


special education teachers. This top-down approach has the effect of narrating a racial binary that arrays White middle-class advocates for students with disabilities against the African American community.

Ultimately, *The Unteachables* provides a forceful counternarrative to the celebration of special education as a seminal, if flawed and inequitable, achievement in the history of K-12 schooling. Mayes has added considerably to the dialogue about special education through this work. The material and controversies examined in each of the six chapters of *The Unteachables* have the potential to inspire multiple monographs. While Mayes engages this data primarily through critical theory, other methodologies could be easily applied to the tremendous amounts of quantitative and qualitative data that special education has produced since the Education for All Handicapped Children Act became federal law almost fifty years ago. *The Unteachables* closes with a quote from Burton Blatt: “In this field we call special education, history has not served us well. We have not learned from it” (278). Until we have more research that critically interrogates the practices, policies, and theoretical underpinnings of special education, there is a distressingly small amount of written history for special educators to learn from.

doi:10.1017/heq.2023.48

## Daniel S. Moak. *From the New Deal to the War on Schools: Race, Inequality, and the Rise of the Punitive Education State*

Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022. 340 pp.

Sevan G. Terzian 

University of Florida, USA  
Email: [sterzian@coe.ufl.edu](mailto:sterzian@coe.ufl.edu)

Historians have become increasingly interested in how and why the United States government’s oversight of K-12 schooling has expanded from the postwar era to the present day. Most accounts view the 1980s as a turning point: when politically conservative and neoliberal policymakers abandoned educational equality (that had been symbolized by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, or ESEA) and instead prioritized academic standards and school accountability. Daniel S. Moak’s book, *From the New Deal to the War on Schools: Race, Inequality, and the Rise of the Punitive Education State*, tells a markedly different story. Its central concern is to describe and explain why a “liberal incorporationist order” prizing inclusion as a means for equality of educational opportunity has consistently dominated federal education policy since the mid-twentieth century. Most significantly, Moak proposes that “market incentives and punitive education policies” (p. 15) were natural outgrowths

of the ESEA, and that “it was liberals that were the earliest and most ardent supporters in promoting these policies designed to punish schools for their perceived failures” (p. 14).

Moak’s early chapters account for conflicting radical and liberal visions of social and school reform during the Great Depression. Radicals wanted schools to impress upon students that American society was fundamentally unjust. Social reconstructionists like George Counts, Harold Rugg, and those associated with the journal *The Social Frontier* envisioned a democratic classroom encouraging students’ critical perspectives on the flaws of capitalism. Some Black intellectuals, meanwhile, held that racial oppression was rooted in the existing capitalist system. American schools therefore needed to mobilize an interracial coalition among the working class. By contrast, liberals included “social efficiency Progressives,” who championed intelligence testing as a central mechanism for differentiating instruction and preparing students for designated roles within the existing economy. In addition, “racial democrats” sought primarily for Blacks to gain equality of opportunity in schools and within the existing economic order. Sociologist Allison Davis and psychologist Kenneth Clark, for example, believed that schools could foster Black students’ achievement by adjusting their personalities and elevating their self-esteem.

As the nation’s economy recovered and anti-communist sentiments intensified in the postwar era, radical critiques of American capitalism diminished. Both social efficiency progressives and racial democrats comprised what Moak calls a “liberal incorporationist” coalition that “positioned education as a policy area capable of addressing a wide array of social issues including racial prejudice, poverty, and unemployment” (p. 91). Most significantly for Moak, this liberal stance encouraged Americans to view “education as central to the economic success of the individual and the nation, to press for more and better testing tied to national standards, and to measure teacher performance on the basis of tests” (p. 47). The NAACP’s psychological arguments against school segregation, for instance, characterized racism as a problem of individual attitudes that could be corrected, and not as a systemic issue in need of widespread reform. They, too, called for standardized testing as a key mechanism for identifying and nurturing high-achieving Black students who would advance the race. This liberal alliance of social efficiency educators and racial democrats, coupled with the silencing of radical voices, paved the way for heightened federal involvement in public schooling by the 1960s.

Many historians of American education have interpreted the enactment of the ESEA in 1965 as an ambitious federal effort to direct unprecedented amounts of public resources to economically impoverished schoolchildren. Given the historic inequalities in school funding from local and state governments, this sort of national intervention seemed to represent a broader social welfare policy to eliminate poverty in American society. Moak’s analysis suggests, by contrast, that Great Society Democrats of the 1960s had abandoned New Deal-era approaches to remedying unemployment, poverty, and racial inequality. Instead, they favored Keynesian economics and adhered to human capital theory and culture of poverty theory. Schools would be a focal point for societal change, and the object of reform was often the individual student, rather than economic systems. Moak therefore characterizes the ESEA as “a dramatically limited progressive vision” that eschewed “aggressively redistributive economic policies” (p. 138). “The

‘educationalizing’ of social problems like unemployment, poverty, and racial inequality,” he argues, represented “a dramatic shift in ideology within the Democratic Party” (pp. 157–58). When it became evident that these federal programs did not eliminate problems associated with poverty, disillusioned policymakers came to blame schools and initiated forms of educational accountability.

Thus began what Moak terms “the punitive turn” in federal education policy. Emerging disillusionment over the outcomes of those interventions by the late 1960s appears to have encouraged subsequent pilot programs for holding schools accountable, including high-stakes testing, merit pay for teachers, vouchers, and some privatization. A central premise in Moak’s argument is that an exaggerated faith in the role of schools in eliminating poverty and racial inequality necessarily fueled disappointment in and growing scrutiny of educators and students. Specific aspects of ESEA amendments and experimental programs in the late 1960s and 1970s appear to have anticipated the full-fledged accountability measures of the early twenty-first century. This narrative encourages readers to see more continuity than change in federal educational policy from the 1960s onward.

Moak’s argument is feisty and enticing. Yet several questions remain unresolved. First, what exactly characterized the federal educational policies of the 1980s and 1990s, and to what extent did they perpetuate the principles of “liberal incorporationism” involving academic standards and school accountability? Moak’s book does not discuss those developments, and his concluding chapter makes relatively fleeting reference to bipartisan accountability measures including No Child Left Behind and Race to The Top. It would have been instructive to bridge the emergence of the “liberal incorporationist” state to the early twenty-first century accountability movement in order to bolster claims of ideological continuity and to demonstrate how the bipartisan consensus came to be.

Second, how might greater consideration of educators’ perspectives help us better understand both the power and limitations of federal educational interventions? As it stands, Moak attends most closely to the voices of federal politicians, influential academics, and Black leaders. His discussion of teachers is limited primarily to teacher unions’ opposition to some of the market-driven pilot programs of the late 1960s and 1970s. Although the teaching profession has suffered enormously in recent years from punitive educational accountability, historically it has played active roles in mediating the effects of social, cultural, and political imperatives on children. Moak even alludes to this at the close of his book by citing the resistance of teacher unions in large cities and parental groups’ efforts in speaking out against charter schools and privatization. But because he does not feature the role of educators, Moak’s claims about the overarching power of “liberal incorporationism” run the risk of being overstated. He may also lose sight of some ways that federal educational support actually benefited schools.

Historians of education will find *From the New Deal to the War on Schools* to be of particular value in probing our assumptions about the nature of liberalism, and how and why the federal government heightened its involvement in public schools in the 1960s and 1970s. Equally important, Moak’s book encourages us to consider some of the radical paths not taken in American education in response to some of the fundamental criticisms of capitalism that had been voiced during the Great Depression. We thus come to realize why a powerful national educational agenda emerged that

aimed to reform the individual rather than fundamentally alter social and economic structures. In other words, the current era of punitive school accountability in the United States was not inevitable. Nor must it be permanent.

doi:10.1017/heq.2023.50