

The Long Island Region Public Hearing for the New NY Education Reform Commission

Thursday, October 11, 2012 from 10am-1pm.

SUNY College at Old Westbury

Student Union Building: Multi-Purpose Room, Old Westbury, NY 11568.

My name is Denny Taylor and I am a full professor in Literacy Studies at Hofstra University. I received my Doctorate from Teachers College, Columbia University in an interdisciplinary program in anthropology, sociology, linguistics, and education. I have two Masters Degrees including one in the Psychology of Reading. I am certified to teach in the UK and the USA and I hold specialist certification in the teaching of reading.

In 1965 I began my first teaching practice in an elementary (primary) school in London and I began my teaching career in the East End of London in 1968. Since that time I have taught on three continents. I have taught kindergarten children who are five and doctoral students as old as sixty five. My experience includes most elementary grades, middle school and high school students, undergraduate, masters, and doctoral students. Graduates of the doctoral program in Literacy Studies at Hofstra University whose doctoral dissertations I have chaired teach at both CUNY and SUNY and many have become recognized for their scholarship and teaching, publishing and presenting their research at national and international conference including in Beijing, China. They are all active working with children in families, communities, and schools.

My work as a scholar stretches back to the 1970's. I have written nine books, some of which have received prestigious awards, and in 2004 I was inducted into the Reading Hall of Fame which has approximately 100 scholars who have been recognized for their ground breaking research and their commitment and dedication to the field. Over time my research represents a continuous thread focusing in the early years on uncovering some of the key factors in why some children are successful in learning to read and write in schools to research on the nature of knowledge, essentially research on what we know and how we come to know it. This research is transdisciplinary and includes the social and physical sciences, philosophy, the humanities and medical science. Some of my most recent research that incorporates the

disciplines and fields that are central to my research can be accessed on my website (DennyTaylor.com), specifically under the tab “Planet Under Pressure”.

It is important to emphasize that while there are very few days in my adult life that I have not pursued my scholarship, my research is also in the real world. As a child born into a coal mining family living in poverty in South Wales I learned quickly about the impact of poverty on the lives of children and their families. I also learned about coal mining disasters, witnessed personally and experienced as a member of the coal mining community when 116 school children died when a mountain of coal waste from the mines in Aberfan collapsed and buried their school. It is these early experiences that frame my scholarship, and have led me to work as a researcher with African American families living in urban poverty whose children are disadvantaged by the lack of resources and abject conditions in their schools; to work with Caucasian men and women living in rural poverty, suffering from drug and alcohol addiction, with mothers who struggle to take care of the children, some of whom were incarcerated and some died.

This research, always including ethnographic work with families and in communities and schools, created the foundation for my research on children and trauma and mass trauma. And while I claim no expertise or professional qualifications, deep study of the psychiatric scientific literature under the guidance of a practicing psychiatrist, who was also on the faculty of a teaching hospital, added to the transdisciplinary perspectives that I have developed, which focuses on children, literacy, and trauma. The research includes field work in a region of armed conflict in the Middle East, and in a region of natural and industrial disaster, specifically in the Gulf Region surrounding New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. This research can be accessed on the website of the International Center for Everybody’s Child (ICEC), at Hofstra University.

It will, I’m sure, be immediately evident that the study of children and mass trauma would have no legitimacy without serious consideration of the political circumstances that ameliorate, mitigate, and exacerbate the catastrophic events that are taking place.

Thus in this testimony I will make the case that: the U.S. is the most unequal society in the developed world and the impact on k-12 public education is catastrophic. There is no doubt that the privatization of public education in the U.S. will plunge more and more people into poverty and that the achievement of students in school will continue to decline. It is imperative that the legislature is critically conscious of how men of power manipulate language, and how the policies and mandates governing k-12 public schools have eroded the cohesion and trust of public school educators and damaged the possibilities for children in the US to receive an education that will prepare them for the uncertainties of an ever changing world..

Empirical evidence derived from an international comparative analysis of social indicators of equality shows that the U.S. is the most *unequal* society in the developed world. In nearly every category the US is a social outlier in a skewed society in which poor people's suffering goes unnoticed by the outside world. Out of 160 countries included in the Save the Children annual [*State of the World's Mothers 2012 Report*](#), the U.S. ranks below all of Western Europe and just below most of the former countries in the Soviet bloc in the measurement of The data presented in the report makes it immediately evident that America does not take care of its own. Even Cuba, after more than fifty years of isolation and U.S. embargos, outranked the U.S.

The *State of the World's Mothers 2012* report makes the case that neither women's rights nor children's rights are protected in America. The U.S. is ranked last or "poor" on nearly every measure. The lifetime risk of maternal mortality is higher in the U.S. than any other industrialized nation. Only in Russia and Albania do women have a greater risk of dying during child birth than here in America. The report states, "A woman in the U.S. is more than 7 times as likely as a woman in Ireland or Italy to die from a pregnancy-related cause and her risk of maternal death is 15 times that of a woman in Greece". Disaggregate the data and it is poor women who are left to die. No other country in the developed world comes close to the depravity with which poor women are treated in the U.S.

The report states, "Apart from the United States, all developed countries now have laws mandating some form of paid compensation for women after giving birth". The report points out that the U.S. "has the *least* generous maternity leave policy of any wealthy nation" and is "one of

only a handful of countries in the world that *does not* guarantee working mothers paid leave” (p. 51). American women are the poor sisters of their other country sisters. America does not care for the mothers of her children, although women often seem unaware of the fact that when compared with other nations in the developed world, their lives are unprotected and they are vulnerable.

The report also focuses on children under five. More children die before the age of five in the U.S. than in nearly every other developed country. Forty countries performed better than the U.S., and on this indicator of childhood mortality the U.S. holds first place in young children dying along with Bosnia and Herzegovina. Disaggregate the data further and it is the children of poor mothers who are left to die in America.

The *State of the World’s Mothers* report brings home that while poor women and children in the U.S. are the most disadvantaged, *all* American women and children are disadvantaged when compared with women and children in other developed countries. In the U.S. mothers have the *least* amount of maternity leave and *no guarantee* of wage benefits as women do in other countries. In addition, the estimated female to male ratio of earned income is amongst the *lowest*, and the percentage of women in national government is well *below* that of most countries in the developed world.

Digging deeper, the *U.S.* is the *only* country in Western Hemisphere and the only industrialized “democracy” that *has not* ratified the U.N. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of discrimination Against Women ([CEDAW](#)), *or* the U.N. Convention on the [Rights of the Child](#). One argument made in the U.S. by right wing adversaries to the ratification of these documents of basic human rights is that both women and children are protected by federal and state laws, but empirical research provides irrefutable evidence that they are not.

Poverty will not be irradiated in America until human rights become women’s rights. And so we have got to ask: When will the U.S. ratify the U.N. Treaty for the Rights of Women in the World, and no longer stand alongside Iran and Sudan as one of only seven countries in the world that have refused to sign the treaty? When will human rights become children’s right in America? When will the U.S. stand down as the only country in the world that has not signed the

U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child? These are critical questions that we must ask if we want to make eradicate poverty in U.S. society. Women's rights and children's right must be protected if America is to no longer to be a social outlier and, it arguably a rogue state, rivaled in inequality in the developed world, only by the United Kingdom.

The systemic risks and cascading effects of inequality have long been the focus of the research of Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett who have gathered the scientific evidence of on the impact of inequality and made it available on the [Equality Trust website](#). This research is also documented in [The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger](#), which Wilkinson co-authored with Pickett. They leave no doubt that in America the cascading effects of inequality leads to the systemic problems associated with poverty.

“We all do better in more equal societies,” Wilkinson said, in March 2012 at the Planet Under Pressure Conference in London. Noting that *income inequality* is greatest in the U.S., he said that mental illness is more prevalent in unequal countries, and that the U.S. has the highest levels of mental illness in relation to international measures of income inequality. Obesity is higher in unequal societies and again the U.S. has the highest rates of obesity in the developed world, and of many other co-morbid states including eating disorders and diabetes.

Wilkinson reported that in unequal societies the use of illicit drugs is also higher, and that illicit drug use in the U.S. is higher than in any other country in the developed world. Violent crime is higher in unequal societies and the U.S. is number one in homicides per million, with a child killed by a gun every three hours in the U.S. in 2005-2006. He emphasized that *unequal* societies imprison more people than societies that are more equal, and once again the U.S. is an outlier with more people imprisoned than any other country in the developed world.

Disaggregate the data and it is poor men, who are disproportionately incarcerated, and it is poor young women who are left to fend for themselves, without the possibility of finding life partners who can join with them in the raising of their children. Recent research indicates that, vying for the few young men who are not incarcerated, poor young women are more willing to have unprotected sex and with respect to the rate of teenage births, a serious problem for unequal

societies, and again the U.S. stands alone in the developed world, with by far the highest teenage pregnancy rates.

In Wilkinson's presentation at the Planet Under Pressure conference he stated that child well-being is better in more equal societies, and from the graphics he presented it was clearly evident that children in the U.S. live in highly stressful environments that negatively impact their everyday lives. The findings of psychiatric research on adverse childhood experiences leaves no doubt that extreme stress has lifelong consequences on the social, psychological, and intellectual development of children, endangering every aspect of human development, damaging their sense of emotional well-being, wreaking havoc with their ability to empathize with others, and to participate in the social life of the communities in which they live.

"Improvement in child well-being in rich societies will depend more on reduction in inequality than on further economic growth," Wilkinson states on the Equality Trust website. In the U.S. further economic growth will not improve the health or well-being of the American people, nor eradicate poverty. Greater emphasis on equality and less emphasis on economic growth will diminish U.S. poverty.

Wilkinson spoke of *social mobility*, which is greater in more equal societies. Again, the *U.S. does not fare well* in comparison with other developed countries. He also presented the evidence for education that "children do better at school in more equal societies".

"Disadvantaged children do less well at school and miss out on the benefits of education," Wilkinson states on the Equality Trust website. "In an international analysis published in [Lancet](#), and an analysis of the 50 U.S. states published in [Social Science and Medicine](#), we have shown that *scores in maths and reading are related to inequality*". This is the devastating idea that neither politicians nor corporate salesmen want us to think about.

Other measures Wilkinson presented at the London conference include *cohesion and trust*, with the *U.S. society one of the most fragmented and distrustful*. "There has been little recognition that greater equality is an important pre-condition for strengthening community life," Wilkinson and Pickett write on the Equality Trust website, where the interconnectedness of the measures is made evident. "High levels of trust are linked to low levels of inequality, both

internationally and among the 50 U.S. states, and trust is linked to health and well-being.” In America there is a great strain on the fragility of human existence, and the resiliency of humanity has reached breaking point for so many people living in poverty. Unfortunately, the great decision makers are either unaware or indifferent to their suffering, especially to the suffering of women and children.

If human rights are not a women’s and children’s rights then how are women and children equally protected under the law? When the U.S. signed the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights sixty four years ago was that just the rights of men and not the rights of women and children? I will leave learned scholars of the U.S, Constitution to explain this anomaly that critically affects the lives of all women and children, but especially poor women, who are dying at rates that are higher than women in some developing countries, and whose children are less likely to thrive in utero, and are more likely to die before they are five because their rights are not protected. Writing as one who has no power, except the power of the pen, America’s patriarchal society seems to be analogous to a family in which the father who, with good intentions, takes for himself the role of patriarch and then, drunk by the power he has given himself, becomes abusive and abandons his family to enjoy his own excesses.

“When a system rides roughshod over its own basic assumptions, supersedes its own ends, so that no remedy can be found,” [Jean Baudrillard](#) (1993) writes in [The Transparency of Evil: Five Essays on Extreme Phenomenon](#), “then we are contemplating not crisis but catastrophe” (p. 32).

In the case of the U.S. public schools, the erosion of democratic principles by politicians and policy makers is catastrophic, but the situation could be cataclysmic, when the clarion call by U.S. policy makers and government agencies is for K-12 public schools to prepare the nation’s “human capital” for military service to protect U.S. global supremacy, is combined with the pressures exerted by the U.S. government, corporations, and billionaire plutocrats to dismantle the U.S. public school system.

The devil is in the details, as the saying goes, and it takes a specific example to bring to the attention of both the U.S. and global community how far the U.S. has slipped from its

democratic principles. “Without examining the full range of privatization actors, our understanding of educational and institutional arrangements is attenuated, the shift in power relationships becomes opaque, and the profound alterations to leadership, teachers’ work, and community participation in democratic governance receive insufficient attention,” [Janelle Scott](#) and [Catherine DiMartino](#) (2009) write. Digging deeply, they describe the power structures that *un-Earthed* the New York public school system:

In 2002, when the state legislature gave the mayor control of the public schools, he became the ultimate gatekeeper in New York City. Upon gaining control of the public schools, Mayor Bloomberg, the former CEO and founder of Bloomberg LLP, chose to hire corporate sector professionals to be key leaders within the Department of Education (DOE). For example, he hired Joel Klein, the chairman and CEO of Bertelsmann, Inc., to be chancellor of the New York City Public Schools. In turn, Chancellor Klein hired McKinsey and Company, and Alvarez and Marshal, private management consulting firms, to help with the reorganization of governance and operational structures within the NYC DOE. Chancellor Klein hired Chris Cerf, the former president of the EMO, Edison Schools, Inc., to be the deputy chancellor of operational strategy, human capital and external affairs. Espousing market ideologies and the positive potential of competition, these leaders invited private sector organizations to partner with the DOE to provide educational services to further their vision of schools reform (p. 441).

Scott and DiMartino provide the private sector, market driven, ideological connection between Klein the CEO, Klein the Chancellor of NYC Public Schools, and Klein the Co-Chair of the U.S. Education Reform and National Security Task Force Report. Add the admitted mind manipulations to militarize K-12 schools, and all that stands between U.S. democracy and plutocracy are the teachers and parents of America’s school children, who are doing their best to resist.

In the *New York Times* and the May 7th article, “[Steering Murdoch in Scandal, Klein Put School Goals Aside](#)”, by [Amy Chozick](#), writes, “While Mr. Klein still worked for Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, Mr. Murdoch and Mr. Klein became close friends,” Chozick writes. “They talked frequently about the state of public schools and Mr. Klein was lured to News

Corporation with the promise that he could use the company's deep coffers to put in place his vision of revolutionizing K-12 education. Mr. Murdoch said he would be "thrilled" if education were to account for 10 percent of News Corporation's \$34 billion annual revenue in the next five years". Klein was paid more than \$4.5 million by Murdoch in 2011, and so a principal advisor to Murdoch, who the British parliamentary report has stated was "not a fit person" to run a major corporation, continues to have enormous influence on the U.S. K-12 public education system.

Given that the News Corp scandal began with the hacking of the phone of 13 year old Milly Dowler who had been brutally murdered, there is something perverse about the fact that Wireless Generation, for which Murdoch's News Corporation paid \$360 million, has Klein at the helm in the development and use of educational data systems and assessment tools used in U.S. K-12 public schools. Chozick writes, "Mr. Klein's education unit is now one of the few areas within the company that is currently growing, both through investment in Wireless Generation and potential acquisitions". She also states that "Wireless generation said more than 2,500 United States school districts, 200,000 teachers and three million schoolchildren currently use its products".

Back again to the *New York Times*, and an article on May 11, "[E-Mails Provide Inside Look at Mayor's Charter School Battle](#)", by [Anna M. Phillips](#). The e-mails were written during Bloomberg's 2010 campaign to expand charter schools, and Phillips writes that they were obtained through the Freedom of Information Act. The "fight of our life", Phillips writes, was the way one email described it. "We need to mobilize," Phillips reports that Klein wrote to James Merriman, the head of the New York City Charter School Center, on January 18, 2010, "Every time we keep our powder dry, we shoot ourselves." The following dialogue ends Phillip's article:

"You were terrific," Mr. Klein wrote to Bradley Tusk, a consultant for Education Reform Now. "Perfect pitch, perfect message."

"Who's the heavy breather on the call?" wrote a participant, whose name was redacted.

"Normally, I'd ask them to mute their phone but I don't want to alienate any donors."

"Some overweight billionaire," Mr. Klein replied.

These emails provide some indication of the nefarious activities of political, corporate, and financial powerbrokers, and the gendering of the struggle that is taking place in the U.S. for the health and well being of American children as well as their academic development. The email exchange is grossly disparaging of the women scholars and educators who are vocal in protecting the rights of children.

Public schools by definition belong to the people, and cannot be owned by the break –it- and- take- it private sector. The extremely rich cannot own the extremely poor, nor can they use the poor to increase corporate profits. In Wilkinson’s international research on equality the U.S. is an outlier, but that descriptor does not come close to describing the scorched break-it-and-take-it policies of the business elites working with billionaires and the Federal and state governments, destroying any hope that children in U.S. public schools might have of responding to the challenges they will face on a planetary scale. A hundred years of solid empirical research on child development has been trashed, and research on human learning in the fields of anthropology, linguistics, medicine, psychology, and sociology has been thrown out.

The empirical evidence from these fields supports the following statement on how policy makers and educators can close the achievement gap in k-12 public schools, and reduce inequality and poverty:

- Make the education of young women a national priority;
- Provide the absolute best care available for pregnant women;
- Follow up prenatal care with post natal care that rivals that of other developed countries;
- Provide mothers/and or fathers with paid maternity leave;
- Make sure that infants and young children receive the very finest health care;
- Revalue creativity, exploration, and nurture imagination;
- Provide nurturing pre-k early childhood centers where children can play, sing songs, listen to stories, and participate in arts and science activities that focus on the natural world;
- *Reestablish and revalue public school educators.*

In conclusion, a country cannot consider itself a democracy and privatize public education, making revaluing of public school educators is of critical importance. In this regard New York State could do no better than to listen to Albert North Whitehead who wrote so long in *The Aims of Education and Other Essays*:

And I may say in passing that no educational system is possible unless every question directly asked of a pupil at any examination is either framed or modified by the actual teacher of that pupil in that subject. The external assessor may report on the curriculum or on the performance of the pupils, but never should be allowed to ask the pupil a question which has not been strictly supervised by the actual teacher, or at least inspired by a long conference with him (pp. 7-8).

But the first requisite for educational reform is the school as a unit, with its approved curriculum based on its own needs, and evolved by its own staff. If we fail to secure that, we simply fall from one formalism into another, from one dung-hill of inert idea into another. ... It will be equally fatal to education if we fall into the hands of a supervising department which is under impression that it can divide all schools into two or three rigid categories, each type being forced to adopt a rigid curriculum. When I say that the school is the educational unit, I mean exactly what I say, no larger, no smaller unit. (Ibid. pp. 21-22).

Thank you for this opportunity to present my testimony.

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Whitehead, Alfred N. (1950) *The Aims of Education and Other Essays*. London: William and Norgate Limited.