

Heather Lewis

*New York City Public Schools from Brownsville to
Bloomberg: Community Control and Its Legacy*

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In a mere 145 pages of text, Heather Lewis' *New York City Public Schools from Brownsville to Bloomberg: Community Control and Its Legacy* offers historians of post-war US school reform a complex and challenging view of urban education, community/school relations, and reform initiatives from the 1950s to the late-1990s.

The quarter-century following World War II constituted an unrepeatable moment in school reform, in which Cold War pressures, notions of education as human capital, and a powerful and widespread belief that education and democracy were fundamentally linked led to unprecedented investment in, and experimentation with, schools and school systems. And yet, these investments and experiments accrued to privileged whites, not the communities of colour that arguably needed them the most. As Lewis argues, those communities received a "husk" of what was on offer for their more affluent counterparts (84).

Lewis focuses on how black and Puerto Rican educational leaders in New York neighbourhoods like Bedford-Stuyvesant tried to even this playing field through what was known as "community control"; or, the "downsizing of government and decision making by breaking up the large, anonymous bureaucracies into smaller units circumscribed by neighborhood boundaries" (15). Fed up with the apathy and inaction of outsiders (what one activist called "czars in our communities" (1), members of those communities generated a "citywide, grassroots onslaught" to gain control of their local schools (3). By 1967, they succeeded when the city created a few districts that would be controlled by community members. Lewis's book traces the genesis of this development and, more importantly, what came afterward: a decades-long struggle to keep the ideals of community control alive in the face of reactionary political pressures. Community control came to a formal end in the 1990s, when

Mayor Michael Bloomberg finally dislodged it to make way for the combination of centralized control and entrepreneurial excess we now know as neoliberal education reform. (Or, as some refer to it, “deform.”)

Through archival work and oral interviews, Lewis reproduces the cut-and-thrust behind the effort to maintain community control in education—from outside *and* inside the movement, as leaders and the grassroots were often at loggerheads over how to proceed in changing circumstances. Lewis’s incisive portrait of the internal dynamics of this struggle should interest political historians and sociologists of education as much as educational historians.

Yet, educational historians will profit most from this book. To take but one example, Lewis’s examination of standards and accountability shakes up in a striking fashion cozy historical narratives about progressive education. Following decentralization, the new leadership in areas such as Brooklyn’s Bedford-Stuyvesant introduced developments such as 1973’s “Accountability Day” to educate parents and community members on the nuts-and-bolts of their local schools, encouraging them understand their children’s work on its own and in comparison to that of their children’s peers, in order to ensure that they “had been exposed to and had completed all academic requirements” (83). They also introduced social-scientific, administrative progressive measures into their schools, including standardized testing as a means of “objectively” measuring student performance, and behaviorist techniques such as “systems management,” in which education was treated as “productive function based on the relationship between ‘inputs of productive factors and outputs per unit of time’” (85). Importantly, these measures were taken to ensure that the community control ideal of schooling for “black humanism” (“reading, listening, speaking, writing, and mathematics,” alongside “thinking, problem solving, library and research skills” (98) would take hold, thus ensuring the dignity and “self-determination” (27) of children of colour in the neighbourhoods concerned. Lewis thus offers an intriguing case study of just how dynamic and volatile the intersections between traditional, administrative progressive, and socially meliorative progressive education can be—all in a context generally ignored by many histories of post-World War II school reform.

Lewis’s book also has a political edge. It defies the all-too-often unexamined notion that people from impoverished communities need to be “saved” from their circumstances by benefactors alien to those areas. Bill Gates, Michelle Rhee, and Arne Duncan are only the most prominent recent American examples of this phenomenon. Seen in this light, Lewis’s book is a powerful anti-colonial history of grassroots education reform. It also serves as a valuable addition to the growing body of literature analyzing contemporary neoliberal educational reform in the United States, and outside of it as well. Lewis herself is a historian and a scholar-activist, and as such, her work points to the past and to the future at once. As young (and not-so-young) educators increasingly try to find a way beyond the broken system of contemporary school reform (backed by a power elite of politicians, disruptive entrepreneurs, and a compliant media), *New York City Public Schools from Brownsville to Bloomberg* offers ideas and practical examples of how to safeguard humanistic pedagogical ideals in a

socio-political environment deeply hostile to them. It is thus an excellent addition to the historical literature, and much more besides.