Book Review in Educational Studies

Kelly Ann Kolodny
structive and convincing accounting of various dangers, commitments, settings, and alternatives. For maintaining his persuasive and very public ideals in the face of a small yet well-armed and powerful opposition he deserves a great deal of credit. Anyone who cares about education—and about young people, teachers, justice, democracy, and schools—cannot afford not to read this marvelous and inspired book.

For Ollman teaches us both "how to take an exam" and "how to remake the world." In that, as in all other aspects of his work, he keeps his promises.

References

Working at the Margins: Moving Off Welfare in America.

KELLY ANN KOLODNY
Lesley University

In 1996 the Clinton Administration instituted the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). This act, also referred to as welfare reform, transferred responsibility for the poor from federal to state governments, eliminated Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), created block grants for states for their own welfare programs, linked benefits to work requirements, set a time limit of two years to find work, and set a five-year lifetime
limit on receipt of welfare. This reform effort also transformed welfare from an entitlement program into a work-based assistance program.

Since the implementation of the PRWORA, varied and conflicting reports have been written and circulated regarding the success of the effort. Some reports focused on the large numbers of families who transitioned off the "rolls." These reports detailed how most heads of household of these families found work, largely in entry-level service positions or in retail. Other reports called attention to the continued difficult realities of former welfare recipients, including low-wage earnings. Indeed, a 1999 editorial piece entitled "Toward Self Reliance," published in the Bay State Banner, a Boston-based newspaper, detailed the conflicting perceptions of the outcomes of welfare reform for the public.

Washington politicians breathed a sigh of relief ... when they were able to announce that all 50 states had met the requirement to reduce the welfare roll by a certain percentage. At 2.7 percent of American families on welfare, that is the lowest percentage in 30 years. ... [Yet] critics of the Welfare Reform Act were quick to point out that those who left welfare were not always doing so well economically. According to a recent study, wage levels still place former recipients below the poverty line. (4)

Regardless of the perceived outcomes of welfare reform, work has been made paramount in policies regarding the poor. Job search, education, and training programs are emphasized. Frances Julia Riemer's book, Working at the Margins: Moving Off Welfare in America, takes a unique look at welfare reform, specifically by examining how welfare recipients are categorized by case workers, connected with job training programs, and how this shapes career opportunities and/or lack of career opportunities. Her book, likewise, explores how former welfare recipients subsequently are accommodated and perceived in private sector employment programs. An ethnographic account, her book is based on two years of detailed field work during which she observed and interviewed participants in four workplaces in which former welfare recipients found work. Perhaps one of the greatest strengths of Riemer's book is the amount of detail and careful descriptive attention she employs when discussing the participants' experiences in these four workplaces. Through these portraits, the reader becomes vividly aware of the potential outcomes of the classification process of welfare recipients by caseworkers to specific work training programs.

Development, one of the work places at which Riemer observed, was a nonprofit inner city training program at the time of this research. Located at the intersection of three ethnic neighborhoods and surrounded by graffiti-littered houses and trash strewn fields in an area of rampant drug dealing, Development's mission was to serve the hard core unemployed. Many of the participants in Development's training programs were categorized by welfare workers as the Transitionally
Needy (TN). The Transitionally Needy program, established in 1984, was a welfare category for individuals who were economically disadvantaged, single, and between the ages of eighteen and forty-five, yet did not qualify for AFDC. At Development, TN participants took part in training that emphasized life skills, didactic computer instruction, and work in crews in which participants sealed abandoned neighborhood buildings, renovated houses for low-income owners, operated the company’s furniture shop, installed carpets, and painted Development’s building. As Development came to rely more heavily on for-profit businesses that the company developed, these participants took part in a kits department in which educational kits were assembled for a science museum, a weatherization unit, a redistribution center, and a copying and binding service. Through such work, Development’s staff noted that the participants took part in work and potentially overcame fears of entering the job market. Development’s staff believed that these workers largely were inexperienced, lacked commitment, and had no solid history of work. Thus they provided a supported work program, that Riemer compellingly argued was linked to theories of cultural deficiency.

Many of the participants who took part in Development’s programs were conflicted about the success of their training experience. Upon completion of a training cycle, participants often believed that they lacked technological skills and certification needed to be competitive in the labor force. At times, Development hired training participants to work full-time at the center. Yet, these participants, too, were conflicted about the opportunities with which they were presented. They worked for wages of $4.50 to $6.00 an hour, received no paid sick or vacation leave, no tuition reimbursement, or leave of absence for any reason. Riemer observed that a two-tiered employment system was established at Development. Former welfare participants, who later took employment at Development, were the bottom tier.

Church Hall, another program at which Riemer observed, was a for-profit nursing home for 240 residents located in an upper-middle-class neighborhood on the northern edge of the city, set back from a busy street on 4.7 acres. The nursing home provided around-the-clock care for elderly residents ailing due to Parkinson’s Disease, strokes, Alzheimer’s and other ailments, thus there was a strong need for nurse assistants at Church Hall. Industrywide there also was rapid turnover of nurse assistants, furthering the need and demand for individuals to fill these roles.

Church Hall was connected to the Department of Public Welfare (DPW) in a matchmaker arrangement. The DPW publicized Church Hall job openings, as well as facilitated a five-day training program for applicants in preparation for interviews at Church Hall. Church Hall then hired a number of welfare recipients on a regular basis. At Church Hall, these participants worked for wages of $6.00 an hour, received benefits such as vacation and sick time, and took part in a state certification training program for the position of nurse assistant.

Most of the individuals who were referred to Church Hall from the DPW were single mothers, often African American, from the inner city. A concentration of
single mothers at Church Hall was not particularly unusual, as women often select into positions such as nurse assistant. Likewise, because some nurse assistants became aware of Church Hall through the DPW, this further linked a number of single mothers to the program. Yet, in her book Riemer detailed how the categorization of nurse assistants as single mothers moving off welfare followed them in their training and work experiences. They became a mass of objectified other. They were viewed as different, strange, and even dangerous by other employees at the nursing home. Subsequently, firm stratification of job responsibilities occurred. Though these women tried, at times, to offer suggestions to the management structure at Church Hall, their input often was not valued. These women, who worked for low wages with little opportunity for advancement, struggled to make ends meet. Often their employment at Church Hall was relatively short in length due to internal dissatisfaction with the work environment.

Concordance Steps, a thirty-five-man woodshop that built stairs for custom homes, was a third workplace observed by Riemer. Many of the former welfare recipients who found work at Concordance Steps were Southeast Asian refugees, particularly from Cambodia. These men fled Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge regime, subsequently lived in the jungle and in resettlement camps, and then were relocated to the United States. The DPW supported their first eighteen months in the United States. In this particular city, case workers then referred these individuals to Vocational Employment Services (VES), the only agency in the area that offered training to refugees on welfare. At VES they participated in a woodwork training program (funded by a Targeted Assistance Program grant) where they learned English, woodworking skills, and were connected to employment, such as that at Concordance Steps, where they would be able to earn a livable wage.

At Concordance Steps and elsewhere, these men were attributed an identity of hard-working, dedicated, and focused on the future. Whereas at Development, former welfare recipients were viewed as the hardest to serve and at Church Hall they were seen as single mothers transitioning off welfare, at Concordance steps these workers were known to be adults with experiences and skills gained over a lifetime. They were not seen as empty vessels that needed to be filled with knowledge. Indeed, their differences were viewed as strengths and preferences rather than as deficits. At Concordance Steps, workers started at $7.00 an hour and increased to $12.00 an hour. These competitive wages afforded these men an opportunity to earn a livable wage. Overtime also was available. In addition, the company provided workers with a full benefits package. Workers at Concordance Steps, in general, were more satisfied with their work situation than those at Development or Church Hall.

Jackson Hospital was the fourth program at which Riemer observed. It was a 707-bed teaching hospital located in the bustling center of the city. At Jackson, a pharmacy technician training program that led to "professional" employment positions was facilitated. The training occurred over a period of six-and-a-half months, and upon completion of training, employment at the hospital was a possibility for
participants. To implement the training program, Jackson’s pharmacy department partnered with the local union and the Private Industry Council, which enabled tuition support to be provided to some participants through the Job Training and Partnership Act. It was a government-funded training, but unlike the previously mentioned work programs, a welfare categorization was not tied to participants.

At Jackson, participants self-selected into the training. Social and professional affiliations led them to the hospital. Paper-and-pencil tests, along with interviews, narrowed a large pool of applicants down to the “cream of the crop” who were then able to participate in the few slots that opened up for each pharmacy technician training. Though it is unclear to this reader how many participants previously had received welfare, Riemer suggested that some had and others had not. Many training participants, however, came with some form of cultural capital that was valued by training facilitators, such as previous participation in college-credited courses. Upon completion of the training, many of the participants who found work at Jackson Hospital advanced quickly into professional positions. Wages for pharmacy technicians ranged from $11.28 to $15.23 an hour. Benefits included a choice of health plans, vacation, personal days, sick time, holidays, and a well-used tuition reimbursement program. Through a variety of employment benefits and professional opportunities, the knowledge and skills of pharmacy technicians were validated and valued.

One of the strengths of Riemer’s carefully crafted and detailed book is that it clearly portrays how former welfare recipients may be categorized by caseworkers, trained, and subsequently connected with employment. Categorization and participation in designated training programs positioned the individuals in this book to receive different salaries, compensations, and benefit packages. Yet, the initial sorting by categorization narrowed an array of identities that each welfare recipient maintained such as mothers, fathers, grandmothers, college educated, high school drop outs, team builders, problem solvers, and others to a single characteristic such as single adults, female head of households, refugees, or that they performed well on tests for reading and mathematics. Riemer noted,

This organization of men and women into categories was neither accidental nor coincidental. Instead it reflected choices made by well-intentioned policymakers, donors and trainers, choices based on beliefs about ability, need and potential. Choices that resulted in discretely bounded work paths and grossly inequitable work lives. (11)

This categorization process subsequently took the role of “informing men and women of their place in the labor market … convincing them of their appropriateness for those tasks” (198). Riemer suggested that the men and women she interviewed for this book, also, were agents in their move to work. They, too, participated in the process of finding placement in a training program that would lead to
work. Yet, Riemer compellingly described how these decisions and choices were made from a predetermined field of possibilities. In some cases these options led to low-paying work, such as at Development and Church Hall. Subsequently, Riemer suggested the need for a pedagogical training model/adult education model for those transitioning off welfare, that is quite different from the welfare-to-work programs that she researched for this book. In contrast to these programs, Riemer suggests the exploration of training programs that accommodate choice based on interests and skills rather than on categorical-group membership (223). Perhaps more important, however, Riemer asserts,

We need to imagine possibilities; we need to reframe the debate about welfare reform from a discussion about moving welfare recipients from the welfare rolls to a conversation about a well integrated universal system of adult education that is inclusive rather than exclusionary; provides continued rather than discrete and fragmentary access, and draws welfare recipients into the mainstream rather than segmenting, marginalizing and stigmatizing them. (228)

*Working at the Margins: Moving Off Welfare in America* by Frances Julia Riemer is a unique and valuable book. Well-known welfare studies such as Edin and Lein’s *Making Ends Meet: How Single Mothers Survive Welfare and Low-Wage Work* (1997) examine the daily economic struggles and actions of individuals as they work to make ends meet while they receive welfare benefits, as well as when they transition off and work for low wages. This particular study is important because, as noted by Riemer, “The relationships among welfare recipiency, training and the organization of work are still rarely discussed” (216). Strengths of this book include the author’s carefully nuanced descriptions of former welfare recipients, the categorizations that they are attributed by case workers, their connections to training programs, and subsequent work experiences. Riemer’s skills in ethnography are admirable. In addition, Riemer’s reflections on other scholarly works that focus on welfare and the experiences of those who live in poverty are astute.

As with many ethnographic studies, the reader often has questions for the author. For example, this reader wonders if the author has information that would allow for a follow-up discussion regarding what happened to the training programs that were connected with these four workplaces since the research was undertaken? Does the author have follow-up data regarding some of the individuals she met with and interviewed for this book? How might such information contribute to contemporary and continued discussions regarding welfare, poverty, training programs, and adult education initiatives? In addition, if we are to move toward a more inclusive universal adult education system rather than specific and fragmented training programs, such as welfare-to-work training programs, what circumstances would need to change in the United States so such a program might be
widely implemented, funded, facilitated, and connected to the federal level, as suggested by the author?

References


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**Perspectives on Philosophy of Education**

**Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy.** Nel Noddings.  

BARBARA J. THAYER-BACON  
_University of Tennessee_

Nel Noddings has written an important book, _Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy_, which I am guessing will have us all talking for some time just as her book _Caring_ (1984) triggered much fruitful discussion and debate. As always with Noddings, we find she writes with an easy directness to the reader and a courtesy and generosity to her critics that few philosophers today are able to accomplish as well. Surprisingly, we also find that Noddings is committed to taking a traditional philosophical approach to caring, in terms of assuming a universal tone as well as presenting caring as an ethical ideal, even as she acknowledges the dangers of such an approach in terms of risking arrogance and diminishing power issues. In _Starting at Home_, Nel Noddings seeks to reverse Plato’s plan for the _Republic_, of trying to describe the ideal state, and then discuss the roles of families in supporting the state. She wants to start at home and describe the ideal home and move from the ideal home to the larger society. However, this ideal home is not sentimentalized, Noddings does recognize that even in the best of homes parents make mistakes and lose their patience and do not necessarily have a lot of resources. The desire to start at home is due to the suggested fact that the small group setting we have come to call “home” is where caring, as a moral orientation, begins. She is not seeking to write a utopian book, but she