Speaking Truth to Educational Policy: A Review of Mettler's Degrees of Inequality

In August 1988, I boarded Singapore Airlines flight from India to Los Angels to start my graduate work at the University of Southern California. I arrived at USC, an eager teaching assistant, and I was immediately blown away by the California Higher Ed Master Plan, by the big idea, the big ideal, that education is a fundamental "right." I remember being struck by the three-tiered Higher Ed system in California with the community college role of providing opportunities for all -- and I repeat for all.

This commitment, I believe, is the heart of Suzanne Mettler’s book Degrees of Inequality. She provides a glimpse of this when she is not having you work through the details of her analysis and eight years of studies. Her father, John Mettler said: "I told each of my daughters that I wanted her to get a college degree so that she could support herself, and then she could marry any damn bum she wanted." And on page 203 she talks about her sister Jeanne: "...a criminal defense attorney and as a teacher has devoted several decades of her life to helping young people who grew up in far more difficult circumstances to have greater opportunities." -- this is the American Dream!

It is coming from deeply held beliefs that Mettler takes us through a journey that Gary Rivlin of the New York Times characterizes as "advance[ing] her arguments through numbers and charts" and not "animate[ing] her story with people."

I read Degrees of Inequality with increasing agitation and urgency as she detailed real tragedy -- the betrayal of this American dream for many students seeking a better life. A devastating story of a public policy gone woefully wrong; a policy that was intended to continue to strengthen educational attainment, a public good, in this great nation. Students were sold the American dream but bought a life of debt instead.

Through the 200 pages we become familiar with Mettlerisms: Polarization, plutocracy, policy failure, policy design, problem stream, policy stream, political stream, lateral effect, policy drift, policy maintenance, etc etc etc. There is a lot. However, I will focus my prepared remarks on three points:

(1) Making profit on public dollars
(2) Community Colleges
(3) Civic Engagement

Making Profit on Public Dollars:

Mettler is merciless on the emergence and consolidation of educational institutions engaged in profiteering -- making excessive and unfair profit. In round figures, for-profit students account for something like 10 percent of the student population, but use 25 percent of federal funding and generate 50 percent of student loan defaults. A percentage of them become in effect "indentured students" with no hope of earning enough in their lifetime to be able to pay off their debt.

Having grown up with the ever-present Catholic guilt, I find it easier to look inward with criticism rather than outward and therefore immediately thought about how public higher ed failed to meet the needs of students and therefore created a great vacuum that had to be filled. In California, for example, with the economic downturn, public higher ed turned away thousands of students who then chose alternative institutions to advance in their education. So, as a public educator, I feel the burden with the responsibility toward what has transpired. The issue for me isn’t about for-profit institutions per se -- these have been around for a long time as Mettler observes, and are part of the educational landscape. But rather the issue is about:

(1) Federal funding going to for-profits that charge five times the price for the same degree as a public institution;
(2) The investment of these large amounts of public dollars did not result in public good -- ie tax paying citizens who are socially and civically engaged; but rather resulted in the creation of an "indebted underclass."

In short, draining public funding away from public good for private profit.

There are areas where Adam Smith’s "rational self-interest and competition can lead to economic prosperity" is effective in realizing the intended outcomes. However in a situation like education where certain entities are highly regulated and others are not regulated, the context does not lend itself to that "invisible hand" of the market place. The flow of public unrestricted federal funding has resulted in some
institutions demonstrating that they can market the same degrees as a public institution at a much higher price than state funding and tuition combined. Meanwhile, public institutions are tightly regulated both in what they receive from the state and what they can charge in tuition. But it's not a market -- the point is not to maximize profit, the point is to maximize public good.

Mettler supports very appropriate and practical policy changes, e.g., to require diversified funding sources to preclude tapping into public sources too deeply, or to put a cap on public funding for degrees, to remove the incentive for excessive tuition that gets paid by the public only to become student debt.

Expanding on this idea, one mechanism to normalize the financial aid support (public dollars) is by using a unit of measurement that is transferable between institutions of higher ed. What measure comes to mind? Of course the Carnegie credit. Now, those of you who, like me, have done work to dissolve the Carnegie credit by making the argument that seat time does not translate to the knowledge skills and abilities gained by a student are probably cringing. But let's not get distracted by that line of thinking for the moment and focus on what we have now as a transactional currency for learning. We do have the Carnegie unit in place. So why not have financial aid for students be a fixed amount, or a fixed range, for a certain type of credit regardless of the institution that it is offered. So a student enrolled in a calculus I course at private non-profit, private for-profit, public 2-year, public 4-year gets the same financial aid.

The Community College

Education as a public good is as fundamental for America as democracy or liberty. Our civil society and democracy depend on it. It is my belief that the best way to accomplish this is to go with what works. There is no doubt that Community Colleges work. Mettler, in speaking about the system of community colleges states: "At the same time, we need to strengthen community colleges. These schools have accommodated less advantaged students without the intensive recruiting efforts used by for-profits, and at a much lower costs. In the hierarchy of trade associations representing institutions of higher education in Washington, DC, those advocating for the community colleges are the least powerful."

Community Colleges are a game changer. And there are many reasons for that.
1. We serve the community -- all of it. Those who never received an education and are working on their GED, those who want to tool-up for a job, those who are en route to a four-year degree and beyond.
2. We serve industry. We work closely with area businesses to provide the skilled workforce that they need to be profitable. Their success depends on us doing our job well.
3. We are the most economical, educational powerhouse you can find. We serve millions of students at a cost that is not matched by anyone.
4. We operate as a kind of social buffer - in bad economic times students turn to community colleges for hope, opportunity and job skills.
5. We teach civic values and teach students how to think and how to learn, and produce more informed, more engaged citizens.

On Civic Engagement:

Mettler's sharp language on page 5 "...they themselves play a crucial role in segmenting our society" punched me in the gut. Although her remarks were directed at public policy makers, I felt my own lack of involvement and participation was reminiscent of the "white moderate" that Martin Luther King refers to in a reproachful way in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail":

I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Councillor or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.

Reading Mettler's work has motivated me to move from not paying serious attention to public policy to a place where I believe that it is my personal and professional obligation. And I think all of us when we got into the business of education, share in this obligation. We must reignite the belief in not just the economic value, but the social value of education. We must create the political will to trigger the changes needed to invest public resources for public good.

After all it should be clear that on a policy level politicians make decisions after being influenced and exposed. Mettler reminds us that "Most importantly, we need to find ways to amplify the voice of ordinary Americans in the policymaking process and bring it to the attention of lawmakers. Over and over again..., we have seen policy developments in which vested interests got most of what they were after, but citizens generally were left out of the loop." Our voice needs to be heard. And through our voices, let's Speak Truth to Policy.

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