

# Notes from the Big Easy

## AUTHOR

[Brad Olsen](#) | Brookings Institution

**PUBLISHED:** April 18, 2011

I had a nice time at the [American Educational Research Association](#)'s annual meeting last week in New Orleans. For the uninitiated: AERA is a yearly conference in which over 12,000 researchers, educationalists, and policymakers descend on some North American city for five days to discuss their work, deliver papers, and talk about the current state of education. Given that it also happened to be the weekend of the annual French Quarter Music Fest, I may have learned a bit less this time around, but possibly have had more fun...

I attended one symposium about the state of analysis in qualitative research on education. [Elizabeth St. Pierre](#) (Univ. of Georgia) argued that too many qualitative researchers reduce data analysis to positivistic, almost formulaic, procedures of flattening data into categories and findings. 'Coding and theming' is not analysis, she reminded us—seeming to imply both that coding and theming are merely a precursor to the analysis, and that they're inherently flattening and positivistic practices. She lamented that rich theories and scholarly discussions related to a topic are often confined to the literature review or theoretical frame of a paper—and rarely employed (or discussed explicitly) during and throughout the whole of data analysis. We should open up the data for deep reflection, was her argument: not close it into tidy categories.

St. Pierre recommended viewing analysis not as simply reducing data to words, then counting those words as numbers, and concluding that something important has been found. Instead, she outlined an approach she called "post-qualitative inquiry" in which data analysis includes thick, extended, intellectually messy, theoretically robust reflection on the collected data over and over again. To do this, she recommended that researchers place well-established, relevant theories and theorists in active conversation with each other in relation to the data. I liked hearing that.

I heard [Diane Ravitch](#) (NYU) give a version of the talk she's been delivering around the U.S. She's a wry, smart, and comfortable speaker. I appreciated the content of this speech so much: she's hitting all the notes that a progressivist educationalist like me wants to hear...

- If you want a clear sense of charter schools, educational reform, and the details of *Waiting for Superman*, follow the money.
- According to the [CREDO](#) study, only 17% of all charter schools perform better than non-charter public schools (a detail glossed over in Guggenheim's movie).
- The nation's current hyper-emphasis on student testing and value-added surveillance for teachers and schools won't improve education for children—and will likely make things worse.

She twice complimented [Debbie Meier](#) for helping form her current positions on education. At the end of the speech, Ravitch exhorted us to keep doing quality research and keep pushing it toward the ears and minds of education policymakers, and be empirically minded investigative reporters who dig underneath current education reforms. And, yet, amid the standing ovations

and adoring cellphone-camera fans, I couldn't forget that Diane Ravitch is the same person who wrote [Left Back: A Century of Battles Over School Reform](#) and [The Troubled Crusade: American Education 1945–1980](#).

A third talk I enjoyed was part of a panel that explored current critiques of neoliberalism in education. [Amanda Lashaw](#) (UC-Davis) offered a substantive, intellectual explanation of why reformers and researchers working to dislodge the neoliberal model of school change should move away from simple binaries (e.g., reform is either top-down or bottom-up; there's a private sphere and a public sphere; the opposite of dominance is resistance). She suggested that we might wish to avoid—or at least critique or re-appropriate—terms such as “public good,” and “democracy.” (This last point reminds me of Roland Barthes' semiotics on empty signifiers and the linguistic power of myth, or [George Lakoff's Don't Think of an Elephant!](#))

During Q&A at the end of this session, someone rose and, apologizing upfront for the impropriety of the question, asked the panel if verbose, theoretical discussions like these were really going to make any difference in the work of changing education. He raised the pragmatist example of social change set forth by Nelson Mandela as a more grounded, direct, regular-folks-based way of social improvement. The panelists replied that they talk differently with different groups and reserve the academic discourse for settings like this one; that they are not only theorists but also engage in ground-level school reform work; and that, while Nelson Mandela was the head of the ANC which got credit for the victory in South Africa, other groups and approaches contributed too. Though I don't disagree with those responses, I left the room thinking that this questioner might have a point.

#### Suggested citation

Olsen, B. (2011, April). *Notes from the big easy* [Commentary]. Policy Analysis for California Education. <https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/notes-big-easy>



Stanford Graduate School of Education  
520 Galvez Mall, Suite 444  
Stanford, CA 94305  
Phone: 650.576.8484

[edpolicyinca.org](https://edpolicyinca.org)

