

## **Turning Public Schools Upside Down**

### ***Stranger Things* as Allegory for the Birth of Neoliberal Education Reform in the United States<sup>1</sup>**

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#### **Introduction**

The Netflix series *Stranger Things* opens with four young boys—Mike (Finn Wolfhard), Dustin (Gaten Matarazzo), Lucas (Caleb McLaughlin), and Will (Noah Schnapp)—sitting around a table playing the classic tabletop role-playing game *Dungeon & Dragons*. The show's musical score is performed almost entirely on a synthesizer, and the opening credits feature stylized words that move in and out of the screen, both reminiscent of films from the 1980's; indeed, from its opening moments, *Stranger Things* could not be more 80's in its setting or tone. *Stranger Things* is set in 1983 in a fictional small Indiana town. The story centers around the disappearance of a young boy named Will and the efforts of his family, friend and members of the community to find him. The show depicts a group of kids desperately looking for their friend, their quest is disrupted by their encounter with an odd young girl with strange powers and their battle against mysterious supernatural beings. The show has won many plaudits for so accurately encapsulating the period. Created by brothers Matt and Ross Duffer, as the series progresses much of the action takes place at the local schools which become sites of struggle for the young protagonists, both from their peers (through bullying) and from outside forces; the first season's denouement takes place inside a school. As schooling is so integral to the series, it fits that the show can be used as an allegory for the changes that swept the public schools beginning in the mid 1980's,

particularly those that gave rise to neoliberal reform efforts in the public schools.

The Duffer Brothers have granted numerous interviews since the show premiered; while they have explained at length that their own experiences growing up in an America suburb in the eighties have been the main inspiration in developing *Stranger Things*, they did not indicate why they chose to set the action in November 1983. However, 1983 is a pivotal year in the development of schooling in the United States (U.S.). With the election of Ronald Reagan and the publication of 1983's *A Nation at Risk* (ANAR), the public schools of the U.S. became swept up in a neoliberal wave that rose with the passage of America 2000 and Goals 2000 crested with the passage of 2001's No Child Left Behind Act, and spread with the 2009 formulation of the Common Core standards and subsequent passage of Race to the Top.

This article uses the first two seasons of *Stranger Things* to allegorically explore the reforms that swept the public schools of the 1980s. Allegories are intended to illuminate a conversation in some way; we argue that just as the dark forces within the Upside Down completely reformed the lives of the show's protagonists and the town in which it was set, so too did ANAR reform the nation's views of public schooling, creating a sense of fear regarding the institution of schooling. The article begins with contexts through which the allegory can be understood. It explores the notion of public pedagogy in the current "Golden Age" of television, and presents a brief history of major periods of educational reform in the U.S. It then details Reagan's anti-education agenda and the publication of ANAR. Once this background is presented, the article explores the crux of the allegory: defining neoliberalism, how major characters and other elements from the show can be seen as metaphors for educational reforms of the 1980s. It concludes with a discussion of how this has impacted the current state of schooling in the U.S.

### **Media as Allegory: Public Pedagogy in the New Golden Age of Television**

When *Stranger Things* premiered in the U.S. in July 2016, Netflix was praised for channeling the eighties the same way the AMC drama *Mad Men* did for the sixties. These two shows are emblematic of a new era in television programming started approximately ten years ago in the United States and dubbed the new golden age of television. Scholars in television studies and popular culture argue that this new wave of television programming has also brought a new kind of shows that make viewers think; according to Johnson (2006):

Some narratives force you to do work to make sense of them, while others just let you settle into the couch and zone out...Narratives that require that their viewers fill in crucial elements take that complexity to a more demanding level. To follow the narrative, you aren't just asked to remember. You're asked to analyze. This is the difference between intelligent shows and shows that force you to be intelligent. (pp. 63-64)

The success of the show has also been attributed to the unique ways in which the Duffer brothers paid tribute to major players in 80s popular culture such as Steven Spielberg, John Carpenter, and Stephen King to name a few. Therefore, in many instances, the action in the show is a clear reference to another iconic movie. For example, in several episodes the Duffer brothers pay tribute to Steven Spielberg's *E.T the Extraterrestrial* (Spielberg, 1982) imitating the famous flying bicycle scene. This practice is known as intertextuality. French philosopher and semiotician Julia Kristeva coined the word intertextuality in 1969 in *Word, Dialogue and Novel* (reprinted in Moi, 1986). Allen (2005) gave a useful working definition of *intertextuality* "the fundamental concept of intertextuality is that no text, as it might like to appear so, is original and unique-in-itself; rather it is a tissue of inevitable, and to an extent unwitting, references to and quotation from other texts" (Allen, para.1).

Tillman and Trier (2007) emphasized the role the media play in our cultural discourse and argued for the use of popular culture in education:

The media play a major role in the construction of popular cultural "texts," such as films and television programs. These media forms are conceptualized as "public pedagogies"-i.e., as texts that have great potential to teach the public about a wide range of educational issues" (p. 121). Following Tillman and Trier's lead Carpenter & Sourdout (2010) explore the learning opportunities film and television programming offer viewers:

We see public pedagogy as being concerned with, and taking place within the discursive spaces of public issues, situations, and events that surround television and film. That is, viewers of film and television public pedagogy can encounter meaningful learning opportunities through critical engagement within this form of visual culture. This form of public pedagogy requires the active participation of viewers to make meaning of the complex nature of the narratives they experience on multiple levels. (Carpenter & Sourdout, p. 446)

In sum, Tillman and Trier (2007), Carpenter and Sourdout (2010), and Johnson (2006) tell us that studying popular culture is critical in helping viewers and scholars alike to make sense of the world we live in.

Indeed, popular culture provides informal education that is as prevalent as any more formal, systematic form of education.

### **A Brief Periodization of Educational Reform<sup>2</sup>**

Throughout its history, the public schools as an institution of formal education have gone through several significant periods of reform. From the earliest days of the nation, public schooling was of paramount interest to the nation's political leaders; indeed, early federal legislation set aside lands to be used in support of the public schools. However, in the earliest years, schooling was left to the states and municipalities to determine what was best for the highly localized populations. Thomas Jefferson proposed a blueprint for the public schools in his "Bill for the More Common Diffusion of Education"—a state divided into districts, each of which would provide both elementary and secondary schools freely available to top performing students based on their performance on high-stakes accountability measures. While Jefferson's home state of Virginia never adopted his proposal, many other states quickly adopted variations of Jefferson's model.

If the blueprint of the public school system as we know it today was provided in the Early National Period by thinkers such as Jefferson, it was Massachusetts Secretary of Education Horace Mann's vision of common schools provided the foundation. During the Common School Era, roughly from the 1830s to the 1860s, schooling moved much closer to the public school system as we know it today. Buildings were standardized, the curriculum was formalized, and pedagogy was detailed. The normal school movement began the idea of a formal teacher training process, which eventually gave rise to colleges of education. The pedagogy was softened, appearing much more similar to what is still used in elementary schools across the U.S. today rather than the "spare the rod, spoil the child" mentality of previous generations.

By the mid-1800's, though, there was concern about the state of the nation due to the rising tide of immigration. Accordingly, the nation turned to its public schools to help "Americanize" these citizens. Due directly to the rhetoric of reformers such as Mann, public schools developed a messianic purpose—the schools became seen as the saviors of all social ills. The U.S. wanted to create a national unity, so the schools were put squarely in charge of doing so. Leaders—so the civil religion in the classroom came about via the public school creed. As there was an increasingly diverse group of people flooding into the U.S, the schools became the primary instrument of social control. U.S. society wanted to reduce strife between these peoples, many of whom

were mixing for the first time, so the schools were called upon to create one culture. Of course, this one culture was based almost exclusively in pan-protestant notions, perpetuating the religious purpose of schooling. This messianic legacy would increase exponentially with the passage of time—particularly when the group of progressive reformers swept into political, social, and educational power.

The Progressive Era (1890's through 1920's) of schooling brought forth a wide variety of reforms. There was a tremendous amount of legacies of the era on all levels of schooling. Schools took to expanding their curricula to meet all students' needs; the schools were perceived as the primary means of educating children in all facets of their lives. Schools engaged in "new" techniques in education such as curriculum tracking, ability grouping, vocational schools, and mainstreaming students with special needs. Schools expanded their missions greatly by adding extracurricular activities (sports, social clubs) as another level of effort to develop the "whole child" and noncurricular activities such as vaccinations, supporting the war effort, school breakfasts, hygiene, and medical screenings. Schools increased in complexity—there emerged separate elementary, middle, secondary schools at the public school level, while postsecondary education formed junior/community colleges in addition to the established university system. Overall, there was less sameness in the treatment of students; schools offered a broader curriculum, including vocational education, but was still often limited to students who were white, middle to upper class, abled, and often male. Finally, under the guise of efficiency, states implemented teacher certification and state accreditation programs.

The Era of the Five E's (1950's through the 1970's) marked kaleidoscopic educational reform. The first E was excellence, marked by the nation's desire to produce a generation of rocket scientists in the aftermath of the launch of Sputnik. To this end, the schools experimented with "new math" and "new science" curricula. The second E was equality, sparked by the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision which desegregated the schools. In its aftermath, the public schools worked towards desegregation, integration, bilingual education, Title IX/sex equity, and the mainstreaming of students with special needs, lofty goals which are arguably still unmet. Indeed, even in the post-*Brown* era public schools have not always worked towards desegregation, such as the seventeen Jim Crow states and also many in the north that still fight equality of educational opportunity. The third E is expansion, spawned by the baby boomer generation entering the schools *en masse*. Economically, schools became recognized as growth industries with larger budgets, buildings, and administrations, as well as

school supply and textbook companies becoming profitable. The fourth E is expertise; as schools increased in size and scope, so too did they increase their administration. Locally, districts moved to fragmented centralization and site-based management. The fifth E is emancipation, launched by the increase in Supreme Court decisions and creation of the U.S. Secretary of Education as a stand-alone cabinet position. The general public wished to emancipate the schools from provincial, local control; as such, federal involvement in schools from both the legislative and judicial branches increased tremendously, paving the way for the ensuing neoliberal period.

After years of trying to get politics out of education, schooling became extremely political and “ground zero” for the emerging culture wars. Due to declining requirements and standards there was a back to basics movement; when schools were perceived as being too elitist, there was course proliferation and a migration to the general track. Most remarkably, the public began to have questions about the validity of public schools as an entity—research set out to prove that schooling makes little difference in achievement of life chances, if not oppressing children. This led to much criticism of schools along almost all lines: among other critiques, the schools were seen as being sorting machines, and that there was too much choice in curriculum. The general public was ready for a significant change, and the election rhetoric of Ronald Reagan encapsulated that desire.

### **1983 As Pivotal Year**

On November 13, 1979 Ronald Reagan announced his intent to seek the Republican nomination for President of the United States. Reagan only briefly mentioned education at the end of his speech. However, on the campaign trail and his interactions with members of the news media, he repeatedly expressed his disdain for the federal government. Once nominated, Reagan’s platform was very specific on education:

The Republican Party supports deregulation by the federal government of public education, and encourages the elimination of the federal Department of Education... Federal education policy must be based on the primacy of parental rights and responsibility. Toward that end, we reaffirm our support for a system of educational assistance based on tax credits that will in part compensate parents for their financial sacrifices in paying tuition at the elementary, secondary, and post-secondary level. (Republican Party Platform, para. 108)

Once in office Reagan charged Secretary of Education Terrell H. Bell to create the National Commission on Excellence in Education and

directed it to produce a report on the quality of education within 18 months. Chaired by David P. Gardner, then president of the University of Utah, *A Nation at Risk* was made public on April 26, 1983; it sent shockwaves throughout schools across the land because of its bold tone and sweeping call for reforms of the American education system. As a former teacher and Commissioner of Higher Education in Utah, Bell understood that Education reform would not take place in the United States without a significant event that would impact the American consciousness. In his memoir, Bell explained that he was looking for what he called a “Sputnik-like” event to focus people’s attention and energies on education.

On April 26, 1983 the National Commission on Excellence in Education delivered its final report to President Reagan. Its full title was *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, however it was subtitled *An Open Letter to the American People*. Bell achieved his goal of creating a significant event. While there had been some texts noting the challenges and problems facing the public schools prior to this report, they were mainly academic in tone and did not capture the nation’s attention. As soon as the report was released, several major news outlets published stories and analyses about the report.<sup>3</sup> The extensive news coverage for a report about education was unprecedented. The amount of attention the report received is in part due to the alarming tone of the report and its equally troubling findings. It is worth noting that *A Nation at Risk* was the first significant document published by the Department of Education, giving the agency instant legitimacy. That is why the alarmist, fear-inducing tone of the report sent shockwaves throughout the nation:

Our Nation is at risk...The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people...If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war...We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament. (p. 9)

In his analysis of *A Nation at Risk*, Holmes identified several major frames that have driven education reform in our country for decades. The first frame used in *A Nation at Risk* is mediocrity in education. This argument was clearly articulated by the Commission who highlighted the achievement gap between White, Black, and Hispanic students and the need to raise educational standards to allow America’s youth to compete on the International stage. Another frame, promi-

ment in the report, is the dire consequence of a lack of action on the issues facing the education field in the U.S. The report makes an explicit connection between America's educational system mediocrity and the country's national security.

According to *A Nation at Risk*, some of the most notable indicators of the risk facing our nation were the fact that twenty-three million American adults were functionally illiterate (inability to achieve everyday reading, writing, and comprehension) and the lack of ability of seventeen-year-old Americans to achieve specific academic achievements in reading comprehension and science. Another troubling spot for the Commission was the data provided by the military, specifically the department of the Navy, indicating that one-quarter of its recent recruits were not able to read at the ninth-grade level, the minimum needed to understand written safety instructions. The report mentioned that both business and military leaders complained of having to spend millions of dollars every year to provide remedial education to bring new recruits up to speed.

The rhetoric and the reality did not match up: a reading of ANAR reveals that the recommendations made therein were actually reasonable and achievable compared to the alarmist rhetoric it spawned. ANAR included several specific recommendations under five areas: content (increasing high school graduation standards), standards and expectations (raising expectations in PreK-16 including increasing university admission standards), time (increased school day and lengthened school year), teaching (raising standards for teacher preparation and increasing rewards for teachers to attract stronger candidates to the field), and leadership and fiscal support (holding educators and elected officials equally responsible). These were not a blame game; these were not darkness and fear. However, the media-generated headlines and political talking points focused on the alarmist rhetoric of the beginning of ANAR, not the balanced approach of the end.

All in all, in 1983 the report shocked America and its people; however, the reality of the nation's public schools did not conform to the rhetoric. It appears that in *Stranger Things'* 1983-set Hawkins, Indiana, schools and teachers did not seem to live and work in the Upside Down of education as described in *A Nation at Risk*. The fictional middle school and high school of Hawkins so integrally portrayed in the show reflected what many Americans in reality noticed in their local schools: dedicated teachers, a clean and organized environment, and preteens and teenagers doing what kids have done for generations while walking in the halls. Indeed, scholars produced much work disproving much of the alarmist rhetoric and trying to tone down the na-



tional conversation around schooling. Most notable was David Berliner and Bruce Biddle's 1995 *The Manufactured Crisis*, however, criticism arose as well from scholars ranging from John Goodlad to Linda Darling Hammond and Alfie Kohn. However great the academic efforts, *A Nation at Risk* caused many Americans to question the very validity of their public schools and after years of reforms, were ready to look to the Reagan-led federal government to help provide solutions to "fix" the "broken" school system, thus opening the door for neoliberal reforms in education.

### Neoliberalism in Education

In the allegory of *Stranger Things* as educational reform, the Up-side Down created by Hawkins Lab represents neoliberal ideology in education. Broadly speaking, neoliberalism refers to a complex set of ideologies, values, and practices that impact the economic, cultural, and political spheres. In general, it is a free-market ideology that favors private enterprise, consumer choice, and entrepreneurial initiative. Government intervention is seen as deleterious to these outcomes. Core assumptions that undergird neoliberal beliefs include the notion that all individuals are self-interested and rational; that given complete information, individuals will make the choice that is in their best interest; and that individuals must be given a variety of options in all transactions (social, economic, and political). Main points shared by many neoliberal thinkers include the belief in absolute free market rule, a total freedom of movement for capital, goods and services; that social services such as education and health care should be eliminated; that deregulation is key, as government regulations inhibit progress and profit; and that privatization is the key to increasing efficiency, including turning over state-owned enterprises. There is a fundamental tension between neoliberals and progressive liberals because neoliberals believe in the elimination of concepts such as public good and community as core values, to be replaced by individual responsibility, individual liberty, and entrepreneurship.

The Reagan years marked an ideological adoption of neoliberalism as mainstream thought. While not using the term "neoliberal" to describe Reagan's rhetoric and the media culture around it, Douglas Kellner's description mirrors the definition:

Reagan, in turn, redefined "common sense"...: government must be limited and taxes reduced; businesses must be strengthened to create jobs and increase national wealth; government and "red tape" (and thus regulatory policies) must be eliminated; individual entrepre-

neurialism is the best road to success and producing a strong society, therefore government should do everything possible to encourage such businesses enterprise; life is tough and only the fittest survive and prosper. (1995, p. 59)

Of course, as neoliberal ideology has come to dominate much of the U.S.' economic and political structures, two unintended and wholly unfortunate consequences have emerged: that a handful of private interests control the majority of social and political life in order to ensure their personal profits; and that a small number of wealthy investors have come to define sociopolitical and economic policy for the nation as a whole. While the 20<sup>th</sup> Century marked a time in the U.S. when the government believed it was its purpose to protect its citizens' rights and assist them meeting their fundamental needs, in the 21<sup>st</sup> that belief has been limited to the rights and needs of a select few. Institutions established during 20th century to ensure the common good—public utilities, health and welfare agencies, cultural institutions, courts and prisons, police and firefighters, the military, and schools and universities—are now being increasingly eliminated and privatized.

Public schooling has not been lost in these conversations; indeed, as public education is a multi-billion dollar per year endeavor, corporate America and its political lackeys have been drooling at the opportunity to encroach into what was hitherto a sacrosanct world.<sup>4</sup> Further, neoliberal proponents rightfully recognize that the public schools and universities mark one of the last lines of resistance to their takeover of the nation—and as such, the public schools and universities have come under increasingly virulent and frequent attacks since 1983.

Within the existing public schools, neoliberal reforms have taken on many forms, often with bipartisan political support. These include increased corporate presence (fast food restaurants in cafeterias, major athletic brands sponsoring teams) in the name of reducing the financial footprint of the schools; decreased tax support (particularly for public universities) in the name of economic efficiency; increasing a standardized curriculum (Race to the Top and Common Core) in the name of increasing academic performance of students; and increasing accountability for teachers (state mandated testing and public report cards) in the name of improving performance on international comparisons. The report was deeply rooted in fear. As described by David Hursh:

In the same way that the Bush Administration and other neoliberals and neoconservatives have used the fear of terrorism to promote a war on Iraq and to restrict civil liberties, they use the fear of losing jobs to economically competitive countries to promote high-stakes testing, accountability, markets and privatization in education. In 1983, during

the depths of an economic recession...the Reagan administration...released *A Nation at Risk* explicitly blaming the recession and nations's economic problems on schools and calling for improved educational outcomes through increased efficiency." (2008, p. 23)

While the notion of creating an environment of fear around the nation's public schools was not unique, *A Nation at Risk* moved the conversation to the foreground of national conversation.

This media friendliness was absolutely intentional. Zane C. Wubbena explains that ANAR "gained widespread popularity throughout the United States through the mainstream news media." A group of journalists were convened to revise the report which "helped to translate a bulky and technical report about public education into something that was news media friendly...In brief, while the U.S. Department of Education provided the sourcing, the news media helped to concretize the perception of a nation wide crisis based on the failure of public education" (2016, pp. xix -xx). Further writing about ANAR, Beta Carela argues:

With this indictment of education and the implication that our students are the nation's enemies, a wave of education reforms has been put into effect, calling for state and government interventions through reform policies and financial support that continue to shape our education landscape...The embedding of these mythos into our policies, teaching practices, and subconscious has resulted in the adoption and internalization of a free market construct of education that leads to... a hegemonic, neoliberal education agenda. (2019, pp. 75-76)

The notion that ANAR was the catalyst for neoliberal reforms has become widespread. For example, in an *Edutopia* article Tamim Andary described the collective reforms as "a single set of take-'em or leave-em initiatives" and "a political movement that grew out of one seed planted in 1983" (2007, n.p.). An Association of Supervision and Curriculum Design "Policy Points" referred to ANAR as "the catalyst for standards-based, testing-focused education reform at the federal, state, and local levels for three decades" (2013, n.p.). In an article for the *American Educational Research Journal*, David Hursh notes that "Neoliberal ideas, although rarely explicitly stated, form the basis for most of the educational reform proposals since *A Nation at Risk*" (2007, p. 498) and that ANAR "initiated the reforms that were to follow: first standards, then standardized testing, and eventually high-stakes standardized testing and accountability combined with efforts...especially under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), to convert public education into a partially or fully privatized market system" (2008, pp. 23-24). Or, as described by Wubbena:

Thereafter, the policy solution proposals for addressing the public education crisis coalesced to form the foundation of the current neoliberal education reform system. This system combines both government—the standards-based reform movement (i.e. curriculums, standards and high-stakes testing)—and business-market-based reform movement (i.e. school choice, including: charter schools, school vouchers, and tax credits/deductions). (2016, p. xx)

There is a direct line of neoliberal reforms from the release of *A Nation at Risk* to the passage of No Child Left Behind and the formulation of the Common Core State Standards. Even programs such as Teach for America can trace their ideological roots back to ANAR (Gautreaux, 2015, pp. 2-3). Indeed, the while many looked on in anger with the appointment of Betsy DeVos as arguably the most neoliberal secretary of education, many of her predecessors in office had similar bent. Arne Duncan, nominated by President Barack Obama and served 6 of Obama's 8 years, argued for the elimination of colleges of education, pushed for the adoption of Common Core, and implemented Race to the Top, which spread federal dollars to public, charter, and private schools in the name of increased competition.

### **Exploring the Allegory**

What follows is an explanation of the allegory. In the interest of those who have not watched the series as of yet, the authors are intentionally remaining vague on specific events from the show, unless necessary; we seek to avoid spoilers as much as possible, but a few are included in the following.

#### **Hawkins National Laboratory: Darkness Spreading**

Just as *A Nation at Risk* was the impetus for neoliberal impact in the public school, so too in *Stranger Things* was Hawkins National Laboratory the origin and focal point of much of the show's conflict—the origins of the Upside Down (an alternate dimension existing in parallel and representing of a post-apocalyptic human world). In Season One, the Lab (a facility connected to the U.S. Department of Energy which came to existence to pursue scientific research in the post-World War II/Cold War era) was headed up by the character Martin Brenner (Matthew Modine) who unintentionally released the Upside Down; similarly, David Gardner, the chair who directed *A Nation at Risk* unintentionally created neoliberalism in education in its wake in the interest of national security.

Season Two's Lab director of operations, the character Sam Owens

(Paul Reiser), resembled Ronald Reagan: both are affable, charismatic characters who really didn't have the best interest of the public at heart but instead were more interested in protecting their own legacy. Indeed, just as the Hawkins Lab was finally taken down in public fashion by the end of Season Two, so too must we remember that the Reagan administration had a historically high number of its members actually imprisoned for a variety of offenses.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Children: Lost in the Neoliberal Tide**

Calling themselves "The Party" after their favorite game, the four boys at the core of the story stand for the youth of the nation who are buffered along by these changing trends outside of their control. Jonathan Byers (Charlie Heaton) is the older brother of Will Byers, the most sensitive of the youth almost gets destroyed by the new system. He remains linked to the upside down throughout both of the first two seasons, and twice almost becomes subsumed by the Upside Down. Similarly, many youths lose themselves and their love of learning in the neoliberal educational landscape. They become subsumed by the push for better test scores and are fully indoctrinated into the false neoliberal doctrines of "learn more, earn more" and other manifestations of the meritocracy myth.

The other boys—Dustin, Mike, and Lucas—band together in their resistance of the mainstream. They find creative outlets that allow them to maintain their true selves—the audio-visual club, playing Dungeons and Dragons or video games, dressing up as Ghostbusters for Halloween, and reinforcing an abandoned bus to defeat a Demogorgon. So too do some schools, and some children, find ways of perpetuating creativity in spite of the neoliberal push towards literacy and numeracy at the expense of all other things. Often these take the shape of extracurriculars, particularly when it comes to the arts, but they still exist in our schools in spite of the reformer's work.

Other children are impacted as well. Barb Holland (Shannon Perser) represents all schoolchildren who are swallowed by the movement, cast out and almost forgotten. One of the first to become a victim of the Upside Down in Hawkins, the work of Barb's friends fighting to preserve her memory drives much of the plot forward throughout both of the first two seasons.

In contrast Steve Harrington (Joe Keery) is a child of wealth and influence who therefore has means to resist the worst of the action, as children of middle to upper classes likewise have the tools to resist neoliberal education reforms. It is interesting to note that Steve chooses

to transcend his somewhat elitist background in order to help the boys of the party throughout the series. Steve uses elements of his privilege to support those who are marginalized, and often pays physically, psychologically, and emotionally for his support. Similarly, those who work to assist the marginalized against neoliberal oppressions often face retribution of many forms by mainstream society.

Season Two introduces a new antagonist to Steve, one Billy Hargrove (Dacre Montgomery). Clearly depicted as troubled and violent, Billy represents the worst of what can happen from an abusive household; he is so focused on his own survival, his own needs, that he ignores the evidence of the Upside Down throughout the season. Billy has needs that are not being met; so too do millions of students have needs that neoliberal educational programs leave unmet in the interest of improving test scores. Just as Billy becomes self-serving to the point of narcissism or sociopathy, so too have many of the Millennial generation adopted these character traits. Yes, there is a direct line between the neglectful selfishness of neoliberalism and a generation's selfie obsession.

### **Hopper: Public Schools Standing Strong**

The town's local chief of police, Sheriff Hopper (David Harbour), is a man over his head trying to protect his town from the strange happenings taking place. It is evident that he is not without trauma in his background, but that he works to overcome this on a daily basis. Initially, he resists believing in the darker, more fearful elements coming into play; however, he eventually is confronted with facts he can no longer ignore.

He, like the public schools of the 1980s, is the public face of the drama; he is the one many turn to with hope and blame. He, like the schools, is trying to maintain order in light of the new reality that flips his world, and he winds up ultimately hurting and damaged by the end. At times he becomes subsumed by the new trend, but finds a way to fight his way out.

### **Eleven: The Charter School Movement**

The most powerful of the children protagonists, the character named Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown) was a product of the Hawkins Lab who goes on to lead resistance to it throughout both seasons. She wields enormous psychic powers; however, her use of them always inflicts some personal harm (ranging from nosebleeds to collapse). She is tracked by her creators as she was considered too dangerous for the

outside world. When the children first realize her powers, almost all are terrified of Eleven and realize that their world view—and their place in the community—has been forever altered. Her actions are explicitly to benefit her friends; however, they also often have unforeseen repercussions. Arguably, Eleven can represent the charter school movement - a movement born out of the greater neoliberal impulses of the period that were beloved by some, hated and considered dangerous by others, who has the best intentions but causes chaos. Charter schools are public schools; however, just as Eleven's use of powers comes at a personal cost, so too does the great expansion of charter schools cost the public schools in terms of enrollment and the ensuing financial support.

Eventually, Hopper takes in Eleven, adopting her as his own daughter but refusing to allow her to use her powers for her own safety. Similarly, the public schools have started coming to terms with the charter schools but not really allowing them to be used to their full potential. This comes as a result of fear: in Hopper's case, it is fear that Eleven will be found by the government and taken away. In the public schools' case, it is fear that they will be rendered obsolete by the charters, or that their existence is threatened by loss of funding and other governmental support.

### **The Parents: Resistance and Absence**

Sherriff Hopper is not the only adult portrayed on the show; the mother of two of the boys central to the plot, Joyce Byers (Winona Ryder), features heavily in the series. She is initially presented as a flawed character. However, as the tragic events of Season 1 unfold, she is the only one to keep faith in her son. She successfully finds ways to overcome obstacles, maintain communication, and ensures as happy an outcome as could be considering the events that transpired, even though her actions are perceived as erratic by the general public. During Season 2, while she has a distrust and dislike of Hawkins Lab, she also has to work with it.

In many senses, Joyce is similar to teacher's unions. Like Joyce, they find themselves often the only voice in support of her son (the nation's children). Like Joyce working with Hawkins Lab, they have to overcome their dislike of many neoliberal reforms in order to support the nation's teachers. The actions they take, and the public stances they hold, are often met with skepticism from the general public; however, they have historically served an essential role in the ongoing well-being of the nation's schools.

Beyond Hopper and Joyce, viewers do see occasional moments involving the other parents. Unfortunately, these parents are portrayed

as ranging from absent, to uncaring, to ineffectual, to abusive. Similarly, the general public went along with the anti-public school narrative of the time; they bought into the false narrative spun by *A Nation at Risk* and supported it through laws such as No Child Left Behind and support of policies such as Race to the Top. Just as the parents in *Stranger Things* for the most part spend their time wholly ignorant of the Upside-Down in spite of its increasing presence in their town, so too do most citizens of the nation remain willfully ignorant of the true nature of schooling and the damage being done in the name of reform.

### **Mr. Clarke: Gardner's Multiple Intelligences**

At Hawkins Middle School, one teacher stands out: Mr. Clarke (Randy Havens) is depicted as a smart, supportive and dedicated educator, who serves as the advisor to the Audio Video club. Throughout the first two seasons, Mr. Clarke appears as the only fully developed adult character. Other educators and paraprofessionals appear briefly, most of the parents hold cameo roles, but the only constant meaningful educational presence in the children's lives is Mr. Clarke.

There are several examples of this: Mike, Lucas, and Dustin turn to Mr. Clarke to ask about his knowledge of other dimensions.<sup>6</sup> He entertains questions from his students as he delivers a mini-lesson about a flea and an acrobat on a wire to describe the theoretical existence of parallel universes using a paper plate to the delight of his captive audience. Mr. Clarke is also called upon in "Chapter 7: The Bathtub," when Dustin contacts him after hours to inquire about building a sensory deprivation tank which is used to allow Eleven to get to the other side and find Will. In season two, Mr. Clarke's continues to inspire his students in the classroom, using unconventional approaches to teach his students about the mysteries of the human brain.<sup>7</sup>

Again arguably, Mr. Clarke is a perfect representation of a movement started at the same time: applying Howard Gardner's book *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* to our educational settings. Also published in 1983, at its heart, Gardner's work was applied by demanding educators stop asking students how smart are they and instead asking how are they smart? Mr. Clarke allows his students, particularly the protagonists, to develop their own skills and explore questions in their own unique ways. Just as Mr. Clarke is a sense of stability to the boys, so too did educator's explorations of applying Gardner's work provide students a sense of meaning and accomplishment in their Upside Down neoliberal school experiences.



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**Conclusion:  
Neoliberalism as the “Upside Down” of US Schools**

From 2016 to 2020 the Secretary of Education (and 17<sup>th</sup> in line of succession to the President) was Betsy DeVos, arguably the ultimate neoliberal education officer. In a 2015 speech, DeVos made the following comments:

We are the beneficiaries of start-ups, ventures, and innovation in every other area of life, but we don't have that in education because it's a closed system, a closed industry, a closed market. It's a monopoly, a dead end. And the best and brightest innovators and risk-takers steer way clear of it. As long as education remains a closed system, we will never see the education equivalents of Google, Facebook, Amazon, PayPal, Wikipedia, or Uber. We won't see any real innovation that benefits more than a handful of students... many Americans rightly admire entrepreneurial pluck. Shouldn't the intelligence and creativity of Silicon Valley's markets be allowed to cascade down over public education, washing the system clean of its encrusted bureaucracy? (Blakely para. 4)

However, as article author Jason Blakely points out, DeVos represents the latest in a “decades-long struggle between two models of freedom—one based on market choice and the other based on democratic participation” (para. 6). There are many reasons for caution when applying neoliberal principles to education: failure of a school is a significant public loss, it creates educational deserts, it most significantly negatively impacts the poor and creates a never-ending cycle of failure for low-performing communities. This leads to the growing inequalities between classes and the shrinking middle class in this nation.

Just as neoliberal experiments with education have a profound effect on society as a whole, so too in *Stranger Things* does Hawkins National Laboratory and the experiments conducted there had a profound effect on the town and its inhabitants. However, it is Hawkins middle and high schools that are at the heart of *Stranger Things*. In the first episode Hawkins Middle School is depicted as a regular middle school, where Dustin, Lucas, and Mike are subjected to bullying as they make their way to school. Dustin is especially targeted because of his medical condition (cleidocranial dysplasia, missing his adult teeth). Hawkins High School is the site of several significant events, such as when Steve approaches Nancy Wheeler (Natalia Dyer) near her locker to invite her to his party. Schools and schooling are depicted as a site of suffering (bullying), comfort (the assembly in Will's honor), resource (thanks to its dedicated educators), struggle (where good defeats evil), and hope (the school dance).

We know from the interviews they gave since the show premiered that the Duffer Brothers used their own upbringing in suburban North Carolina when writing *Stranger Things*. However, the school in *Stranger Things*, appears to be so far removed from the depictions of schools and education in America as described in *A Nation at Risk*. Could Secretary of Education Terrell Bell have been wrong? What about the report produced by the Commission on Excellence in Education? Was it accurate? Is our nation still at risk? Was it ever at risk in the first place? Scholars and education observers are still divided on the issue. However, current neoliberal rhetoric around the perceived failings of public schools and insistence on various forms of privatization as being the only solution ignore the reality that the public schools can be, and are well worth, preserving in the national interest. Indeed many of the recommendations found in ANAR, never before implemented, still warrant discussion today. Like the show, the 1980s are back.

Through *Stranger Things* the Duffer Brothers allowed its audience to dive back into the 1980s, they shared with the viewer their take on Hawkins, Indiana, its people, schools, institutions, welcomed and uninvited guests in 1983. They also gave us an opportunity to reexamine the Upside-Down of education reform through their work. Just as the Party ultimately overcame the Upside-Down, can our current public schools overcome the neoliberal attacks and begin improving themselves once again? Stranger things have happened...

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article builds and extends upon the following: Ludovic Sourdout, "The Upside-Down of Education Reform during the Reagan Era: A Re-Examination of Education Policies through *Stranger Things*," In K. J. Wetmore (Ed.). *Uncovering Stranger Things: Essays on Eighties Nostalgia, Cynicism, and Innocence in the Series*, pp. 205-214 (McFarland, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> For a more nuanced examination of these periods, see Edward Janak, *A Brief History of Schooling in the United States: From the Colonial Era to the Present* (Palgrave Pivot, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> For more information on this see Alyson Leah Lavigne & Thomas L. Good, *Teacher and Student Evaluation: Moving Beyond the Failure of School Reform* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> For more on this see Joel Bakan, "Chapter 5: Corporations Unlimited," *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power* (New York: Free Press, 2005), 111-138.

<sup>5</sup> After 8 years in office, there were 138 Reagan officials convicted, indicted, or the subject of official misconduct or criminal violations. See "List of Reagan Administration Convictions", Dailykos.com, <https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2005/10/17/157477/> (retrieved January 3, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> *Stranger Things*, “Chapter 5: The Flea and the Acrobat.”

<sup>7</sup> Mr. Clarke tells the story of Phineas Gage, a railroad construction foreman who suffered a traumatic brain injury and whose case was critical in helping the medical community in beginning to understand brain functions. *Stranger Things* Season 2, Episode 3.

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