

## Dreams from the Past: A Review of *California Dreaming*

Matthew G. Jones

**ABSTRACT.** This is a review of *California Dreaming: Reforming Mathematics Education*, by Suzanne M. Wilson. The book describes the efforts to change the mathematical standards for K-12 in California schools, primarily in the 1990s. The reviewer explores the content of the book and describes who might benefit from reading the book.

*California Dreaming: Reforming Mathematics Education*, is the story of efforts to change K-12 mathematics teaching in the 1980s and early 1990s. As Wilson explains in the preface, “I tell this story neither to demonize one or another of the involved groups, nor to oversimplify the events” (p. xii). The book then takes a mostly chronological approach, delving into earlier history a bit to set the stage, and then describing the key people, processes, ideas, and events that led to major changes in the state curriculum and associated assessments, first towards reform, and later away from it.

Wilson helpfully describes the structure of the California state education bureaucracy. There is the governor-appointed State School Board of Education (SBE), the California Department of Education (CDE) and its elected head, the state superintendent of instruction, and the group known as the Curriculum Commission (CC), with 13 of its 18 members appointed by the SBE. The CC writes and revises the curriculum subject frameworks with assistance from CDE staff members. Ultimately, the SBE has the authority to adopt a framework submitted by the CC. This is only the beginning, as there is subdivision of the work of the CC and public comment periods during development. In addition, K-8 textbooks are approved by the state in a complex adoption process, and the state has its own testing regime. Wilson provides diagrams illustrating some of the relationships and processes, including one of the interacting state agencies and one of the textbook adoption process.

Wilson explains the lines of debate as well as the terms. She expends considerable effort explaining the terms used by the different sides in arguments over curriculum and pedagogy, for instance, “constructivism” (p. 39) and related terms are discussed in the context of the 1985 Curriculum framework. She highlights the tension between what is taught and how it is taught, as well as tensions within the community that wrote the 1985 framework.

Wilson also provides some key insights into the thinking and the limitations in thinking of different players in the system. For instance, she notes that Bill Honig, elected State Superintendent of Instruction in 1982, targeted changes in the formal bureaucracy, but that the larger context in which this system exists was essential to the success or failure of efforts at reform. Appropriately, then, Wilson also details some of the key individuals and organizations and their impact on mathematics education, including Marilyn Burns, Judy Kysh, Judy Mumme, Phil Daro, the California Mathematics Council, and the California Mathematics Project, CMP (disclosure: the author is and has been the Director of a CMP site for 10 years). Later, as the story shifts to the unraveling of the reform, she discusses groups such as Honest Open and

Logical Debate (HOLD) and the website Mathematically Correct, as well the criticisms from folks like Henry Alder and Hsung-Hsi Wu.

While the focus is on California, Wilson does portray the interaction between the changes happening in the state and similar debates and efforts at the national level. The national context includes reports like *A Nation at Risk* from 1983, National Council of Teachers of Mathematics documents, and the movement of key individuals between California and national efforts.

For perhaps half of the book, the story is about the rise of reforms in California, and then it shifts into the rise of its opposition, beginning with criticism of the California Learning Assessment System (CLAS). Wilson is helpful in citing the ways in which criticisms arose louder and louder, with “media coverage [that] inflamed the discourse with strategically selected examples that fanned passions rather than furthering deliberation,” (p. 134). Wilson cites potential contributing factors to perceptions of poor testing performance that were largely ignored in debates, such as California’s decline in comparative per pupil spending, from fifth among the states in 1964-1965 to forty-first in 1994-1995, and the fact that for a majority of California school students, English is not their first language. Whatever the contributing factors, opposition to testing culminated in a veto of the CLAS reauthorization bill by Governor Pete Wilson in September 1994. Later, there is a discussion of the many overlapping and conflicting values at play in discussions of public education, and the undercurrents, such as racism, that also contributed to the conflict. Wilson notes the tendency of some on both sides toward dogmatism, and the consequences:

It seems reasonable to assume that some people encountered a questionable constructivism, and others—when they raised questions—felt dismissed.

Meanwhile, some progressive educators also felt that they were encountering an oppressive traditionalism. Eventually, the either-or dogmatism that some critics and reformers encountered would exacerbate the “war,” heightening passions on every side (p. 151). Late in the text, she points out that “the story has no end” (p. 202). Throughout, Wilson is mindful of the difference between changes in policy, curriculum, and testing, on the one hand, and actual classroom teaching on the other, and she eventually shifts to a discussion of what classroom instruction was like at the time, and some of the forces that mitigate against change.

Who would benefit from reading this book? Many of us who work in or alongside K-12 mathematics education or who are interested stakeholders, we who are not familiar with the bureaucratic structures that govern educational policy, the history of reforms, their impacts, and the reactions, would benefit. This book provides insights on just those issues. I first read the book in 2003 as a relative newcomer. As I write this in 2023, the newest California Mathematics Framework has been delayed multiple times as a result of public criticisms of the draft. Are we merely repeating history, or is there progress, as the lines of debate shift? That is a discussion for future historians. For now, consider spending time with California Dreaming, and you can draw your own conclusions about where we go from here.

## References

Wilson, S. M. (2003). *California dreaming: Reforming mathematics education*. Yale University Press.