

Book Review: Trinidad, Jose. *Subtle Webs: How Local Organizations Shape US Education*, Oxford, UK/New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2025. viii-217 pages. eBook, \$29.95.

In *Subtle Webs: How Local Organizations Shape US Education*, Jose Eos Trinidad provides analysis of how local organizations, operating outside traditional educational structures, fashion and impact educational change in the United States. The focus of the book zeroes in on the issue of students dropping out of school, particularly in large, urban school districts of Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York City. The author calls attention to the complicated ways in which these organizations, including researchers and public benefit organizations work to effect change through data, cooperation, and networks. This book is about the *web* of individuals and organizations that create an almost invisible infrastructure to support and influence educational institutions. The book's title, *Subtle Webs* merits explanation: the webs are *subtle* in the sense that they are almost unnoticeable.

To illustrate their imperceptibility, many school leaders, educators, students, and parents take school practices for granted—not knowing either their origin or that webs of outside organizations helped research, test, advocate, and contest these practices. What's more, school principals and teachers often do not mention the work of these outside organizations. Also, the subtlety of the webs means that they have a complex structure. Furthermore, the webs are subtle in that they are quite discreet. The webs of outside organizations are intentionally careful with their interaction with schools and school districts. Lacking the powerful tools of top-down accountability or the radical strategies of bottom-up social movements, they rely instead on personal-on-personal and long-standing connections with school principals, district leaders, and other public benefit actors. The book comprises two parts split into six chapters and a conclusion.

Part I focuses on the case of early warning indicators (EWI). Chapter 1 (Preventing Dropouts) examines how EWIs serve as vital tools in educational intervention. In effect, EWIs act as red flags, signaling when a student might be at risk academically, socially, or emotionally. Early grades are markers for future academic success or failure. If educators and parents recognize these indicators early, they can put measures in place to support at-risk students. EWIs became technologies for accountability, dropout prediction, student intervention, and systems improvement. As Trinidad put it, school authorities “saw EWIs as a catalyst for school improvement” (p.41). Chapter 2 (Predicting Dropouts) shifts focus to the work of those outside schools, namely: researchers, nonprofits, and school support organizations. This chapter focuses on the broad history of the development of EWIs in New York City, Philadelphia, and Chicago. So why the focus on Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York City? Urban schools and urban school districts have often been characterized as failing students, particularly ethnic minority students who form the majority of students in these places. Research shows that low-income, low-achieving, and non-Caucasian students in urban schools often find themselves in classes with the least qualified teachers. Furthermore, sociologists point out how larger social forces like poverty, family instability, drug trafficking, violence, and social inequities contribute to outcomes often associated with schools.

Chapter 2 not only highlights changes happening with the availability of new technologies but also documents how powerful forces converge and diverge to sustain or threaten the initiative. In addition, the chapter exposes the advantages and disadvantages of nonprofit organizations in education, with forthright opinions and ideas from those working in these organizations. Notable nonprofits and research organizations that contributed immensely to solving K-12 school problems include the following: The University of Chicago’s Chicago

School Research, Talent Development Secondary (TDS), Johns Hopkins University's Center for the Social Organization of Schools, Philadelphia Education Fund, United Way of Greater Philadelphia, the William Penn Foundation, Philadelphia Academies, Inc., Research Alliance for New York City Schools, New Visions for Public Schools, the Gates Foundation, and the Carnegie Corporation.

Part II (Chapters 3 to 6) analyzes the role organizations have played in spreading EWIs and the strategies they used to sustain them. Chapter 3 (How Technologies Shape Institutional Logics) maintains that one of the core reasons for the change and adoption of EWIs was because of the creation of institutional logics through EWI technology. As public benefit organizations and school districts introduced new forms of EWIs, the technologies produced specific meanings from different system-wide institutions in society. The chapter shows how different EWI technologies attach to scientific, professional, and community logics. It illustrates how EWIs appeal to different individuals and groups because of the multiple logics adopted. Chapter 4 (How Templates Structure Entrepreneurial Networks) highlights a mid-range view of organizational collaboration and division of labor. The chapter catalogs the structuring of entrepreneurial networks in spreading and fostering the use of EWIs. With examples of inter-school and inter-organizational connections, the author shows how local organizations were key factors in organizing the webs that created diffusive and connective networks.

Chapter 5 (How Routines Change Organizational Resistance) contends that establishing webs of organizational routines to guide the practice of EWIs on the ground is the key role of outside nonprofit organizations. The chapter adopts a small-scale perspective of what happens inside schools and classrooms to show how public benefit organizations must work with school leaders and educators. It highlights the forms of resistance school leaders and educators put up,

and the strategies local organizations adopt to convert resistance into action. Central to this strategy is the work of school improvement coaches who work with schools to create routines that change not only behaviors and systems but also beliefs and mindsets. The moral lesson rests on how routines come as a forerunner to, rather than the follow-up of, mindset changes.

Chapter 6 (How Local Systems Have National Consequences) highlights the approaches organizations use not only to influence local school districts but also to disseminate the innovations they crafted to other places. By doing so, national educational practices are transformed through inter-local changes. For example, local organizations in Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York City have created and brought about a subtle web and an invisible infrastructure of organizations across the United States. Hence, ideas and practices spread as local examples are embraced as proofs of concept. Local organizations are linked to or contracted by other school districts, and, in the process, local initiatives gain national-level support from federal agencies and large philanthropies. Thus, institutional change is hypothesized as a set of spatially specific, inter-local changes, not as a monolithic change.

In conclusion, the book shows how dynamics similar to EWIs happen with other educational changes that have been initiated and sustained by school improvement organizations. Trinidad deserves commendation for providing an engaging account of how organizations work to address school dropout rates. The author shines light on the often-imperceptible local activists and public benefit organizations that initiate progressive change inside schools.

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