

# The Quest for Rationalization

*How the standards movement became the dominant educational reform*

**The Allure of Order: High Hopes, Dashed Expectations, and the Troubled Quest to Remake American Schooling**

by Jal Mehta

Oxford University Press, 2013, \$29.95; 416 pages.

*Reviewed by David Steiner*

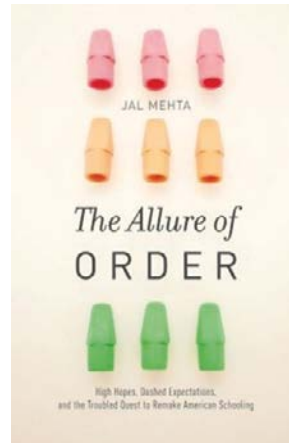
In what is in essence a collection of essays—historical, theoretical, and normative—on American education reform, Jal Mehta, of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, explores the drive for top-down accountability throughout the 20th century and gestures provocatively toward a way to break what he sees as an unproductive cycle of “thin” accountability measures to improve education outcomes. Although the book is sometimes short on empirical evidence about these outcomes, there is enough excellent history and original thinking in this volume to merit engaging with it.

One of the essays in particular offers an empirically rich, deeply researched, and largely reliable history of education reform in the United States around the turn of the 21st century. If you are interested in how the Charlottesville Summit of 1989 both synthesized major strands of the accountability movement and served as a launching pad for a flood of Washington, D.C.-based education-reform strategies, Mehta’s march through the terrain is for you. Carefully, and without much editorializing, he shows how the standards and accountability movement became the dominant education-reform paradigm by offering power brokers of widely disparate worldviews enough of what they wanted

to build an unstoppable policy coalition.

A second essay, only the last 25 pages or so of the book, makes some reasonable points about the limits of top-down, “Weberian” accountability reform models: for one thing, they tend to be discouraging to teachers. Mehta then lays out a laundry list of ideas that in his view would help ameliorate our current situation. Here we read about the need to attract stronger candidates into teaching, make education research more relevant to school practice, free schools to define a particular culture and to manage the training of their own personnel, and empower schools to be centers of reflection and collective action (“internal accountability”).

Most of the list is drearily familiar—Finland is the example of teacher recruitment—and far too little is said to suggest how we might gather the necessary political will to advance the recommended changes. But many of the illustrative examples Mehta uses show that he is thinking beyond the traditional divide between the top-down “distrust and verify” approach that is the accountability regime at its worst and the equally underwhelming view that “teachers should simply be celebrated.” Thus, we find Mehta lauding charter school organizations as exemplars of autonomous control of culture and professional development, including Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills) in England as a form of external accountability that works with schools rather than remotely from them, and citing



research out of the Chicago Consortium as the kind of new knowledge we need for effective reform. These unusual juxtapositions are provocatively framed under some new nomenclature. Mehta champions what he terms “thick” (as opposed to “thin”) theories of reform, where high-stakes testing is thin, while KIPP—the charter school organization that also helps train

its own teachers, manages their professional development, defines the ethos of its schools, and controls its own personnel policy—is “thick.”

This is not an unambitious book, and Mehta wants to do much more than provide us with some history and then a nice wish list. His major normative argument is that “the quest to rationalize schools has taken us as far as it can take us.”

He characterizes this current “thin” approach harshly:

We draw less than our most talented people into teaching; we give them short or non-existent training...we send many of them to schools afflicted by high levels of poverty and segregation; and, when they don’t deliver the results we seek, we increase external pressure and accountability.

In the rest of the book, Mehta touches only briefly on teacher preparation. Rather, his focus is on that “external pressure and accountability,” a top-down strategy he sees as doomed to fail. Unfortunately, the argument is often light on empirical evidence of failure and, with the exception of some positive references to charter schools, silent about success.

## book reviews

For example, there is almost no discussion of actual results from the post-No Child Left Behind regime. If Mehta wants to condemn the current standards reform movement, he needs to address outcomes (from Florida, from Washington, D.C., from NYC) that many reformers point to as evidence of success. In the absence of such a discussion, Mehta's central normative claim, that any top-down reform strategy is hopelessly misguided, is greatly weakened. (At one point, Mehta dismisses research on the Harlem Children's Zone because it fails to back up his broader thesis that such community-school partnership projects are promising counterexamples to standards-based reforms.)

Mehta relies instead on historical accounts to substantiate the normative argument that closes the book. And much history there is. Prior to laying out the current, post-Nation at Risk period of American education policy, Mehta offers an account of two previous times when accountability and standards drew scrutiny, the Taylorian movement of the 1900s and a rather looser set of efforts in the 1960s and 1970s. There is a kind of guilt by association here: since the three movements are essentially driven by the same logic of distrust for teachers, external "expertise," and top-down management, and since, *per arguendo*, the first two didn't "work," our current reform movement is doomed to a similar fate.

The problem is that while the historical account of the first two efforts is extremely rich (once again, Mehta proves himself a laudably careful education historian), the central assertion that these movements foundered is never supported with data. America has had to educate an ever-increasing number of its citizens to ever-greater levels of attainment. Compare high-

school science or math today to where it was 50 or 100 years ago. Have we failed? By how much? On what standard? The normative conclusion is in fact an unargued premise.

There is another essay in this book that, despite some earnest efforts, has little to connect it to the rest, coming as it does from other places in Mehta's intellectual journeys. By his own telling, Mehta spent some years studying sociology, and we get a major section on the "sociology of the profession." This is the weakest part of the book, with models and countermodels, in a language that will appeal only to a rather narrow audience of academics. At times, Mehta seems to lose patience with the whole edifice, shooting instead for the stars: what, he asks, are "our assumptions about individual psychology, organizational sociology, and human nature?"

What indeed! Oxford University Press could have served the author better with more careful editing.

There is much impressive scholarship in *The Allure of Order*, and the history sections, especially of the period from about 1988 to 2004, are finely handled. I hope Mehta takes his last thoughts, and their arresting and provocative framing, into a more substantive exegesis; with due care for weighing the evidence for his suggestions and sensitivity to political realities that inform his work as a historian, his normative argument could offer a compelling framework to advance the education reform debate.

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"Just give me the broad strokes."