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Educational Reform: Why our Current System is Unnecessary

Educational reform has always been a controversial topic simply because there are so many opinions surrounding the standards students are required to meet. In a journal written by Arthur Costigan, the author explores popular myths about education and why the United States' current system of reform is faulty. He does so while simultaneously conducting a study with English teachers, grades 7-12, in his area. For this paper, I will assess Costigan's implied argument that school systems should not base their reforms on government mandates.

Here is Arthur Costigan's argument:

The Correlation between Academic Achievement and Rigorous Standards

1. If school systems enforcing rigorous testing and strict accountability to authorities are successful, then academic achievement in these settings will be raised.
2. Academic achievement in these settings is not raised.
3. Therefore, school systems enforcing rigorous testing and strict accountability to authorities are not successful.

(2,3 MT)

Teachers are usually faced with a considerable amount of stress. They have papers and tests to grade, curriculum to draft, meetings to attend, and so on. Recently, however, the United States government, in particular, has doubled down on telling teachers what they must teach

students and sometimes how they must teach - in addition to passing students through the system in a timely manner. The rationale for premise (1) is essentially that higher standards should cause teachers and students to achieve a higher level of success in education. This is one of the myths Costigan claims is often believed, but incorrect. Many assume that our current school system is “failing, due to unchallenged students and deficient teachers” (Costigan 209). However, this is not the reality: “Even before our current era of educational reform, student achievement and school success have been steadily increasing as represented by historically high graduation rates and other valid assessments of student progress” (Costigan 209). Statistics show that education, while imperfect, is making necessary strides to improve students’ experiences, but educational reform is not to thank for this. There are several flaws Costigan introduces in his article that prove our current system of educational reform should not be employed in schools.

First, educational reform mandates often come from higher up in the system, the school board office or “administrators’ interpretations of various national and state mandates” (Costigan 199). These mandates are given by elite personnel who rarely enter the school(s) in question. And if they do, it’s only to look around and make judgments about a school and its inhabitants whom they don’t personally know. They are also usually imposed rather than voted on by teachers and staff who understand what their students need most.

Second, the government’s current criteria for imposing educational reform treats the “problems” of the old standards as individual parts rather than interdependent sections, believing they act separately from one another rather than performing together. These reforms are unsuccessful and miss the mark if they only address part of the problem and fail to realize that they need to pay attention to every aspect of education. Regardless of the issue at hand, there is

no possible way to fix only part of the criteria without seeing how one change shifts the entire system around.

Other general criticisms that Costigan introduces in his argument against traditional educational reform include ineffectiveness, reductionism, decontextualization, and unintelligibility. The current system of educational reform is ineffective because there is a lack of evidence for improvement that stems from nearly two decades of change. This includes the myth that high standards perpetuate high achievement. These standards are especially ineffective when they are imposed without any input from or consultation with teachers. This goes back to authoritarianism; the best people for creating standards that benefit students are those that are actually in the classroom with them. Costigan introduces the concept of reductionism when talking about how our government attempts to compartmentalize the problem by taking the “easy” way out and not addressing each section of education. Also, the increasing amount of standards teachers and students must adhere to reduces the quality of instruction because they’re more concerned with covering everything than the depth of what is learned. Third, much like separating educational reform into categories, there’s a common misconception that students’ lives outside school do not connect with their educational experience. Numerous studies have proven this false, however. Such topics as “poverty, racism, and disenfranchisement,” among others, are directly related to education and can have a positive or negative impact on their performance (Costigan 210). Lastly, there’s a serious concern that the educational reform coming from these higher up elites is “unintelligible, unobtainable and unrealistic” for students today (Costigan 211).

Educational reform has so drastically altered classrooms that teachers claim, in this study, that they don't even recognize what they're teaching anymore. Our current system has made education more about reaching the mark on tests and standards rather than assuring that students are equipped with the necessary knowledge to be a well-informed, intelligent citizen. This is why Costigan argues that the current system of educational reform should not be used in today's school systems across the board.

Works Cited

Costigan, Arthur. “‘I’m Not Teaching English, I’m Teaching Something Else!’: How New Teachers Create Curriculum under Mandates of Educational Reform.” *Queens College – City University of New York* (2018): p. 199-211.