
Blame Teachers: The Emotional Reasons for Educational Reform
By Steven P. Jones

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Abstract

Cultural shifts over the last half century have left educators vulnerable to myriad attacks from the public, politicians, and corporate entities. Battles over the means, methods, and efficacy of education, which manifest in debates over curriculum, funding, and assessments, limit and in some cases imperil educators' efforts to facilitate learning. Jones (2015) levels reasoned, insightful criticisms at those who seek to restrict teachers' praxes and abolish protections such as tenure which allow them to carry out research and expand pedagogy. The author's useful text staunchly defends the teaching profession and exposes the mendacity of education leaders such as Arne Duncan and the detrimental effect neoliberalism has had on the profession, primarily in charter schools. The text behooves educators and those preparing to enter the field to guard themselves against cultural and political threats to the profession and to decode the language used to vilify and dismantle education in its truest sense.

Keywords: *neoliberalism, charter schools, Knowledge is Power (KIPP) schools, multiculturalism*

A sardonic two-panel comic strip has been making its way around the internet for several years now. Anyone who works in education or maintains a close relationship with someone who does has undoubtedly seen it and has formed an opinion regarding the stark difference between the contrasting images. The first panel, illustrated in desaturated colors, is set in 1969. In it, a mother and father peer down at their child with stern expressions and demand that he gives them an explanation for the deplorable grades he has earned in school; behind them the child's teacher, a stereotypically authoritative and austere schoolmarm, sits bolt upright in her desk chair and awaits a response, along with the parents, from the ineffectual pupil, who cowers in a corner. This was an era, readers are meant to infer, when parents and teachers were united in their aim to educate and instruct students; an era where the standards of academe and the desires of the community were indistinguishable and all learners at all levels knew implicitly that they alone were responsible for their success or failure in school. Teachers gloried in their autonomy and their talents were never to be second guessed: they knew best. Poor grades were an ignoble smudge on a student's parents

and those parents' ability to properly prepare and discipline their children for the rigors of education.

Yet the colorful panel to the right expresses an altogether different ethos. Set in the here and now, the same cast of characters—mother, father, child, teacher—occupy the same space (the classroom), yet the sentiment expressed here obliterates the virtues esteemed in the first panel. This time the disapproving parents train their wrathful gaze upon a young, harried, moist-eyed teacher and demand that she “Explain these bad grades!” while their child, a smug little scamp, beams with unearned pride. What is missing from this cartoon is the historical gap between 1969 and the present day, years which saw the rise of identity politics, multiculturalism, economic booms and busts, and a spectrum of national crises, the sum total of which recalibrated the standards and aims of education. No longer do teachers and the public accord in their mission to educate society. While most teachers uphold the principle that education is lifelong and should prepare learners for full engagement with civic life, the public demands measurable assessments, ones that directly translate to career and financial stability for all and a presumption that if students don't reach those goals, the blame can be placed squarely at the feet of the nation's teachers.

Once seen as the great equalizer of society, education in the twenty-first century has now become a battleground for a host of societal tensions. Teachers, once esteemed by the citizenry, now find themselves the target of myriad assaults based on little more than an aggravated society's need to pinpoint exactly when the nation's quality of education began to decline and what that decline can be attributed to. Steven P. Jones, author of the book *Blame Teachers: The Emotional Reasons for Educational Reform* thrusts himself into the fray between teachers and both the public and policymakers who wish to scapegoat teachers for society's ills. Jones (2015) finds that the contract between educators and the populace, once built on mutual trust and respect, has devolved into a war over curriculum, values, compensation, and assessments. Jones (2015) accurately surmises that the battles currently being waged over education signify “righteous indignation coming from both sides in this educational debate [and] clearly signals a felt violation of something deeply held” (p. 15). At its core, the fight over education is indeed a protracted argument over cultural values and cultural identity, one that has been co-opted by corporations and special interest groups to further their own agenda. Informed readers will approach *Blame Teachers* with this idea already in mind. Yet for the uninformed reader, Jones takes what may be little more than a gut feeling and, like any skilled debater, parses the language and exhibitions of adversaries until their claims fall apart.

A reasoned, impassioned polemic, *Blame Teachers* utilizes eight chapters (one hundred fifty-four pages total) to make its case. Jones (2015) incorporates current events, cultural criticism, and politics in this defense of the teaching profession, providing educators the arsenal they need to defend themselves against charges of indolence, ineptitude, and inadequacy. Far more frequently, however, teachers find themselves on the losing end of these battles. Jones claims that the constant calls for reforms and the implementation of programs such as *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top* demonstrate society's view that “teachers need to be managed, watched over, held accountable, and pressured to perform” (p. 40). Like many educators, Jones takes umbrage with critics who see educators as impediments to learning rather than its facilitators and utilizes his book to expose their own avaricious activities. By doing so he brings to the fore a cultural debate over what real learning is, how it can best be accomplish, and by what means and metrics it should be measured. Recognizing that standardized test scores and other quantifiable measures are woefully inaccurate reflections of student learning, *Blame Teachers* argues that such assessments limit teachers' effectiveness and, most importantly, undermines true learning.

Jones (2015) levels his most pointed criticism at former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. As the emissary of the Obama administration's education, principally embodied by Obama's *Race to the Top* initiative, Jones takes Duncan to task for extoling and promoting a vision of teachers as diffident employees who have somehow lost the zeal to adequately mold young minds, as vain, self-interested layabouts who would rather hasten the decline of learning in the United States than sacrifice themselves and their many "perks" (among them summer vacations, pensions, and tenure) to reform the system. Indeed, Secretary Duncan's remarks echo the sentiments of many lawmakers who opine that teachers have become softened by protections such as tenure, and only by dismantling those protections, including teachers unions and pensions, can academe get back to true educating. Yet Jones argues that teachers routinely sacrifice their time and work exhaustively to make sure students learn. A teacher's value and efforts extends far beyond the activities confined within an average school day: teachers at all levels work tirelessly and rigorously and at times must step outside of their role to support their students in ways their families and friends cannot. Nevertheless, the notion that teachers' ineffectiveness is clearly manifest in students' lack of ability signifies the depth to which neoliberalism has infiltrated education.

Neoliberalism and its ancillary impact on education at all levels, Jones (2015) attests, bears a great deal of responsibility for the quandary teachers presently find themselves in. The idea that schools should be run and operated like businesses, and teachers should be forced to demonstrate their effectiveness through their students' test scores or suffer loss of wages or employment, has created a system in which traditional learning is now seen met with hostility by the public. Also, the neoliberal model of education, embodied by Knowledge is Power (KIPP) schools and charter schools, Jones (2015) finds, squanders the talent and expertise of veteran teachers while simultaneously exploiting neophyte teachers' lack of gravitas and eagerness to succeed. Jones (2015) sees a system in which students are rewarded for learning very little and teachers are punished for knowing or expecting too much.

Blame Teachers' strength lies in its clear, strong voice and Jones' focused arguments. Whether this book will reach the eyes of the individuals who vilify teachers and their profession remains a mystery. Like so many texts of its sort, *Blame Teachers*, despite its deft prose, steely arguments, and undeniable reverence for teachers and the hard work they do, may fail to move beyond its imbedded readership of educators—its amen chorus. Nevertheless, a thorough reading of this text would greatly benefit anyone wishing to undertake a career in education. This book will inspire dynamic conversations in both undergraduate and graduate level education courses.

Reference

Jones, S. P. (2015). *Blame teachers: The emotional reasons for educational reform*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Press.

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