

## School Closures as Political Mourning

Terri S. Wilson

*University of Colorado Boulder*

In his thoughtful article, “School Closures, Community Goods, and (mis)Recognition,” Ellis Reid offers an important reminder that schools are not merely places where young people receive an education. Rather, schools are central—even powerful—spaces in their communities, capable of nurturing ties between adults and strengthening their surrounding neighborhoods. For Reid, schools play important and independent community roles; ones not reducible to the task of educating young people.

This argument is central to Reid’s sympathetic critique of the analysis of educational goods offered by Harry Brighouse, Helen Ladd, Susanna Loeb and Adam Swift. In their recent book, *Educational Goods: Values, Evidence, and Decision-Making*, Brighouse and colleagues argue that we need more expansive language than “student achievement” for evaluating the aims of educational policies. They advance a framework of “educational goods” to describe the “the knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions that children develop both for their own benefit and for the benefit of others.”<sup>1</sup> Such goods, they argue, must be balanced against distributive values (such as equality), as well as independent values (such as childhood goods). Policymakers need ways to think about different kinds of goods and how such goods are distributed. *Educational Goods* (or, EG) thus offers a framework for how values might be combined with evidence in evaluating various policy options. As such, it underscores that educational policymaking is a normative and value-laden field, not merely a technical one.

Reid is broadly in agreement with this claim, but thinks that the analysis offered by Brighouse and colleagues fails to adequately account for the *community* goods—not just the *educational* ones—produced by schools. He draws on two conceptual frameworks for thinking about the potential importance of community goods: social capital and recognition. These frameworks draw our

attention to the positive aspects of what happens in schools (the production of social capital) and what might be threatened if these spaces are lost (recognition).

In my brief response today, I will first highlight some of the contributions of Reid's argument, then turn to two points where I think that his analysis—at least in this article—may not go far enough. In effect, I question if those two central concepts—social capital and recognition—adequately convey the depth of community loss, grief and anger over school closures.

First, I want to applaud Reid's thoughtful argument in this essay: the fair and charitable critique of the framework offered in *Educational Goods*, as well as his use of an actual case (the large wave of school closures in Chicago in 2013) to point out potential gaps in this analysis. Reid is correct that *Educational Goods* does not fully account for the community dimensions of schools, and the ways in which schools produce independent community goods for adults, as well as contribute to a stronger overall educational context for children. In his words, an “understanding of the school as community center, venue for democratic deliberation, or provider of social services is notably absent.”<sup>22</sup>

While not *unaware* of the importance of community and neighborhood contexts, *Educational Goods* does not *foreground* these factors. But I wonder if EG might grant this basic point. That is, the authors might agree that their framework's attention to the community role of schools is (in Reid's terms) “underdeveloped.” But does that mean that it is inadequate? In effect, I wonder: how fundamental is Reid's critique? Can we imagine that community goods might be a helpful addendum to EG? Or does the absence of community goods suggest a larger flaw with the framework?

In either case, I think, Reid reminds us that the starting terms of analysis matter. Here, the concept of human flourishing at the center of *Educational Goods* may account for many aspects of education, but starting with a concept of individual flourishing might also limit the ability of the framework to fully—or even adequately—account for other important aims of public schools. Here, Reid's argument also suggests a potential “methodological individualism” at play in accounts of human flourishing, or ways in which this analysis may privilege

the individual actor as the primary element in social phenomena.<sup>3</sup>

In this sense, the concept of community goods offers an interesting counterpoint, or at least an addendum, to the analysis offered in *Educational Goods*. While a fully developed account is beyond the scope of this essay, I would be curious to see how Reid develops the idea of community goods, as well as how he might think through questions that might be required by a fuller account. For instance, how might community goods be prioritized relative to the other educational aims? What about cases where a school might, indeed, strengthen its neighborhood, but perhaps fail to adequately serve its students? Or cases where certain community goods—about, say, a community's drive to establish their own school—might come into tension with distributive values, such as equity?

While they fall outside this article, I think Reid's attention to detailed cases might help explore such questions in more detail. Indeed, I agree that the example of school closures reveals how empirical cases can usefully point to gaps in our conceptual frameworks. But, in the remainder of my comments, I want to suggest that this example might also suggest some ways in which the two central concepts of the article—social capital and recognition—might not go far enough, particularly to explain the deep sense of loss and the racial injustice of school closures in Chicago.

Reid draws on concepts of social capital to describe how schools act as important brokers of social and organizational ties in their neighborhoods. Referencing Mario Small's study of childcare centers in New York City, and the powerful organizational and social ties that mothers forged through these spaces, Reid proposes that schools serve similar roles in their communities.<sup>4</sup> I think this is certainly true. Yet I wondered if this idea goes far enough?

Reid gestures to the profound loss felt by many Chicago parents and community members after the school closures of 2013. But what precisely do we grieve for, when schools, these longstanding centers of their communities, are closed? I suspect that the loss of social capital—the loss of ties between adults—may be *part* of the story, but may not be *sufficient* to capture the weight

of the grief expressed by many community members.

Here, I found myself wondering if Reid's reliance on social capital might suffer from some of the same problems as the *Educational Goods* framework. Reid argues that *EG* offers a thin conception of schools: as *places* that *produce* certain kinds of *individual goods* for students. But I wonder if Reid's framework of social capital—in positioning schools as *organizations* that *produce* certain *community goods*—might also be too narrow?

Schools are indeed organizations—like others in their community, including libraries, community centers, restaurants, corner stores, basketball courts—that produce ties between people. But they are not just any organization. Or, I think, the rage and loss expressed by community activists protesting the closure of Dyett, and other schools on Chicago's South Side, suggests that *these* organizations cannot be easily replaced, or exchanged with other ones. That is: it is hard to imagine many other spaces that could motivate a 34-day hunger strike.

The depths of this grief are well documented in Eve Ewing's recent book, *Ghosts in the Schoolyard: Racism and School Closings on Chicago's South Side*.<sup>5</sup> Ewing draws on the language of mourning to capture the impact of school closures in Chicago's African American communities. She suggests schools are powerful historical markers of community survival and ongoing spaces of political contestation. Asking, "Why do people fight for schools like Dyett?" Ewing answers: "Because it was never just about a school. A school means the potential for stability in an unstable world, the potential for agency in the face of powerlessness, the enactment of one's own dreams and visions for one's own children."<sup>6</sup>

In this sense, the vivid testimonies of community activists who fought against Chicago school closures gesture at losses beyond social capital. Here, I suggest that Reid might explore additional or alternative conceptual vocabularies more attentive to the political dimensions of grief and loss. In particular, emerging work in political theory—building on work by Judith Butler—has explored the idea of "public mourning."<sup>7</sup> Butler emphasizes that mourning begins with acknowledging—or demanding—a shared human vulnerability to

loss, but often reveals something about who we are, collectively:

When we lose certain people, or when we are dispossessed from a place, or a community, we may simply feel that we are undergoing something temporary, that mourning will be over and some restoration of prior order will be achieved. But, instead, when we undergo what we do undergo, is something about who we are revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us?<sup>8</sup>

In this sense, grief is not just a private affair. And grief about the loss—or theft—of a place may be politically powerful, though not automatically so. Simon Stow acknowledges that mourning “often constitutes a problematic form of political activity that can undermine democracy,” but that it can also be “an important mode of critical-theoretical reflection and a rich source for democratic innovation, education and resilience.”<sup>9</sup>

Mourning can be—as Butler and Stow suggest—politically powerful; transformative for both those who grieve in public, and for those who recognize the losses suffered by others. But mourning depends on *mutual recognition*. As Shirin Deyami argues, “public mourning relies on a symbiotic relationship between those who act publicly in their grief and those who apprehend that grief and the structural and normative conditions through which suffering makes possible.”<sup>10</sup> Here, I think Reid’s shift to Fraser’s concept of recognition at the end of the article is a turn in the right direction.

Yet, and this is my final point, I wonder about how claims of recognition are actually heard (or, and perhaps more likely, heard, but routinely dismissed), by the policymakers that both *Educational Goods* and Reid seek to influence. For Reid, “decision makers in Chicago appeared to have missed the value of these ties.” Here, I wondered about the implicit view—in both projects—that there is an interested, well-meaning and reasonable policymaker who might have simply missed the significance of these ties.

Arguably, decision makers do see the value of such ties in *certain*

communities; or, certain communities are adept at turning their social ties into political power that is difficult to ignore. Reid certainly understands these dynamics. Drawing on concepts of misrecognition, he notes that “school closures are efforts to destabilize communities of color and constitute part of a broader pattern of racist neglect.” Yet, I question if Reid’s interpretation of Fraser might actually be sharper—and more specifically attuned to race—than her own theory?

But, in the end, I find myself wondering how any philosophical framework—however comprehensive—might help policymakers to see the value of schools for certain marginalized communities. Here, this might be a reminder—for those of us (including myself) who are interested in bringing philosophy to bear on education policy—that we also need to attend to the contested politics and deep racial injustices of these policies. And, perhaps, to think more broadly about *who* our audience might be (maybe activists in addition to policymakers). Here, Reid’s attention to school closures as a form of misrecognition offers a powerful way to start, and I look forward to seeing where he might take us next.

1 Harry Brighouse, Helen Ladd, Susanna Loeb and Adam Swift, *Educational Goods: Values, Evidence, and Decision-Making* (University of Chicago Press, 2018), 2.

2 Ellis Reid, “School Closures, Community Goods, and (mis)Recognition,” in *Philosophy of Education 2019*, ed. Kurt Stemhagen (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2020).

3 Jon Elster, “Social Norms and Economic Theory,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 3, no. 4 (1989): 99–117.

4 Mario Luis Small, *Unanticipated Gains: Origins of Network Inequality in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). “source”: “Open World-Cat”, “event-place”: “New York”, “abstract”: “Social capital theorists have shown that some people do better than others in part because they enjoy larger, more supportive, or otherwise more useful networks. But why do some people have better networks than others? *Unanticipated Gains* argues that the practice and structure of the churches, colleges, firms, gyms, childcare centers, and schools in which people happen to participate routinely matter more than their deliberate “networking.” Exploring the experiences of New York City mothers whose children were enrolled in childcare centers, this book examines why a great deal of these mothers, after enrolling their children, dramatically expanded both the size and usefulness of their personal networks. Whether, how, and how much the mother’s networks

were altered--and how useful these networks were--depended on the apparently trivial, but remarkably consequential, practices and regulations of the centers. The structure of parent-teacher organizations, the frequency of fieldtrips, and the rules regarding drop-off and pick-up times all affected the mothers' networks. Relying on scores of in-depth interviews with mothers, quantitative data on both mothers and centers, and detailed case studies of other routine organizations, Small shows that how much people gain from their connections depends substantially on institutional conditions they often do not control, and through everyday processes they may not even be aware of."

--Jacket."

"ISBN": "978-0-19-976409-9",

"note": "OCLC: 1041577226",

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"schema": "https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"} }

5 Eve Ewing, *Ghosts in the Schoolyard: Racism and School Closings on Chicago's South Side* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

6 Ewing, *Ghosts in the Schoolyard*, 47.

7 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006); Bonnie Honig, *Antigone, interrupted* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); David McIvor, *Mourning in America: Race and the Politics of Loss* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2016); Heather Pool, "The Politics of Mourning: The Triangle Fire and Political Belonging," *Polity* 44, no. 2 (2012): 182-211.

8 Judith Butler, "Violence, mourning, politics," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 4, no. 1 (2003): 9-37.

9 Simon Stow, *American Mourning: Tragedy, Democracy, Resilience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

10 Shirin S. Deylami, "Burning Rage: Disenfranchised Mourning and the Political Possibilities of Anger," in *The Democratic Arts of Mourning: Political Theory and Loss*, eds, David W. McIvor and Alexander Keller Hirsch (New York: Lexington Books, 2019), 123.