless media jabs at public education, the failing public schools narrative resonates like a sound made in an echo chamber. The false crisis narrative is intertextually constructed across many varied social stages. In essence, all people are readers of their cultural environment, and, although fragmented, personal, political, and cultural texts consistently provide new entries in the false crisis narrative. An uncritical reading of these texts has led many to unquestioningly believe that schools are failing, economic consequences are dire, the teachers unions are to blame, and the reformers have the free-market solutions and governmental accountability measures that will save the day.

Yet, how does the public come to believe these messages so willingly? How is it that business managers are trusted over educators to know what is appropriate educational policy? Here is where an understanding of growing neoliberal influence is helpful. Increasingly, capitalist markets have become not merely an economic structure but a cultural value. In emphasizing market-based solutions, reformers tap in to an article of faith for many Americans. In a nation that has never fully recovered from the Cold War, any system reminiscent of socialism or communism is likely to be read as anti-American. Public schools have always had a strong element of commitment to the common good, rather than private profit. And educators work to produce knowledge rather than working to produce capital. For many, resisting the rhetoric of the reformers is difficult because the values of the market are embedded in all their core assumptions.

Additionally, certain facts belie the crisis narrative that so many endorse. In another work by Ravitch, she notes that while “Americans are overwhelmingly
dissatisfied with the quality of the nation’s schools…77 percent of public school parents award their own child’s public school a grade of A or B” (Ravitch, “The Myth of Charter Schools”). How can these two statistics co-exist? How is it that most Americans are satisfied with their own local public school yet willingly accept that the American public school system at large is failing? This lack of consistency underscores what Ravitch hopes to lead her audience to understand – that narration can be so compelling, a story can be told so well, that it may cause people to betray their own experiences or suspend their own powers of reason. A knowledge of Fisher’s narrative paradigm helps a reader understand this point in that a story’s “persuasiveness is not the truth of the narrative, but its credibility” (Rowlands 122). For those willing to entertain the possibility that the reformers’ rhetoric, while believable to many, is not actually true, Ravitch provides a compelling counter-narrative. While an unquestioning faith in free markets may lure many to endorse the reformers’ solutions, she hopes that her reader will come to see the production of knowledge and a commitment to the common good as values in themselves. She accomplishes this purpose through a counter-story that conceals her own narrative methods in an effort to mobilize a defense of public values.

Friedman’s Rhetoric of Choice and Ravitch’s Response

One of the most popular ideas in the rhetoric of education reform is the proposal that students should be given vouchers to attend the school of their choice. Instead of children attending their local public school, they would be given a voucher to attend any school, public or private, across the street or across town. The economist Milton Friedman both originated and popularized the concept of vouchers as a “market force that might improve public education” (Walsh 215). Friedman’s vision for solving the
problems in education was the same vision he had for solving all societal problems – free markets. While he has had vocal opposition ever since he first introduced his voucher proposal in the 1950’s, the broad geopolitical movements towards neoliberalism and globalization that have unfolded in approximately the last 35 years have given Friedman the platform he has needed to advance this agenda. When he died in 2006, The Economist published an article in which they named Friedman “the most influential economist of the second half of the 20th century…possibly of all of it” (“Milton Friedman: A Heavyweight Champ at Five Foot Two”). Accordingly, when Diane Ravitch takes on Friedman’s voucher plan, she accepts no small challenge. He, along with other reformers, constitute powerful voices, yet she speaks back with equal might and leads her audience to see the reformers as highly influential due to their story-telling prowess, rather than due to the merits of their ideas.

In his 1980 PBS series entitled Free to Choose (which was also published as a book that enjoyed five weeks on the New York Times’ bestsellers list), he outlines his economic and political philosophies which equate economic freedom with human freedom, and stand strongly opposed to government regulation and interference in free-market capitalism. Part 6 of the Free to Choose series is entitled “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” – a title that assumes a major problem from the outset in order to then offer a solution. Milton, a grandfatherly figure narrates, while sitting comfortably in front of the camera, and speaking to the viewers in a calm, pleasantly paced cadence, with language that creates a certain urgency:

What we need to do is to enable parents, by vouchers or other means, to have more say about the school which their child goes to – a public school or a private
school, whichever meets the need of the child best. That will inevitably give them also more say about what their children are taught and how they are taught. Market competition is the surest way to improve the quality and promote innovation in education as in every other field.

With words such as “inevitably” and “surest,” Friedman’s proposal sounds immediately actionable. This pressing tone contrasts with his more relaxed demeanor to create a sense of balance and assuredness. If this wise man has come up with a plan to improve education now, why not act on it? With an image of Vermont’s last single-room schoolhouse serving as his backdrop, Friedman harkens back to an imaginary idyllic past, citing “the way it used to be – parental control, parents choosing the teacher, parents monitoring the schooling.” As Burke would likely note, Friedman’s goal is to goad by way of symbol – to arouse an emotional longing for the benevolent wisdom of an elder and a desire for a simpler time, when the schoolhouse was smaller and presumably more approachable.

In the start of the episode, Friedman juxtaposes two schools, Weston High School in one of Boston’s wealthier suburbs, and Hyde Park High in a more economically disadvantaged area of Boston. Though he never makes direct reference to the racial disparities of these two schools, he does not have to. At Weston High School, white students are shown diving into an Olympic-size swimming pool and proudly walking at graduation ceremonies. In contrast, Hyde Park’s footage shows black students walking through metal detectors. Friedman explains that the difference is that Weston High School parents have kept more control over the local schools and are receiving a better value for their tax dollars. He interprets the scene for the audience, “The people who lose
the most from this system are the poor and disadvantaged in the large cities. They are simply stuck; they have no alternative.”

In this way, Friedman casts poor blacks in the role of victim and presents himself as a reliable narrator, one who has the best interest of these students at heart. He prepares the audience to search for a villain. If these students are victims, who is victimizing them? Who is the chief antagonist of the story? Friedman provides the answer as the video continues and he repeatedly refers to educators as “bureaucrats” who “strangle” efforts to create alternative school structures. He blames the “educational establishment” for this “disgraceful situation” and concludes that a “centralized system” cannot possibly serve the needs of these disadvantaged students. But if the “educational establishment” is the antagonist, who or what is the protagonist? What will save these poor students and their parents from being “ripped off” and “shortchanged”? As is Friedman’s solution to all problems, free market capitalism will save the day. Interestingly, the video slowly shifts language that is coded to emphasize education to language that is coded to emphasize the exchange of capital. Parents and students become “customers” seeking not knowledge, but a particular product.

When this episode of *Free to Choose* first aired on PBS in 1980, it was followed with an open forum discussion/debate between Milton Friedman and other interested parties such as politicians and educators. The lively nature of the resulting discussion reveals that education was then as it is now, a hotly debated topic. Public educators (on one side) and those who advocate increased influence of private markets (on the other), continue to tell different stories about how to improve education. In this open forum, no one contested that the needs of all students could be better served, but many contested the
details of Friedman’s market-based plan. John Coons of The Initiative for Family Choice in Education also supported school vouchers but offered that there really was no “free competition” where the public school system was forced to accept all students and private schools could keep certain students out by not offering special education services, bilingual education, or busing to support integration. In this way, Coons complicated the simple narrative that Friedman tells. In an even more invective criticism, Gregory Anrig, the Commissioner of the Department of Education in Massachusetts attacked the very assumption upon which Friedman’s story is built – that the free market provides salvation from the clutches of “bureaucrats.” He resisted Friedman’s market-based solution by clarifying that, “The role of public education in democracy is not akin to that of the marketplace,” and argued that public schools in a democracy exist to create an educated electorate. In this way, he re-instated the role of students as learners, not consumers.

Thirty-five years after the airing of Friedman’s Free the Choose series, the idea of marketplace solutions to many social ills is an enduring and advancing thought. But just as there were detractors in 1980, there are also those who object today. Early in Reign of Error, Diane Ravitch introduces what she calls the false crisis narrative – the dominant narrative that public schools are failing, and prepares her audience for a counter-narrative. While those who tell stories about how the public schools are failing see themselves as reformers who will save a system on the brink of destruction, Ravitch recasts reformers as “corporate reformers,” emphasizing that there is a profit to be made on advancing the false crisis narrative. After all, public schools bring in billions of dollars in tax revenue. Diverting that money to private schools or charter schools with fewer regulations, oversight, limits, and obligations, she claims, could prove quite lucrative for
private interests. This calls the motive of the reformers into question and casts them as unreliable narrators, those with reason to distort events.

Ravitch’s treatment of Friedman’s argument establishes her primary method of resistance, evidence-fueled counter-narrativity. That is, she uses fact after fact to not merely call the reformers’ story into question but to also frame them as false profits. She describes Milton Friedman as one “antagonistic to public education” (20). She explains that Ronald Reagan re-introduced Milton’s idea of vouchers during his presidency, but then cites the fact that voters have never fully embraced the concept. This then lays the foundation for her claim that reformers, desperate for a means to advance an agenda that is more ideological than factual, must “continually parrot or manufacture a steady stream of bad news about public education to shake the public’s faith in public schools” (21). In this way, she implicates the reformers as those who cleverly package reality into a narrative and repeat that narrative until it takes on the weight of truth.

In the “failing schools” narrative, “choice” means that schools will have to improve in order to attract “customers” (students and their parents) who will shop around for a school that provides the best education. This type of marketplace setting is central to their vision of what reform should look like. Yet, Ravitch counters the hopeful picture of market solutions that reformers hope to paint by providing evidence to the contrary – that private schools and charter schools have no magical solutions. She asserts, “To date, charter schools have not fulfilled the hope that they would produce superior academic results” (174). She acknowledges that some have experienced a certain measure of success, but argues that, when they enroll the same demographic of students as the public schools, they largely get the same results. Or, if they enroll a demographic of students
who have typically struggled in school (those from low-income houses, those whose parents have poor educational backgrounds), they only get extraordinary results when they compensate for these struggles by spending great amounts of money to bridge the opportunity gap these students have always faced.

Here, Ravitch takes down a key pillar in the reformers’ narrative structure. Reformers claim that money does not matter, or at least it is not an excuse for poor educational outcomes. Yet, when they want better outcomes for the most challenging students, they must outspend the public schools to achieve them. With this hypocrisy laid bare, Ravitch then explains why, even with tremendous weaknesses, the false crisis narrative remains so appealing. She argues that “society has grown to accept poverty as an inevitable fact of life, and there seems to be little or no political will to do anything about it” (93). Ravitch contends that money does matter, that under-funded schools cannot fully meet the needs of the most disadvantaged students, and that instead of fixing the problem of massive inequality in the United States, the reformers and those who are complicit with their agenda will end up chasing empty solutions that threaten to cause further harm.

In considering Friedman’s ideas, Ravitch has the advantage of writing to her audience in 2013, rather than decades earlier when vouchers were first proposed. When Milton Friedman argued for vouchers in *Free to Choose*, his nascent ideas were yet untested. His solutions likely sounded innovative and intriguing to many. Today, according to Ravitch, Friedman’s ideas have been tested and they have failed. Without making reference to Burke, she leads her audience to a Burkean understanding, that the symbolic action being performed by the words “freedom” and “choice” are a construction
of reality, and in actuality Friedman’s market-based solutions offer no real answers. While they sound appealing in name, they are empty in practice. Again without making reference to rhetorical theorists, she leads her audience to an understanding of the narrative paradigm, that stories are sometimes myth, and intellectual heroes (such as Milton Friedman) are more legend than substance.

**The Gates Foundation’s Rhetoric of Reform and Ravitch’s Response**

Another major narrator in the rhetoric of reform is the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Early in *Reign of Error*, Ravitch introduces The Gates Foundation and its influence on educational policy by noting that it is “difficult to find education organizations that have not been funded by the Gates Foundation” (23). While many laud its philanthropy, Ravitch quickly points out the strings attached to all the money the Gates Foundation channels in the direction of public education. In noting that it “subsidiz[es] almost every major think tank in Washington D.C.,” “promot[es] Common Core State Standards,” and “has joined in partnership with the British publisher Pearson,” Ravitch leads her reader to see that the Gates Foundation as enormously influential (23). Later, this will serve her resistance as she questions who should run public schools – communities and the elected school boards they democratically vote into office, or massive organizations who both underwrite and profit from the changes they propose.

An investigation into the Gates Foundation’s use of the rhetoric of reform reveals its narrative methods. Its website proclaims the Foundation’s agenda to advance “college-ready education.” The web page is laid out in four sections – “the challenge,” “the opportunity,” “our strategy,” and “areas of focus” – framing that suggests a problem in order to then provide a solution. “The challenge” section details, “For generations,
education has been the springboard to opportunity in America. But today, other countries are catching up with and even outpacing us.” Off to the side, assertions are highlighted in an “At A Glance” section that attempts to impart the urgency of the crisis, claiming that only twenty-five percent of U.S. high school graduates can succeed in college. Furthermore, public school teachers are framed as operating at a deficit, in that they “lack access to the tailored feedback, high-quality instructional materials, and support they need to do their best work and continually improve.”

Clearly, the Gates Foundation is making an argument, but a narrative analysis uncovers the intrinsic narrative elements in the argumentative appeals. By beginning with an outline of the problems, as the Gates Foundation sees them, they are setting up the story’s central conflict – failing schools, as indicated by unprepared students and ill-equipped teachers. They push the conflict to a climax by indicating that if the conflicts are not resolved in a positive way the results will be disastrous; individual students will lack economic opportunity, and the U.S. as a whole will not be able to compete with other nations whose educational systems are thriving. At the height of the conflict, a hero comes to save the day. The Gates Foundation enters the scene with several programs “to ensure that all students graduate from high school prepared to succeed in college” and “to dramatically increase the number of young people who obtain a postsecondary degree or certificate with labor-market value.”

Interestingly, their rationale for resolving the crisis they present is economic above all else. This reflects the “corporate pedagogy” Giroux describes, wherein the function of schools becomes to create workers who can participate in consuming goods and competing in the global capitalist system. Giroux stands alongside Ravitch in
advocating education for democracy, rather than education for the marketplace. Giroux and Ravitch are intellectual descendants of Dewey who affirmed that “all those who are affected by social institutions must have a share in producing and managing them” (“Democracy and Educational Administration” 458). Whereas public school boards operate with a body of elected officials who are accountable to the public, charter schools (a movement championed by the Gates Foundation) use public money with no democratic oversight. They re-direct public funds for private profit in the hands of Charter Management Organizations (CMOs). And while an education in service of democracy emphasizes critical thinking for transforming society, education in service of capitalism emphasizes reproducing workers who will continue to build capital and consumers to feed the global capitalist machine.

This is a central part of Ravitch’s counter-narrative. She questions the Gates Foundation’s motives by reminding her audience that they are behind a database project entitled Wireless Generation that collects confidential student data that could be “disclosed to vendors to market new products to schools and students” (24). She explains that educators and politicians who fall in line with the Gates Foundation’s agenda are fast-tracked to top-paying administrative positions and powerful political status. She details the rewards offered those who comply by noting that “Those who rise in the corporate reform movement are soon managing their own charter schools or assuming leadership roles in large urban districts or state education departments, some before they reach the age of thirty” (26). In Ravitch’s telling, reformers are not the schoolchildren’s heroes they claim to be; they are a self-interested party seeking profit by raiding public coffers, and influence they buy rather than democratically earn. This works to support
Ravitch’s strategy of consistently undermining the credibility of the reformers and thus casting them as unreliable narrators. Simultaneously, it positions Ravitch herself as more trustworthy and pre-disposes the audience to believe her counter-narrative in place of the reformers’ story.

**NCLB and Race to the Top’s Rhetoric of Accountability and Ravitch’s Response**

In addition to business leaders and “philanthropist” organizations such as the Gates Foundation, the federal government has done much to advance the rhetoric of reform. While using the banner of “accountability” to lead the public into a belief that government efforts are providing schools with much needed regulation, Ravitch counters that such efforts are based on an inherent mistrust of teachers, a disingenuous “concern” for students, and an uncritical endorsement of market-based reforms. Where reformers emphasize the need for more testing to ensure that all students are achieving, Ravitch sees instructional time stolen from students and the teachers who should know best what their unique set of students need. Where reformers express heartfelt sympathy for underprivileged students, Ravitch sees a callous indifference to the deep social inequities that shape American life far beyond the school system. And where reformers advocate for free-market solutions, Ravitch sees opportunists with little interest in education and much interest in developing new revenue streams.

The federal government’s role in response to the corporate reformers could be one of wise regulator, a party who intervenes to check their involvement in education, yet Ravitch presents political leaders as playing an important supporting role to the corporate reformers. If business leaders, with their money and their prestige, are not enough to reform education alone, they can rest assured that they have friends in government that
will assist them in advancing their corporate pedagogy and privatization agenda. The reformers have been effective in advancing the crisis narrative, and they have used this narrative to gain support for their reforms from both major U.S. political parties. The U.S. Department of Education website outlines a brief history of federal education policy, complete with more recent legislation such as George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Barack Obama’s Race to the Top. The website features a vague call to action, urging “opportunity for every child, support for schools, teachers, and principals, and accountability for the progress of all students.” The language is intentionally abstract in order to pre-dispose an audience to agree. Certainly, no one can argue with “opportunity,” “support,” and “accountability.” An uncritical audience would be seduced by the language alone. The Department of Education explains the meaning of accountability under NCLB:

Under the act's accountability provisions, states must describe how they will close the achievement gap and make sure all students, including those who are disadvantaged, achieve academic proficiency. They must produce annual state and school district report cards that inform parents and communities about state and school progress. Schools that do not make progress must provide supplemental services, such as free tutoring or after-school assistance; take corrective actions; and, if still not making adequate yearly progress after five years, make dramatic changes to the way the school is run.

So then, in the way the legislation explains the meaning of “accountability,” a dynamic is constructed wherein schools are like an unruly child and federal legislation must paternalistically establish structure and discipline to ensure proper progress. Such a tone
does not just arise without context, but arises within a social climate that assumes that
schools have strayed. Like the prodigal son, they have left, they have failed in their
obligations, and they must be brought back.

Ravitch elucidates the role of No Child Left Behind in constructing the crisis
narrative of America’s public schools. She explains what she believes is the real purpose
of No Child Left Behind. Under NCLB, 100% of public school students were supposed
to reach “proficiency” by 2014. As that deadline approached, 80% of America’s public
schools were considered “failing.” To be sure, 100% proficiency is a goal that “no other
nation has ever achieved” (12). So then, this mandate, along with the punitive measures
accompanying it, never really had the purpose of realistically improving education for
public school students; it was designed to facilitate the labeling of public schools as
“failures” so that the reform agenda could be advanced. Unlike the rhetoric of Friedman
or the Gates Foundation, NCLB does not have to explicitly claim in its text that public
schools are failing; rather it tells the false crisis narrative in its application every time a
school does not meet its unrealistic demands.

In her counter-narrative, Ravitch draws an arch of continuity between Bush’s
NCLB and Obama’s Race to the Top, which “preserved testing, accountability, and
choice at the center of the federal agenda” (28). In the view of the reformers, this is used
as evidence that the crisis of America’s public schools is so obvious that both parties are
compelled to agree on the need for “change.” In Ravitch’s version of the story, it is not
that the evidence is so compelling, but that the themes of equality have been re-
appropriated and are being used to advance an anti-democratic agenda. Ravitch
contends, “The corporate reform movement has co-opted progressive themes and
language in the service of radical purposes” (22). She details how this has been done, through language that conceals the true intentions of reformers. When they actually aim for deregulation and privatization, they speak of reform. When they want to impose rigid and restrictive testing, they speak of “accountability.” When they want to eliminate teachers and the subjective judgment that is intrinsic to critical thinking and teaching, they speak of “technology and innovation” (34). Furthermore, the “change” that reformers seek is actually more of the same. Ravitch argues that the combination of “the wealth of the big foundations with the financial and political clout of the U.S. Department of Education [constitute] a mighty force. The reformers are the status quo” (25). In Ravitch’s counter-narrative the reformers would exacerbate, not alleviate the problems faced by America’s public schools because the reformers themselves already represent the interests of the economic and political elite.

*Waiting for Superman: Guggenheim’s Myth and Ravitch’s Response*

To fully dismantle the crisis narrative of American schools, Ravitch must contend with cultural texts in addition to the rhetoric advanced by economic, corporate, and government entities. A popular recent entry in the crisis narrative came from 2010’s *Waiting for Superman.* Ravitch responds to this film with facts, charts, data, and re-interpretation of the documentary’s evidence. While the film presents many facts packaged into a persuasive narrative, Ravitch undermines the film’s credibility by highlighting what the film omitted, and re-framing the evidence presented. In this way, she establishes her own ethos as a more reliable narrator. While it may appear that she is primarily employing rational argument, she is actually weaving a new story and positions herself as the narrator who can best tell it.
Of all the texts discussed in this thesis, Davis Guggenheim’s *Waiting for Superman* is the most obvious in its narrative methods. Guggenheim, who many know from his other popular documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*, has become more recognizable than most documentary filmmakers could dream of, and this is in no small part due to his ability to present reality to his viewers in a compelling narrative form. In *Waiting for Superman*, the audience comes to know the cast of leading characters – five schoolchildren and their sympathetic families, innocent and good-natured protagonists. As Fisher would note, there is a sense of identification established between the audience and these characters, not only due to the presentation of the families’ hopes and dreams as they battle financial hardship and complacent teachers, but also because these protagonists represent intrinsically American values. The children are adorable and precocious, full of energy and curiosity; they represent what many hope all American children embody – boundless potential. And their parents repeat a familiar American refrain – that they want a better life for their children. That upward mobility is possible for those who want it badly enough is central to American values and ideals. These protagonists are not just people with whom the audience relates – they are also the very embodiment of some of their most deeply held values.

As the protagonists explain, their children’s potential and opportunities are under attack. They are threatened by failing schools that hold them in their clutches, and teachers who either cannot or will not perform their jobs. The protagonists’ ultimate goal is to gain admission to charter schools, and thereby position themselves in a setting of hope and opportunity, rather than the public schools’ setting of dead ends. If these innocents are the protagonists, failing public schools and their tenure-protected teachers
are the evil villains. Guggenheim highlights the worst offenders, schools he calls “dropout factories” and unions that protect “lemons” (i.e., bad teachers).

The audience’s sense of identification with the protagonists, and corresponding resentment of the antagonists, is carefully cultivated through scenes in which the students each enter a lottery to win admission to a privately managed charter school in their area. Viewers follow students and their well-meaning parents through their nights of doing frustrating homework and receiving little or no support from teachers. Viewers listen to the students’ dreams for their futures, echoed by their parents’ expressions of what they dream for their children. Viewers see slick graphs and animations of the “realities” of the students’ chances of success, which appear very grim as a parade of bleak statistics about the public schools advances. The audience is meant to dream for a better future along with them, meant to respond with outrage to the absurdity of entering adorable and deserving children into a lottery that (as it is framed by the movie) may very well determine the children’s success, and meant to cry or celebrate along with these families as they learn whether or not they have been randomly selected for a spot in the charter school of their choosing.

In Reign of Error, Ravitch re-tells the basic storyline as presented in this movie, and thus establishes for herself an opportunity to counter the failing schools narrative. She responds with a barrage of statistics and accompanying facts. Armed with data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Ravitch challenges the film’s claim that seventy percent of America’s eighth grade students cannot read at grade level. Ravitch asserts that the truth of the matter is that only twenty-four percent of eighth graders actually fit that “below grade level” label, which is still not a pleasing statistic but
certainly a far cry from seventy percent. The difference between Guggenheim’s claim and Ravitch’s claim is interpretation, and by inviting her audience to re-interpret the “hard facts” that undergird the reformers’ rhetoric, she asks her audience to question the “truth” of all they think they know of American schools. If facts themselves are open to interpretation, perhaps the crisis narrative (that once appeared so self-evident and blatantly true) is itself also a matter of perspective. In Ravitch’s interpretation of statistics, she includes students who performed as “basic” in the calculation of who is at grade level, while Guggenheim includes only those who score as “proficient” or “advanced.” Furthermore, Ravitch establishes herself as an authoritative interpreter of these test results by detailing her background as a former board member on the National Assessment Governing Board. She argumentatively asserts, “I know the questions asked on its examinations are challenging. I am willing to bet that most elected officials and journalists today would have a hard time scoring well on the NAEP tests administered across the nation to our students” (44).

Moreover, Ravitch not only questions Guggenheim’s use of statistics, but also his framing of particular characters. Former Chancellor of D.C. Public Schools Michelle Rhee is prominently featured in Waiting for Superman, and Ravitch refers to her as a “star” – emphasizing the film’s role in not merely documenting reality but creating a dramatized story, complete with celebrity icons. As Ravitch notes, the camera loves Michelle Rhee, or perhaps it is Michelle Rhee who loves the camera. She embodies a Clint Eastwood-type persona – gritty, tough, unflinchingly staring down adversaries. She seems to relish in documenting her “tough on bad teachers” stance, as in the moment she turns to the camera and says, “I’m going to fire somebody in a little while. Do you want
to see that?” To an audience convinced that bad teachers are the enemy, perhaps this feels like justice; but in Ravitch’s counter-narrative, it is calculated acting – a person who has become a caricature of herself for the sake of her own celebrity.

As Ravitch continues, she vets Michelle Rhee much more thoroughly than *Waiting for Superman* ever does. Ravitch is careful to document that, before leading D.C. public schools, Rhee’s only experience in education was teaching for three years for a for-profit privatized wing of the public school system in Baltimore, a wing that was closed after only four years. She elaborates that Rhee’s time at D.C. public schools placed “re lentless pressure to raise the passing rates on tests” which did result in “some early gains, but it produced a major cheating scandal as well” (148). Rhee accepted numerous awards and accolades for boosting scores, results that were later called into question due to the high erasure marks on students’ answer sheets. Again, Ravitch’s counter-narrative casts Rhee not in the role of courageous educator, but skilled actor – one who has convinced people that her policies work, even when those policies include shifting the goal of education to simply taking and passing tests, and even when success by that limited measurement is questionable. This constitutes a significant rhetorical move for Ravitch, for she is not merely fact-checking Rhee’s record, but also illustrating the performative nature of Rhee’s appeal. This allows Ravitch to reveal the narrativity in the reformers’ rhetoric, and later re-cast the movements’ protagonists as antagonists.

Finally, Ravitch takes issue with *Waiting for Superman*’s not-so-subtle hailing of charter schools as the promised land. After all, if all the film’s featured children and their families are desperate to get there, they must provide magical solutions and much more opportunity than public schools, right? On the contrary, Ravitch details aspects of charter
schools that Guggenheim ignores. She explains their history – the fact that Albert Shanker, “the founding father of the charter school movement” (156) has since abandoned the cause of charter schools as he has “concluded that management by private corporations was incompatible with public education. The management’s decisions would be based on reducing costs, he realized, not improving education” (157). Ravitch continues in her examination, explaining that charter schools, by nature, operate according to their own independent rules, and are therefore difficult to generalize. However, in the current climate of “accountability” – wherein schools must prove their “success” through standardized tests, “Many (charters) exclude children with severe disabilities and accept very few English-language learners. Many have high attrition rates” (159).

In Guggenheim’s vision, charter schools are “free” to make “innovations” and offer students and their families “choice.” It is a compelling narrative because it taps into the American value of equal opportunity and the neoliberal faith in free markets to cure a multitude of ills. The viewers want to believe that if all students are given choice, free market competition will compel the schools to improve or risk closure, just like a bad restaurant or a retail store with poor service would when they fail to keep customers. In Ravitch’s counter-narrative, American values are still at play, but they are values of a more ugly sort – cutthroat competition and greed. Instead of competing to be the best school, charters compete to attract the most capable students in order to stack the deck in their favor, and they do this in the interest of profit, not in the best interest of their students. Ravitch narrates:
Charter operators want to have it both ways. When it is time for funds to be distributed, they want to be considered public schools. But when they are involved in litigation, charter operators insist they are private organizations…The courts and regulatory bodies have agreed with the latter point (163).

So then, in Ravitch’s narrative, “freedom” is not for students, but for business managers who want to freely benefit from public money that has been shielded from regulation. “Choice” is not for students, but for investors and entrepreneurs who want to choose what money they are entitled to, what regulation they do not have to follow, and what students they will exclude. The competition lauded in free-market capitalism is not a panacea for the problems that plague education but a force that pits the interests of needy students against the interests of privileged executives.

The result of this interplay between Guggenheim and Ravitch creates for the reader the sense that the failing schools narrative is not as clear and easy as the narrators, the purveyors of this story, would make it seem. Ravitch disrupts the facts upon which the storyline is built and thereby disrupts the storyline itself. She interjects with an onslaught of data and details that complicate the ease with which the false crisis narrative is told. In this way, Ravitch leads her readers to believe that a compelling narrative might be different from an accurate narrative. While Waiting for Superman has all the features of a good movie, is it to be considered a true documentation of reality? In Ravitch’s counter-narrative, this film becomes a cherry-picked piece of propaganda, one that uses manipulated statistics, un-vetted icons, and deceptive language to move an audience into agreement with an indefensible ideology. It is a work that is more appropriately categorized as a fictionalized drama than a documentary.
Reign of Error: The Counter-Narrative

Because Ravitch’s work is so obviously argumentative, complete with ample data, reason, and logic, some might believe that it would be appropriate to classify Reign of Error as rhetorically operating in accordance with Aristotle’s rational world paradigm, but that would be a mistake. While she does appeal to her audience’s rationality, this reason fuels her counter-narrative. Her use of logic and facts work to subvert the false crisis narrative and cast the reformers as deceivers. The reformers are not only wrong, they have a self-serving ulterior motive – profit. Their solutions are empty, but they repeat them anyway, and this makes the would-be heroes misguided at best, and liars at worst. Ravitch’s plethora of statistics that demonstrates the improvement public education has made in spite of the challenges they have faced makes public schools themselves heroic, succeeding even in the face of real and persistent challenges.

Ravitch’s work is indeed narrative because it maintains narrative structure to advance an argument in service of shifting the roles of central characters involved in the conflict over America’s public schools. More specifically, it demonstrates how counter-narratives “reshape and reconfigure” dominant stories (Bamberg). With facts, she undermines the theme of the crisis narrative and establishes her own – that poverty is the enemy, the reformers are not to be trusted, and public schools must be fiercely defended if they are to continue their noble work. She hopes her audience will want to think of themselves as informed rather than gullible, and will thus follow her into believing that they (as those truly informed and interested in meeting the needs of students) will resist the corporate reform movement and bravely join her in taking on the real challenges public schools face.
Just as many texts in the dominant narrative implicate average Americans as actors in the grand social drama of America’s “failing schools,” so does Ravitch call upon her audience. In the reformers’ narrative, anyone who joins their cause can be a superhero and a civil rights activist. This is evidenced in *Waiting for Superman* during a final call to action in which viewers are directed to a website where they can get more information about becoming a reformer. Guggenheim wants his viewers to believe that they are, at least in part, the Superman the children have been waiting for. This tactic is reminiscent of George W. Bush’s rhetoric that “failing” schools engage in “the soft bigotry of low expectations,” establishing a dynamic wherein those who do not join him are framed as bigots. As Bamberg notes “master narratives surely constrain and delineate the agency of subjects, seemingly reducing their range of actions.” By using deeply embedded cultural values, the reformers have led many to believe that they should support the reform agenda. In believing the failing schools narrative they believe that they too are taking a noble position by standing with the reformers. Ravitch maintains this element of the dominant narrative, leaving intact the possibility that the audience can be important social actors, but in a much different way. In Ravitch’s counter-narrative, the average American can and should resist privatization efforts and support strong public schools.

Additionally, Ravitch re-casts the reformers from Superman-type figures into roles equivalent to “the great and powerful Oz,” people who sound and look credible but who really have no special powers to offer, those who are revealed as frauds when the curtain is pulled back. In Ravitch’s counter-narrative, those who claim to support reforms in the name of equality have in fact abandoned that noble goal, for reform efforts
such as NCLB and Race to the Top pit schools and schoolchildren against each other in a “competition between the swift and the slow” (28). This sort of cutthroat environment is antithetical to the progress achieved through legislation such as 1975’s Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) which guaranteed the right to a free public education to students who now benefit from Special Education services and the inclusion that was previously denied them. Additionally, America’s public schools now increasingly serve students from foreign countries. These students benefit from English language services that are expensive, to be sure, but that reflect the commitment to provide for the good of all. In Ravitch’s counter-narrative, reformers disingenuously use the themes of equality while trading in a commitment to help those most in need for a new system that, like the marketplace itself, creates winners and losers.

According to the false crisis narrative, the chief villains are teachers and their unions, who are “just protecting their jobs and power” (21). Ravitch’s counter-narrative contends that they are not villains, but they are being used by the “refomers” as scapegoats. Burke’s dramatism reveals that in real life, just as in plays and other fictionalized stories, people trace the rise and fall of central characters, and when communities are troubled, they often seek redemption through the sacrifice of a public scapegoat. Anderson, King, and McClure explain:

Since ancient times, communities in troubled times have sought out a scapegoat. Unable to blame themselves for bad times, mistakes, or poor decisions, they have blamed a scapegoat and either killed or driven out the victim in order to purify themselves. According to Burke, this pattern is repeated over and over as troubled communities seek to purge themselves of guilt and restore their social
Ravitch does not detail the Burkean concept of scapegoating for her readers, but communicates this point nonetheless. Her readers are presented with the idea that teachers and their unions are merely an easy target to be used to purge the collective frustration some feel over “failing” schools. In Ravitch’s counter-narrative, teachers are not villains, and although they perform heroic work, they are, in fact, merely human. Even when exerting their full strength, they cannot overcome the tremendous challenges of poverty and segregation. “Bad teachers” are a scapegoat to purge America’s guilt over not treating its schoolchildren equitably. Furthermore, focusing on “bad teachers” is a distraction from real losses the nation’s schools and schoolchildren will continue to suffer as long as “the root causes of poor academic performance (such as) segregation and poverty, along with inequitably resourced schools” remain (9).

Along with the reformers, their push towards privatization is the true villain in this story. Ravitch’s counter-narrative contends that those who want what is best for America’s public schools and schoolchildren must “recognize that public education is a public responsibility, not a consumer good” (300). Unlike a business, public education, in a commitment to serve all, cannot control its “raw material,” the students. She details: They (public schools) cannot pick and choose among them. They cannot reject those who are homeless and those who don’t speak English. They cannot ‘counsel out’ those with low test scores and those with profound disabilities. They must find a place for students with behavioral problems. They are responsible for educating them all (301).
While reformers see obstruction in the public school systems’ slow improvements, Ravitch counters this part of the story by acknowledging that the accommodation of all, regardless of background or need, will inevitably make “progress” as shown on standardized tests appear as though it has stalled out. Yet, Ravitch sees the inclusion of all as progress itself. And even with the inclusion of all, public schools have managed to achieve “significant increases in both reading and mathematics” as measured by NAEP data since 1992 (49). In the reformers’ false crisis narrative, this is a part of the plot the public never hears. In Ravitch’s counter-narrative this point is integral, tantamount to the plot itself – public schools are both committed to equality and improving performance.

Ravitch’s counter-narrative demonstrates that “social order is tenuous, precarious, and open to negotiation in various ways” (Mumby 5) and that “the social construction of meaning does not take place in a political vacuum but rather is a product of the various constellations of power and political interests that make up the relationships among different social groups” (Mumby 6). Ravitch helps her readers see the relationship between narrative and politics. She evidences Fisher’s claim that narrative is rhetorical by demonstrating, in great detail, the rhetorical work of the false crisis narrative touted by the reformers and showing how this narrative is mobilized in service of a political agenda.

To be sure, Ravitch also has a political agenda. Her counter-narrative is used in service of a nexus of goals that includes: providing prenatal care for every pregnant woman, providing early childhood education to all children, providing a robust curriculum that includes arts, physical education, and foreign language, in addition to the “core” subjects, reducing class sizes, eliminating for-profit charters and ensuring that the
remaining charters cooperate rather than compete with public schools, providing medical and social services to children from economically disadvantaged homes, eliminating high-stakes standardized testing and replacing it with project-based assessments, maintaining the democratic element of schools by keeping elected officials and school boards in control of public funds allocated to schools, and implementing plans to reduce racial segregation and poverty that plague America’s schools and schoolchildren.

Ravitch recognizes that narratives are rhetorically powerful, and rather than simply dismantling the false crisis narrative, she also re-constructs a new re-telling of the story that she hopes will provide her readers with a compelling counter-narrative. If “the narrative paradigm insists that human communication should be viewed as…stories competing with other stories,” Ravitch offers her readers counter-evidence and a new story that her readers are meant to see as the victor (Burgchardt 291). Fisher calls the details of a story that make it credible “good reasons,” and Ravitch provides many “good reasons” to accept her version of the story of America’s public schools.
Chapter 4 – Conclusions

The Messy Artifacts of Democracy

Embedded throughout Ravitch’s counter-narrative, and then explicitly argued in Chapter 31 of *Reign of Error*, is the idea that what is happening to America’s public schools is contrary to the principles of democracy. Gone are the days in which there was a balance of power between locally elected school boards, state education departments, and the federal government. Under NCLB and Race to the Top, federal mandates and coercive incentives have compelled districts across the country to comply. In the past, the federal role was to ensure equal access – as in providing more funding to the neediest districts and enforcing desegregation. Now, local school boards and state departments of education are becoming arms of the federal Department of Education, existing to communicate and enforce federal testing, reporting, and procedural mandates. Ravitch leads her readers to an understanding of the federal government’s shifting priorities – from ensuring equity for students to ensuring that the nation’s schools comply with unproven policies.

These moves to consolidate power are happening in the name of efficiency. When proposals such as a new charter school or a new textbook adoption have to be considered, it is much easier for one party to make an executive decision than for a school board to have to hear public comment and consider multiple perspectives. Do school boards still meet to discuss and vote on such measures? Yes, but their hands are often tied as they have pre-existing obligations to the federal education agenda. Ravitch presents local boards as becoming more and more of a puppet government – a new status quo that is justified through criticism of school boards’
inefficiency.” Yet, Ravitch values this “inefficiency.” In discussing school boards, she offers: “They move slowly. They argue. They listen to different points of view….They prefer incremental change….They are a check and balance against concentrated power in one person or one agency….They listen to their constituents. That’s democracy” (287).

Valerie Strauss, education blogger for the Washington Post, has written about the same phenomenon, wherein control is wrested from local boards in favor of more centralized power. The Gates Foundation, for example, has spent millions “to help persuade state legislators to extend mayoral control in New York City” (Strauss). Bill Gates himself admits, “The cities where our foundation has put the most money is where there is a single person responsible” (qtd. in Strauss). Gates prefers the ease of convincing only one person of the merits of his reform proposals to the laborious process of considering many varied interests that undoubtedly are affected by educational decisions. Strauss irreverently muses, “no need to bother with the messy artifacts of democracy which might stand in his way.”

It is at this point that an opportunity for resistance emerges. Not only does Ravitch hope to dismantle the crisis narrative, she hopes that through her counter-narrative, she and others of like mind can mobilize a new story in the interest of preserving democracy in America’s schools. As the nation’s foremost historian of America’s public school system, she adds her influential voice to many before her in generations past who believed that public schools were a public responsibility, as opposed to a private investment. And there are many who stand alongside her – those whose work and lives are affected every day by educational policy, and those in the academy who study shifting educational policy, both its causes and consequences. Yet,
in *Reign of Error*, Ravitch appeals to a popular audience by enacting a rhetorical form that needs no academic introduction, as narrativity is intrinsic to human modes of communication. Behind the curtain of her dramatized counter-narrative is a global neoliberal movement, yet she focuses on the major players in America’s school privatization movement and uses more commonplace language for the purpose of appealing to a mass audience. If the reformers seek to trap the public in the prison house of their language, she must counter by providing an alternative.

By way of example, Ravitch leads the audience to believe that democratic participation can save America’s school system. She is unwaveringly committed to this grand discussion – incessantly writing and speaking out, and encouraging others to do the same. In her closing chapter, she writes, “Democracy functions most effectively when people from different backgrounds interact, communicate their interests, and participate in shaping the purposes by which they live” (323). Here, she implicates her audience as important social actors in this crucial story, for all people have a role in the maintenance of democracy, and specifically in what has historically been one of America’s most democratic institutions – the public school system.

**In Defense of Nuance: An Autoethnographic Conclusion**

At the conclusion of this research, I find myself reflecting on my initial motivations to embark on this study, what I anticipated to find, and what I actually learned. When I first came across Ravitch’s book, I felt equipped and energized. Here is a highly researched yet readable work that clearly, coherently, and authoritatively establishes the many reasons to resist privatization. Ravitch evidences what my own personal experiences had led me to conclude – that private schools often do a great
disservice to the cause of equality and in that process reproduce rather than correct the very conditions that a true education should seek to overthrow. Her assertion that the reformers’ agenda will cause “levels of inequality [to] deepen if teachers are incentivized to shun students with the highest needs” made sense to me so intrinsically that it took on the weight of unquestionable truth (109). I have experienced this for myself. As a student in a private school, I lived in a system where difference was stomped out in service of the interests of those in power. I have benefited from the unearned privilege of being able to mitigate my difference, but I should not have had to. And what of those who can’t or won’t? What of those students who don’t speak English well, have disabilities, or don’t otherwise easily assimilate? Any worthy system of education should broaden and shift to fit the shape of those whom it is charged to serve. In my experience and according to Ravitch’s arguments, privatized systems epically fail in fulfilling this function.

Yet, I now find myself emerging from this study almost like one emerging from a trance. While buried in the depths of Ravitch’s counter-narrative, I viewed everything through the lens of resistance to the reformers. I was seduced by her story and willingly allowed myself to be trapped in the prison house of her language. As I move away from this focused study, I find myself now confronting petite narratives that don’t fit either the reformers’ story or Ravitch’s response. As a teacher in the public school system, I have seen tremendous examples of what education should be, but also some unfortunate examples of what it should not be. Ravitch’s counter-narrative does much to move the conversation away from privatization, and rightfully asks for broad social supports outside the public school system that would likely improve educational outcomes for all;
still, there is no room in Ravitch’s counter-narrative for public schools to take charge of problems that clearly belong in their own hands – namely, teachers unions.

Ravitch is correct in her assertion that teachers need unions to protect them from politically motivated sanctions, to preserve academic freedom and professional autonomy, and to make the education profession attractive to highly qualified candidates, but worker protections should not provide cover for teachers who, for whatever reason, cannot or will not teach. In my years of teaching in the public school system, I have personally seen students underserved by union-protected teachers who continually neglect student needs. It is infrequent, but it does happen. And while I don’t believe this is a rampant problem, it is deeply unfair to the student who does experience this injustice to dismiss him or her with the grand narrative that “unions aren’t the main problem.” For that individual student, the union is the problem. While the reformers’ narrative conceals a hidden agenda that is not in the best interest of students, Ravitch’s counter-narrative is so grand that it discounts certain individual experiences. And while the reformers unfairly villainize all public school teachers and their unions, the unions make themselves easy scapegoats when they allow student needs to go neglected in the name of “due process” for teachers.

In my assessment, the reformers are wrong, and Ravitch’s story is indeed better, but narratives need not be dichotomous. For a while, I found myself trapped in a false choice between these two grand narratives, both hegemonic to different extents. But, is it not possible to imagine and build public schools that are inclusive, respectful of workers’ rights, and responsible to the students they serve? One fully aware of narrative rationality should, at least temporarily, question the attempts to narrativize the public
school system because any system so complex, broad, and varied will undoubtedly
envelop contradictions and nuances that do not easily fit a grand narrative. However, if
narration is as inescapable as Fisher posits, we will continue to tell narratives both petite
and grand, all while we should continue to ask what I find myself asking of Ravitch’s
counter-narrative now – Is this precisely the narrative we need?
Works Cited


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