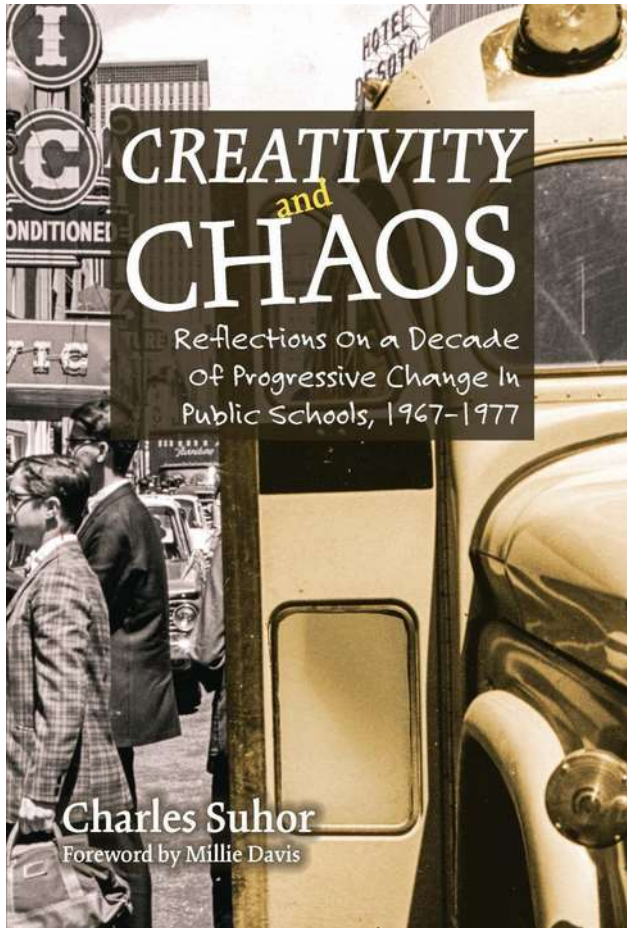


Suhor navigates U.S. public school system

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“Creativity and Chaos: Reflections on a Decade of Progressive Change in Public Schools, 1967-1977” by Charles Suhor. Montgomery, Alabama: NewSouth Books, 2020, 304 pages, \$27.95.



“The late 1960s and early 1970s were a time of tumultuous social change,” Charles Suhor notes in “Creativity and Chaos: Reflections on a Decade of Progressive Change in Public Schools, 1967-1977,” his thought-provoking treatise on one of the most consequential decades in the long and occasionally distinguished history of the still-evolving educational tradition in the United States. “Those years saw the Vietnam War, widespread racial strife, assassinations of national leaders, hippie communes, the sexual revolution, a rapidly emerging drug culture and a new radicalism in popular music.”

“Of course, the challenges to traditional values did not start in the elementary and secondary schools,” the author continues a little later. “But longstanding conservative education programs and practices could not avoid the wave of changes that was washing over American society. (Jack) Weinberg notwithstanding, I was young enough to relate to the crescendo of protests, but I knew that mine was not the way of the hippies. I had long been ‘working within the system,’ as the phrase went – bringing in lively materials beyond the stodgy textbooks, encouraging open

discussion and agitating for causes like school integration, collective bargaining for the teachers’ union and advancement of the then-neglected art of jazz.”

Finally, it’s a book on education that I can personally relate to on many levels – primarily because I was totally submerged within the public school system during the period covered by this masterful and massively insightful critique. In 1967, I finished the third grade and entered the fourth; I graduated from high school in 1976. As such, I feel I am qualified to speak to the efficacy of Suhor’s analysis and interpretation. Those of us of a certain age can certainly remember the introduction of “new math” and similar “innovations” – and the impact they had on both students and teachers alike.

The manuscript is extensively researched – as evidenced by the 23 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the main narrative – and also features a few pictures scattered strategically throughout the 11 chapters, which serve to give a more human context to the ideas being presented. The writing style is fluid and easily deciphered by anyone with a rudimentary understanding of the subject matter being covered in this exquisite exploration of the ultimate significance of a pivotal era in the ongoing evolution of our nation’s public school system.

Moreover, given my background and expertise in educational assessment, I was drawn to “Mass Testing: The Battleground,” the 10th chapter and one I found to be particularly instructive. Again, it’s reassuring to know that what I felt at the time (as a student) and what I have since come to believe (as an educator) have some basis in reality, at least the reality that Suhor and I both seem to inhabit:

“The atmosphere of testing situations was itself a prerequisite ‘test before the test.’ Even when taking teacher-made tests, it is the rare student who doesn’t feel edgy in ways that can affect the outcome. With standardized tests, the atmosphere was ritualized in the extreme. Instructions were read slowly, ceremoniously, the same at every testing site. The first step was for students to fill out their names by darkening letters on a grid. ... A proctor, often a teacher not known by the students, sat with a watch and a watchful eye for cheaters as students filled in the bubbles. The expectation was that no one would complete the test in the allotted time. ... The assumption was, and indeed still is, that in this singularly bizarre environment we get accurate information about students’ knowledge and skills.”

Just reading that excerpt brought back ominous feelings of apprehension and borderline nausea. Honestly, I distinctly remember thinking, even as a relatively unsophisticated and arguably naïve 10-year-old, that there is no way this experience was going to yield anything that vaguely resembled what I was actually capable of achieving given a more supportive and nurturing environment. So thank you, Suhor, for validating my pre-adolescent insecurities from half a century ago.

Suhor has a B.S. from Loyola University, an M.A.Ed. from Catholic University of America and a Ph.D. from Florida State University. He also spent some time studying at Tulane University of Louisiana as well as Oxford University. During a lengthy career that has spanned more than six decades, he taught English, reading, history and business math in traditional, vocational and magnet public schools in New Orleans. In 1977, he became the deputy executive director of the National Council of Teachers of English in Urbana, Ill., a position he held until his retirement in 1997. A freelance drummer who has played with several prominent musicians since 1950, his list of publications includes “Jazz in New Orleans: The Postwar Years through 1970.”

Unlike many authors and social critics who have attempted to navigate and make sense of the turbulent waters that characterized the public school system in this country during the 1960s and 1970s, Suhor was there. As such, he brings a front-row perspective to the discussion that is sorely missing from similar efforts. Instead of talking about what “they” did during this so-called progressive era, he talks about what “we” did. This is more than a subtle distinction; it adds an air of credibility and authority to the story the author is telling. And his depth is as impressive as his breadth. “Creativity and Chaos” covers it all – the controversies over Black literature, Ebonics, the new grammar, faculty integration, testing, standardization and the introduction of computers and other automated technologies into the learning equation.

To top it off, Suhor is careful to tie everything in education to everything that was happening in the greater culture in which it was embedded at the time. As such, the picture he paints is raw and unsanitized. It is apparent the author comes from a progressive bias, but to his credit, he is quick to point out where those with the best of intentions often introduced and supported methods and practices that clearly ran afoul of their original and often admirable goals and objectives.

So if you want to know – I mean really know – how we got to the present moment in our nation’s ongoing experiment in public education, you’ll definitely want to pick up a copy of “Creativity and Chaos.” Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.