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Wuwei (Non-Action) Philosophy and Actions:
Rethinking “actions” in school reform

Seungho Moon

Abstract

This inquiry aims to enrich conversation regarding school reform. The author asks about what other discourses are possible when the action-oriented question of how to ‘act’ is a major approach to ‘fix’ current educational problems. Drawing from Taoist philosophy of *wuwei* (non-action), the author provides a frame to review current school reform movement. Political philosophy of *wuwei* highlights non-interference or non-intervention governance. Laozi discusses his theory of governance that a sage-leader should take and explicates the paradox of non-action: By not doing, everything is done. The paradox of *wuwei* complicates dialogues in the field of curriculum theory by opening spaces for taking *effortless actions* in the midst of standardization and accountability reform movement.

Keywords: Taoism, school reform, curriculum theory, cross-cultural conversation

***Wuwei* (non-action) Philosophy and Actions: Rethinking ‘actions’ in school reform**

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to review the current school reform movement drawing on the political governance theory of *wuwei* (non-action). Laozi’s non-action philosophy provides an important lens to dismantle taken-for-granted beliefs and attitudes about social values and sociopolitical transformation in education (Clarke, 2000). In his recent book, Jeffrey Henig (2013) analyzed current U.S. educational policy, which actively promotes centralization, privatization, and shifting governing institutions. Considering the current school reform movement, the market-oriented vocabulary of accountability, standardization, and competition is operating as the solution for failing schools. Actions to provide better management, as shown in the private business sector, are mandated to secure failing educational systems (Noddings, 2007; Saltman, 2012). Urgent actions for educational change are aimed at increasing literacy and numeracy skills in order to prepare students to succeed in the global economy in the 21st century. In the midst of taking action, teachers are becoming scapegoats for failing public schools (Kumashiro, 2012).

Interventions by politicians and private sector leaders saliently influence the current school reform movement (Kumashiro, 2012; Pinar, 2012). Educators and curriculum theorists challenge policymakers’ obsession with discovering the right, universalized strategies in the current school reform movement (e.g., Miller, 2005). Pinar (2012) argued that actions to find “the right technique, the right modification of classroom organization” block actual learning experiences in education (p. 212). Drawing from the critique about neoliberalism, Watkins (2012) criticized business-oriented reforms that pursue “tyrannical political actions”—actions

that include the disruption of the democratic values of community and neighborhood schools (p. 2). Similarly, Ravitch highlighted the importance of answering open-ended questions, increasing creativity, and generating democratic citizenship that encourages living together with neighbors (Hess, 2004; Ravitch, 2010).

In concurrence with the critique about current school reform movement, I intend to extend the discourse about it with the use of Taoist tradition. When most school reform discourse is action-oriented (i.e., what/how to act), I review the *wuwei* (無爲) philosophy, which emphasizes Natural Law (*ziran* 自然) in governance. Laozi's political philosophy of *wuwei* provides a theoretical lens to challenge the current school reform language of effectiveness of actions and to encourage educators to value Natural Law in governance. Laozi posits that the present form of governance, including its aggressive, rigid, and authoritarian elements, is inadequate to effect political control and then suggests an alternative political governance based on Natural Law.

This inquiry strengthens current discourse in curriculum theory, which requests more complicated dialogues in the discussion of adequate education for all students. I disclaim that this paper aims to provide alternative solutions to fix current educational problems. Rather, this inquiry will provide a space for dialogues from a different philosophical tradition (*wuwei* in Taoism) in order to rethink the business-inspired school reform movement. Predominant examples in this paper are drawn from the US context, but other nation-states, if influenced by corporate-inspired school reform, may rethink their policies as well by the examination of the *wuwei* philosophy.

Context of the *Tao-Te-Ching* and *Wuwei* (Non-Action)

The notion of *wuwei* comes primarily from the *Tao-Te-Ching* in that *wuwei* is the “basic principle of Taoism” (Zhao, 2010, p. 19) as well as providing a theory of governance. According to Kirkland (2004), *Tao-Te-Ching* explains the political philosophy of governance during the Spring and Autumn Period in ancient China (772-481 BCE). Chinese society was obsessed with economic and political power during this period and society was manipulated by bureaucratic and technocratic organizations. Political actions were manifested by regulatory controls and Laozi observed the social situation of the late Spring and Autumn Period when the rulers were struggling for power while the people were under oppression and living in misery. Laozi was skeptical about empire’s actions (*youwei* 有爲), which led to the bureaucratic practice of forcing citizens into a “condition of living death” (Clark, 1983, p. 79). For example, Laozi argued, “The people starve because the ruler eats too much tax-grain. Therefore they starve” (民之饑，以其上食稅之多, Chap 75, as cited in Chan, 1963, p. 174). Rather, Laozi put forward *wuwei* (non-action) as a political idea, which means the rulers or the leaders must be generous with the people and make the minimum interference or intervention in people’s lives. *Wuwei* neither applied aggressive controls to people nor provided good examples that people should follow in the Confucian political philosophy. Rather, *wuwei* highlighted a sage-leader’s roles of governing the state with soft, minimal intervention, humility, and in a spontaneous manner, which is cultivating life and leadership in accordance with Tao (Zigler, 2007). The assumption of *wuwei* philosophy is that human nature returns to *de* (virtue) by emulating the natural Tao (Ames, 1994). Making people non-aggressive, content, and desire-free is a political strategy in Taoism that is different from Confucianism, with the emphasis on educating benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. Understanding *Tao-Te-Ching* as a political

text directed to the leader who is already in power and action minimizes confusions—confusions generated from highlighting how ways to enlighten people appear in Confucianism¹ (Ames, 1994).

Theory of Governance: Wuwei

Literally, *wuwei* refers to *not-doing* or *non-action*: *Wu* refers to the negation (not) and *wei* means to act (Slingerland, 2003). Unlike the literal translations of *wuwei* as non-action, a broader interpretation is possible by reading *wu* as *being* (i.e., invisible nothingness) and *wuwei* as “powerful openness to change” (Wang 2007, p. 282). *Wuwei* is also connected with *ziran*, being itself, and the meaning of *wuwei* is widely viewed as taking non-impositional, timely, and creative action in response to the contingencies of a particular situation.

For Laozi, *wuwei* is an important principle for governing a society. The philosophy of Laozi is not for the hermit, who pursues absolute quietism, but for the sage-leader, who leads the world with non-interference. Away from its literal meaning of inactivity or taking no action, *wuwei* refers to not taking action that is against Natural Law. That is, letting Natural Law take its own course is important. Reviewing ideal sage-leaders is important in order to enhance the understanding of the *wuwei* philosophy.

Ideal Leaders and Wuwei

In *Tao-Te-Ching*, an ideal leader or decision-maker appears as a Sage, 30 times in 25 chapters

¹ Roberts’s (2012) work introduces the historical background of *Tao-Te-Ching* and Laozi. Although his work contributes to understanding *Tao-Te-Ching*, his comparison between Paulo Freire and *Tao-Te-Ching* generates problems by not considering Laozi’s major audience. Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed is an educational philosophy that highlights the humanization of education by emancipating both the oppressors and the oppressed. Working with students is highlighted, while working for/about students prevails in education. Laozi does not emphasize enlightening people for social change. Self-reflection of the people and the art of silence are far from Laozi’s political philosophy of *wuwei*. Rather, returning to the natural Tao and letting people be free of desires is what a sage-leader does to bring contentment to the people.

(Chan, 1963). Laozi wrote *Tao-Te-Ching* to explain what a sage-leader is and how a sage applies *wuwei* in governance. Lee (2012) and Cho (2006) defined a sage in *Tao-Te-Ching* as a leader who follows Tao. A sage-leader emulates the natural Tao in his or her governance of people. For example, weakness or flexibility, not strength or rigidity, is how Nature operates. Ames (1994) categorizes salient characteristics of sage-leaders analogically and explicates the ways in which a sage-leader follows Tao. He lists eight major characteristics of sage-leaders: taking *wuwei*, seldom issuing commands, a state of tranquility, being soft and weak, not contending, dwelling below, natural genuineness, and not appropriating. In addition to Ames's categorization, I include six more characteristics drawing from the indication of a sage-leader in *Tao-Te-Ching*: spontaneity (Chapter 49), acceptance (Chapter 27), simplicity (Chapter 58), emptiness (Chapter 81), no blaming (Chapter 79), and self-knowledge (Chapter 71).

Laozi's description of a sage-leader is similar to the characteristics of Tao, although its meanings are not nominal. By following Tao, sage-leaders do not show their authoritative power, but embrace people with effortless action, flexibility, and simplicity. A sage-leader intervenes less in engaging people into personal cultivation and public affairs. Her simplicity enables people to be free of desires and express their own potentiality naturally (e.g., Chapter 58). No effort or struggle is needed to pursue any contaminated external purposes and actions (Ames, 1994). Thus, a sage-leader keeps to the weak and lowly like water and minds any conscious efforts to achieve a goal (Duyvendak, 1947).

Among the issues about a sage-leader, taking *wuwei* is one of the most important principles by which sage-leaders govern. By rejecting unnatural *youwei* activities yet supporting less intervention, the sage-leader ensures the physical well-being of his people and further provides an environment in which people return to Tao naturally without constraint or

distraction. The values of *wuwei* include not subscribing to artificially and arbitrarily determined values, not exalting one human quality over another, not attaching importance to material acquisitions, and emptying the people's desires (Ames, 1994). Thus, as Laozi says, all things exist in order by taking no-actions (*wuwei*).²

Political Philosophy of Wuwei

Historically, *wuwei* as an ideal of government or technique of social control has been the primary focus. The political philosophy of *wuwei* is not being passive or doing nothing as the literal meaning of *wuwei* indicates. Rather, *wuwei* governance includes being “non-instrumental without forcing and thus free of constraint” (Wang, 2007 p. 275). Laozi stated, “ruling a big country is like cooking a small fish.” Chan (1963) commented on this phrase by indicating, “too much handling will spoil it” (p. 163). When a technological control by the state was prevalent in Laozi's time, *wuwei* governance was attributing any achievement to the people's work, although any visible actions the sage-leaders had implemented made a contribution.

Laozi articulated concrete ideas of political governance of *wuwei*. Analyzing the practice of taking *wuwei* provides more concrete ideas about the governance of *wuwei*. Lee (2012) categorized ideal actions into 43 themes. I have reviewed Lee's categorization and

² It would be helpful to give some examples of sage leaders of taking *wuwei*. Politically, Mahatma Gandhi's salt march in 1930 and Aung Sang Suu Kyi's peaceful anti-government protests are good examples of sage-leadership. Gandhi's leadership and political actions had the specific purpose of gaining India's independence from Britain. Also, Gandhi's actions were driven by Hindu and Buddhist traditions of emptying desires or valuing vacancy in actions. The non-violent components of Gandhi's actions were highly influenced by Zen Buddhism. Gandhi had to listen to the voice of his people, who were struggling with taxation of salt by the British Empire; such listening was similar to Confucian teaching. Still, Gandhi's actions can be seen as taking *wuwei*. As indicated in Chapter 27 of *Tao-Te-Ching*, Gandhi utilized strategies of not competing with others but co-operating. “A good traveler leaves no track or trace. A good speech leaves no flaws. . . . A well-tied knot needs no rope and yet none can untie it” (Chan, 1963, p. 153). Gandhi did not need a rope to unite the Indian people. Since Gandhi did not use any rope, the British government did not know what to untie.

revised specific ideas of *wuwei* governance into 20 major categories (Table 1). By adopting yet modifying Lee's categorization, I explicate *wuwei* governance strategies by highlighting four components: returning to nature, effortless action, selfless action, and timely, less intervention.

A salient description of *wuwei* is connected with its compliance with Tao. When things obey Natural Law, all parts of the universe will form a harmonious whole and the universe will become an integrated organism of *ziran* (so-of-itself). This naturalness is connected with following one's *de* with no arbitrary, mindful effort (Peerenboom, 1993). By following their inner natures, people are able to act in accordance with their inherent self-natures, their *de*—what individual objects obtain from Tao and thereby become what they are. Laozi connects *wuwei* with *ziran*, which is returning to nature or so-of-itself. Taking actions of *wuweiziran* is related to effortless action with less interference. Slingerland (2003) theorized *wuwei* as effortless actions—that is, spontaneity and naturalness of action devoid of conscious premeditation by emphasizing non-intervention in the natural flow of things. Drawing from this effortless action, *wuwei* is considered as the “the art of letting things happen” (Clarke, 2000, p. 126).

[Insert Table 1 here]

In addition, the principle of *wuweiziran* is selfless action that does not pursue any desires or materials in the world. Peerenboom (1993) articulates the meaning of *wuwei* by juxtaposing it with the notion of *youwei* (有爲). If a person acts out of self-interest and creates conflict, he or she practices *youwei*. In contrast, if a person acknowledges and incorporates the intrinsic uniqueness, value, and interests of others in his or her behavior, the person practices *wuwei*. *Youwei* conforms to predetermined rules that arise out of and incorporate the interests, concerns, and attitudes of particular parties (Duyvendak, 1947; Peerenboom, 1993). *Wuwei*, in contrast, sees the environment as a sphere of interrelated persons and things so that no extrinsically forced

efforts exist. The practice of any mindful effort is considered as *youwei*, whereas natural, spontaneous development of action is *wuwei* (Duyvendak, 1947).

Lastly, the aforementioned interpretations of *wuwei* have common points of avoiding arbitrary efforts to follow the flow and let it happen (e.g., laissez-faire). Some scholars advance the idea of non-doing with an understanding of proper and timely intervention (Zhao, 2010). Letting things happen passively is not what non-action means. Paradoxically, it should take no purposeful action, but still act (Chan, 1963). This approach to *wuwei* is connected with a timely, proper intervention. A person should restrict his or her activities to what is needed and what is natural, not pursuing actions motivated by self-interest. In this sense, *wuwei* takes necessary, spontaneous, and unforced actions without overdoing anything.

Overall, taking *wuwei* is recognizing possibilities of its potentiality of action by opening its spontaneity, flexibility, and less intervention (Duyvendak 1947; Wang 2007). Unlike universalized or merely habitual forms of actions, *wuwei* calls for a considerable amount of “flexibility of response and action” (Slingerland, 2003, p. 8). The *wuwei* philosophy opens up the ways of open-ended, complicated, and flexible manners by challenging imposed, fixed, and binary modes of thinking (Fleming, 1998).

Technologies of Action in School Reform and Taking *Wuwei*

In this section, I review technologies of action in school reform and rethink them informed by *wuwei* philosophy. The philosophy of *wuwei* emphasizes the sage-leader’s role in taking non-actions of governance so that Tao is implemented. I apply *wuwei* philosophy to review, challenge, and criticize the current school reform movement, which is highly driven by technologies of control with predetermined educational outcomes. Current school reform in the United States is controlled by more interventions from both central government and profit/non-

profit organizations. Taking actions creates schools from new technologies of control—ones where the smallest actions are captured and turned into measurable, predictable, and controllable data. Drawing from the prescribed solution of the current school reform, US schools are predominately manipulated by technological controls of “market economics, neoliberalism, and privatization” as the solution to educational problems (Watkins, 2012, p. 1).

The complexity and depth of *wuwei* provide a framework to rethink the current discourse of educational reform, which is arranged by effortful actions of control, competition, and profit-oriented motivation. In what ways does *wuwei* provide a different framework to rethink the current reform movement? This section elaborates the dangers of taking action at the current time when students and teachers struggle under the regime of standardization and accountability imposed by nation-states. Reviewing the current reform movement from the governance of *wuwei* will enrich discourse on current educational reform: returning to Natural Law, effortless action, negation of goals, and less action.

Mandated, Standardized Reform vs. Returning to Natural Law

Laozi underscores the philosophy of *wuwei* when extensive control with fixed solutions generates false promises with the harmful side-effects of generating more desires for success, competition, and power. Regulatory controls and coercive interventions from the government and other interest groups conflict with returning to Tao and self-cultivation. In *Tao-Te-Ching*, flexibility, not uniformity, is the principle of changes, just as the wind blows spontaneously. Yet, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the recent Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are actions that flow *against* the natural order, like water flowing uphill.

Technologies of action have created more rules punishing failing schools and scapegoating teachers for failing students. The achievement gaps still exist or even become

wider among students from privileged and underprivileged communities although the idea for reform is providing excellence and equity in education for all. Important knowledge has been limited to numeracy and literacy skills that should be demonstrated by benchmark test scores. A hybrid format of legislation is born under the name of NCLB waiver or flexibility. The NCLB waiver program is a variation of federal-led school reform that loosens approaches to achieve the required proficiency level but still emphasizes accountability for students' achievement (Doan, 2008). CCSS, which is supposed to be a state-led, voluntary initiative, plays as a new standardization movement by highlighting rigorous content and the application of knowledge through higher-order skills.

Fixed solutions that demonstrate educational outcomes with test scores have been the norms of reform by undertaking artificial, coercive activities for improvement. I argue that following the Tao, that is, being weak and soft, is part of the natural flow of being and that school reform should not be ready-made, but should flow in motion (LaFargue, 1994; Zhao, 2010). Fleming (1998) explicates the naturalness of *wuwei* philosophy in its flexibility, challenging rigid implementation of dichotomous interpretations including good/bad, success/failure, and useful/useless. In the midst of reform that pursues large government with more control, current school reform leads education in predetermined ways of the best curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.

Predetermined, mandated actions of reform are problematic in that such actions are motivated by "politicians' self-interested and ideology-laden agendas" (Pinar, 2012, p. 214). State-driven reforms have been evolving since President Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Educational Act (ESEA). Each president has changed the name of the legislations during his term to keep his self-interested desire of leaving his fame for future generations. The

Reagan, Clinton, and Obama administrations developed the languages of threat, competition, achievement, and punishment by making or reauthorizing the laws of “Nation At Risk,” “Goals 2000,” “No Child Left Behind,” and “Race to the Top” (RTTT). During the Spring and Autumn Period in Ancient China, rulers were obsessed with economic and political power and the society was manipulated by bureaucratic and technocratic organizations. Laozi was skeptical about imposed actions and policies in that the practices of bureaucratic actions often reduced people to the “condition of living death” (Clark, 1983, p. 79). Although the social contexts in ancient China and the current United States are different, the struggles of people due to selfish leaders’ interests are not different. Teachers are spending several weeks cramming knowledge to students. The focus of education becomes more about management than living life.

This philosophy of *wuwei* is a genuine paradox. Any universalized, prefixed solution to the problems, such as standardizing curricula and increasing accountability, will therefore necessarily be “plagued by the sort of superficial and structural difficulties describe[d] as the solutions” (Slingerland, 2003, p. 19). Providing *the* fixed answers for education generates more problems than properly responding to newly emerging issues in schools. Most notably, when leaders pursue their own interests and want to establish fame in decision-making, people suffer from such actions. Teachers, for example, have become the scapegoats of coercive actions and a punishment/reward mechanism has been implemented through legislation (Pinar, 2012, Kumashiro, 2012). The effort made or action taken by forces other than spontaneity may not do any good but may disrupt the natural process and the procedure of self-transformation.

Producing mandated, coercive efforts for creating the right solutions in education by creating predetermined curricula is similar to blocking water flowing downhill or trying to force water into a fixed shape. Spontaneity of learning and curiosity does not have any pre-given form, just

like water does not have such a format.

Educational experience should be flexible depending on its specific context. In Chapter 8, Laozi uses a metaphor of water to articulate characters of Tao: “The best (man) is like water. Water is good; it benefits all things and does not compete with them” (Chan, 1963, p. 143). Similarly, in Chapter 78, Laozi states, “There is nothing softer and weaker than water, And yet there is nothing better for attacking hard and strong things” (Chan, 1963, p. 174). The way of nature is to let everything be itself in its own development and self-transformation. Following Tao in *wuwei* philosophy is to let education be itself in its own naturalness—that is, relying on self-transformation of learning without any imposed, mandated curriculum and assessment. To live by spontaneity of learning is to live in the world of constant naturalness. Trying not to help, trying not to do anything extra artificially. Everything will be accompanied by its natural course of transformation [*wuweiziran*]: that is, naturalness without force, like water flowing downhill. Trying to help education by mandating curricula and tests is like trying to make water flow uphill, which is against *wuweiziran*.

Effortful Action vs. Effortless Action

Effortless actions are good governance strategies for sage-leaders. As Laozi mentions, people do not know if the leader exists. They think that all prosperity is generated as of itself. I examine *effortful* actions (*youwei*) in school reform by mainly discussing the audit culture.

Audit culture is an anthropological term where a society is ruled through self-surveillance. Business-inspired, Informational Technology oriented terms replace older languages of self-cultivation, spontaneity, or collaboration in education. Profits, data-driven decisions, and measurement systems replace professional judgment in learning (Taubman, 2009). Audit culture is attached with accountability issues and recent incidents in education reflect on what

happens when effortful actions are mandated. Furthermore, these incidents inform the problems with wisdom when Laozi recommends making people with no desire and making them non-aggressive.

Effortful actions in education driven by accountability cause more desires in administrators, teachers, and students that aim at wrong knowledge and wandering outside to pursue knowledge. As lessons for sage-leaders, Laozi provides provocative teaching for the people in Chapter 3: “Do not exalt the worthy... Do not value rare treasures... Do not display objects of desires” (Chan, 1963, pp. 140-141). Less intervention by the leader is required to follow Tao. When the government is searching for or generating technologies of control, “[t]he people are disappointed and contentious” (Chapter 58, as cited in Chan, 1963, p. 167). The logic of accountability and the audit culture in education has definitely provided rare treasures that school administrators, teachers, and students desire to possess. For administrators, Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) has become the object of desire in order to avoid being punished by the state government. Similarly, students’ achievement has become “the worthy” for teachers, in that indicators become tools for promotion or demotion in their careers. For the private sector, all the financial benefits gained from the accountability movement become real treasures and corporations such as Pearson or College Board attempt to occupy the public education field with their desires. Kohn (2012) argued that the corporate sector justifies its plans for reform with the rhetoric of freedom, competition, and accountability under the regime of State-initiated laws (e.g., NCLB). Current education reform actions under NCLB are “ill-intentioned law.” This reform generates damage for students rather than benefiting public schools (Kohn, 2012, p. 93).

Paradoxically, Wang-Pi commented on Laozi’s Chapter 25 by saying, “To use knowledge

is not as good as to have no knowledge” (Chan, 1963, p. 321). Having politicians and private corporations impose “objectively discernable” (Greene, 1994, p. 498) strategies with fixed ideas is not as good as having no knowledge. Furthermore, laws with ill intentions like NCLB make people more knowledgeable or desirous for rare goods and products. According to Laozi, encouraging people to be simple is crucial. It is because “[t]he more cunning and skill man possesses, [t]he more vicious things will appear. The more laws and orders are made prominent, [t]he more thieves and robbers there will be” (Chapter 57, as cited in Chan, 1963, p. 166).

Politicians’ and corporate leaders’ effortful actions to benefit their own interests have generated the accountability and audit culture and thus let school administrators and teachers pursue desires for the treasurable assets of test scores. News articles cover cheating scandals of administrators and teachers manipulating test scores. Thirty-five teachers and administrators in Atlanta were indicted in March 2013. A Former Atlanta school superintendent and others are under investigation (Strauss, 2013). Twenty-three Houston schools are being investigated for possible cheating on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills. Cheating allegations are becoming more common around the United States in the face of NCLB sanctions (National Center for Fair and Open Testing, n.d.). Learning has been reduced to test scores in addition to promoting self-surveillance. More laws for reinforcing punishment or incentives depending on test scores have generated “more thieves and robbers” in education. The political philosophy of *wuwei*, which emphasizes effortless actions, lets educators remain sincere and ignorant about goods although all treasures are appreciated by the accountability regime. The audit culture makes leaders’ effortful actions always visible through legislation and rewards/punishments.

Goal-oriented Reform vs. Negation of Goals

Global competition and winning the race in this competition have been the motivation for state-

initiated reform and general-purpose governance (Henig, 2013). The language of threat and fear has grown enormously since Sputnik and *Nation At Risk* explicitly expressed such feelings in the legislation title. The language of competition is still prominent with the RTTT legislation by the Obama administration. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), which is legislation to stimulate the economy during the financial crisis in 2008-9, provided \$100 billion in education funds. As a competitive grant, RTTT keeps \$4.35 billion for state incentive grants in education (Henig, 2013).

The purpose of education has been reduced to becoming the top-ranking nation in TIMMS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) or PISA (Program for International Student Assessment), which functions as the indicator for global economic competitiveness. The centrality of public education has reduced to competition for human capital development for labor productivity and global competitiveness (Henig, 2013). This goal-oriented reform, specifically a competition model, is governance by *youwei*. It leads people to false aims, the repetitive rhetoric of winners/losers, and limiting knowledge to literacy and numeracy, which appears in the test under the name of college-career readiness in CCSS. When this competition model functions as a principle of reform, I ask questions of who benefits the most out of the discourse of competition, choice, and global economy. Not much literature supports the direct benefits for children, but there are direct benefits for politicians and the corporate sector by putting federal policy into practice (Pinar, 2012; Ravitch, 2010; Taubman, 2009). Taubman (2009) stated that state funds flow “into complying with policies catering to business interests” (p. 67). According to Pinar (2012), corporations invested in educational resources, including Pearson, McGraw-Hill, and Kaplan, in addition to individuals who get benefits from NCLB (e.g., Sandy Kress), have made drastic benefits out of federal-led school

reform. According to Andrew Hacker, test preparation is a more than \$1 billion business and the Kaplan Company, the Princeton reviews, and Pearson are making benefits out of the test business (Pinar, 2012).

Recently, a process of designing and implementing CCSS was revealed and doubts emerged over who receives benefits by adopting CCSS—which was launched by the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). The State Fiscal Stabilization Fund (SFSF) Program had \$53.6 billion dollars under AARA and the U.S. Department of Education promised approximately \$48.6 billion to governors who agreed to essential education reform. Specific directions of reform include college and career-readiness standards, assessment of all students, usage of database systems for Pre-K through post-secondary students, teacher effectiveness and highly qualified teachers, and closing low-performing schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Educational reform was provided as part of the economic recovery package and states had to decide whether to adopt CCSS or other compatible standards in order to receive other funds from the federal government.

Consequently, 45 states decided to implement CCSS. The language of business continues, including a high-stakes test, data-driven reform, school accountability, and teacher evaluation (U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, n.d.). The displays of treasures, which are high numbers from tests, actually lead the direction of reforms.

Selfless action is important part of *wuwei* governance. The sage-leader does not pursue self-interest, retreats after making a contribution, and is generous. Laozi explicates the irony of taking non-actions to fulfill goals. “Therefore the sage places himself in the background, but finds himself in the foreground. He puts himself away, and yet he always remains. Is it not because he has no personal interests? This is the reason why his personal interests are fulfilled”

(Chan, 1963, p. 143). Reviewing the language of reform, highly influenced by centralization and privatization, the purpose of actions is problematic. A major question to ask is if reform indeed recognizes children's well-being and their happiness, rather than being driven by self-interest of politicians and corporations. If test-driven, accountability-based reform continues with the logic of global competitiveness, Laozi's *wuwei* philosophy provides a good lens to rethink current reform. If the sage-leader does not pursue his or her own interests, then his or her personal interests will be fulfilled. In other words, if policy-makers and business leaders do not pursue their own benefits or interests, their personal interests of being good politicians and ethical business leaders will be fulfilled. Racing to the top of the world economy or ranking Number One in global competition both in numeracy and literacy are externally imposed goals that are against taking non-actions. Thus, Ames (1994) underscores that *wuwei* generates a situation where "people are free to express their own untrammled potentiality and to develop naturally and fully without suffering the contaminations of externally imposed 'purposes'" (pp. 42-43). Without such coercive purposes from the leader (or decision makers), children (and teachers) are finally out of the current suffocating educational environment. If decision-makers sincerely take care of children and their learning, they can even practice *wuwei* by not participating in global competition organizations such as TIMMS and PISSA. Laozi said, "the sage never strives for the great, [a]nd thereby the great is achieved" (Chapter 63, as cited in Chan, 1963, p. 169). Furthermore, Laozi stated that the sage "does not compete that the world cannot compete with him" (Chapters 22, as cited in Chan, 1963, p. 151). If the U.S. government wants to reach the top of students' achievement, it should never take effortful actions of participating in the ranking game by practicing the non-interference philosophy of *wuwei*. As Laozi says, greatness will be achieved by not striving for the great.

More Action vs. Less Action

The current school reform movement assumes that the more actions that are taken, the better education will be. Yet, as Cuban (2010) elaborates, too many changes are made by too many people at too fast a pace. Fewer interventions not more interventions are needed for reform in education. Furthermore, when leaders or decision-makers ignore the flexibility of their actions, more technological controls are implemented and thus generate desire to obtain more fame, artificial knowledge, and power. Laozi stated that mandated, effortful actions lead to disorder and that “the more extensive control, the more chaotic the world becomes” (Clark, 1983, p. 71). In Chapter 57, Laozi describes the chaotic situation as follows:

The more laws and orders are made prominent, the more thieves and robbers there will be. Therefore the sage says: I take no action and the people of themselves are transformed. I love tranquility and the people of themselves become correct. I engage in no activity and the people of themselves become prosperous. I have no desires and the people of themselves become simple (Chan, 1963, pp. 166-167).

Laozi provides his insight by indicating that more laws paradoxically disorganize a society. Drawing from this paradox, I open up discussion whether more standards and tests will actually fail students or not. I question if the more educational problems aggravated because of “the more bureaucracy proliferates” (Chan, 1963, p. 166). Unlike the initial goal of education reform for saving a failing school system, what if the extension of authoritative technological control, for the sake of maintaining order, has only further destroyed the structure of learning communities, thus dismantling social integration and “producing more deeply rooted disorder”? (Clark, 1983, p. 71)

New technologies of control operate in students’ learning with predictable and

controllable data and students are being treated in a distinct and personal manner based on their past actions. Computerized tests, such as Item Response Theory (IRT), decide which question to provide next based on how students have answered already. Within a normalized scale in the assessment, a student's performance is standardized continually. More standardization is mandated across nation-states and more testing is required in school districts. In the United States, the monolithic imposition of what works best in schools is applied with universalized, state-controlled curricula (Miller, 2005). The blind belief that more works better generates different versions of universalized curriculum reform mandates, including CCSS, New Generations for Science Education, and more. Due to the NCLB waiver program and a shift to new curriculum standardization, US educators rarely discuss NCLB as much as they discuss the upcoming CCSS in 2014. Some practitioners are enthusiastic about CCSS in that it aims at critical thinking skills. Yet, such support of CCSS is not valid in that test-driven assessment in CCSS is similar to that of NCLB. The ideology of more actions never ends with the assumption that using the best solution will fix problems. In contrast to these technological controls of student's learning, the *wuwei* philosophy not only opens up a space to think differently, but also questions technologies that want to impose more actions based on standardized testing. When the ideology of *more* is better is prevalent, *wuwei* philosophy leaves spaces to remind us that *less* is more. Simplicity of actions, goals, and mind vacates peoples' and leaders' desires to achieve goals with effortful actions. When taking more actions is operating in the dominant school-reform discourse, the *wuwei* philosophy highlights the importance of non-actions, which does all things without effort.

I recognize *wuwei* as a non-impositional, timely, and creative response to the contingencies of a particular situation. Zhao (2010) stated, "[n]ot overdoing things and doing

them at the proper time is the key to success.” (p. 21). The rationale behind this statement is that when humans put forth their desire against the world they interrupt the existing harmony. Thus *wuwei* is “not to say that we ought not to exert our will to act. Rather it is knowing whether, when, and how to act in relation to natural processes” (Zhao, 2010, p. 21). Sage-leaders know when to take action and when to stop. Knowing this frees the sage-leader from danger. By highlighting less and timely intervention, I develop the pedagogy of *wuwei* that generates a learning community where students and educators return to Natural Law with creative responses to the specific sociopolitical, economic, and cultural context. This pedagogy resists any imposed and standardized educational purposes limited with high test scores or universalized curricula. The emphasis in non-doing, rather than compulsorily imposing a universalized and mandated educational reform plan, will paradoxically lead to natural change in education.

Implications for School Reform: Lessons from *Wuwei*

I began this paper in the hope of generating a space for rethinking current school reform technologies (e.g., competition, punishments, and choice). Incorporating *wuwei* into school reform means re-imagining the purpose of education beyond *racing to the top* of the world economy. Ironically, it is students’ learning that we ultimately lose when the technology of actions and controls operates with/in the current imposition of universalized curricula and educational practices. Intervention with prescribed solutions will block the opportunities for evolving novel and creative patterns by limiting student success to normalized, standardized test scores (Pinar, 2012; Taubman, 2009). I articulate suggestions and implications by connecting Laozi’s *wuwei* political philosophy in relation to the laissez-faire atmosphere in neoliberalism. I posit that more interventions from both the states and corporations to pursue their own interests

are against the *wuweiziran* philosophy. I revisit the notions of no desires, weakness, and invisibility of sage-leaders for recognizing *wuwei* governance. Also I highlight small government with few people as ideal governance, which appears in Chapter 80.

No-Activity (無事) and Reform

In *wuwei* political philosophy, I emphasized a return to Natural Law, effortless action, selfless action, and less intervention. Laozi used the two terms *wuwei* (non-action) and *wushi* (no-activity) in explicating sage-leaders' actions. He stated that the sage-leader administers the empire "by engaging in no activity" (Chapter 57, as cited in Chan, 1963, p. 166). Laozi also articulated, "An empire is often brought to order by having no activity" (Chapter 48, as cited in Chan, 1963, p. 166). In the interpretation of *wushi*, Chan (1963) twice added comments to Laozi's idea of no activity as "Laissez-faire government" (pp. 162 and 167). Discussing the relationship between Laozi's ideas of no activity and current educational reforms is meaningful in that a laissez-faire atmosphere is grounded in neoliberalism and thus underpins the current reform movement. Laozi's articulation of no-activity, followed by Chan's comments on laissez-faire government and neoliberalism seem to be similar in terms of arguing for less intervention from the state. However, I argue that coercive interventions that are grounded in effortful actions and self-oriented actions, either from a public or a private organization, are against Tao and thus are against the principles of *wuwei* and *wushi*.

A closer examination of neoliberal practices in education reform shows that neoliberal institutional reform is against the philosophy of *wuwei*. In political and economic science, laissez-faire originally indicated the deregulation of government to ensure a free market and fair competition. Neoliberalism is founded in the laissez-faire ideology—that is, limiting the role of state to maximize the proper functioning of markets. Furthermore, if a market does not exist in

public domains such as education, the state should provide a platform for a market, if needed (Harvey, 2005). Ideally, neoliberalism values market, freedom, and competition for the “well-being of all” (Harvey, 2005, p. 79) by limiting totalitarian interventions from the state. The great hope is embedded within this neoliberal ideology in the pursuit of individual freedom, choice, and competition (Taubman, 2009).

Unlike the aforementioned ideal, actual consequence of neoliberalism has restored authoritarian neo-conservatism (Harvey, 2005). In neoliberal practices, the boundaries between the state and corporate power have become blurred in taking actions of restoring class power (Harvey, 2005). With support from the federal government, governors, and mayors, the neoliberalization of education has enhanced public-private partnerships and has provided spaces for the privatization of education. According to Henig (2013), the centralization of power to state and federal authorities has increased the role of mayors and governors and they have helped open opportunities for the privatization of education while discrediting public, school-specific decision-making venues. Under the Bush administration, for example, the president supported businesses by opening up education to the business community. Corporations collaborate closely with state actors by writing legislation (e.g., NCLB), deciding educational policies, and establishing a regulatory, audit culture in public education (Harvey, 2005). Similarly, the RTTT initiative and the CCSS initiative demonstrate examples of state-corporation partnership for advancing global competitiveness in literacy and numeracy skills.

Ironically, more controls operate in public education, driven by neoliberal ideologies of competition, freedom, and global markets, with support of the state. Partnerships between public and private organizations opened more spaces for privatization of education by bringing non-education-focused groups and actors who provide “legitimacy, resources, and political

support” (Henig, 2013, p. 146). The centralization and privatization of education, influenced by neoliberal ideologies, has generated more desire from both government and private sectors by enforcing business-inspired management of standardization and audit culture—namely, a performance-based management of education.

In Chapter 48, Laozi states, “An empire is often brought to order by having no activity (*laissez-faire*). If one (likes to) undertake activity, he is not qualified to govern the empire” (Chan, 1963, p. 162). Although Laozi specifies the target of this statement as the sage-leader, the implication of his lesson is applied to decision-makers in education in our time. No-activity in *Tao-Te-Ching* and Chan’s understanding of it with the use of *laissez-faire* government is following Tao just like the moon and the sun circulate according to their own Natural Law. This understanding of *no-activity* is returning to wholeness and balancing through natural momentum, which results in not “ignoring students’ needs” (Taubman, 2009, p. 94). Any mindful effort to ensure excellent outputs through higher standards and raising performance is *youwei* (Duyvendak, 1947). In contrast, *wuwei* is effortless, *laissez-faire* action through which sage-leaders follow the principle of *wuweiziran*. Everything goes spontaneously and harmoniously, without artificial notions for performance-based administration, including measuring students’ success solely relying on high test scores.

Harvey (2005) harshly criticized neoliberalism as “a failed utopian rhetoric” covered by hegemonic efforts for “restoring ruling-class power” (p. 202). Corporate interests and political power supported by the state continue to assault public services including education (Watkins, 2012). As indicated earlier in this article, educational reform driven by neoliberalism is no different than the empire’s actions in Laozi’s time when rulers ate too much food while people starved (Chapter 75). Laozi’s development of *wuwei* philosophy, with the elaboration of *wushi*,

enables educators to imagine a sage-leader in the current time who is generous with students and teachers by making the fewest interventions in their lives, rather than employing “technological domination” (Clark, 1983, p. 81) in pursuit of his or her self-interest.

Small Government with Few People

Laozi targeted his audience at rulers who wanted to control the empire. In the chaos of multiple regimes during the Spring and Autumn Period, Laozi had different ideas than those of Confucius or other thinkers by highlighting returning to Natural Law and limiting interventions from states. Structurally, Laozi articulates an ideal vision of small governance with few people in Chapter 80. Bai (2009) highlights that Laozi’s ideas of a small country with few people are prerequisite for minimizing taking drastic actions in governance. Keeping a small state with few people after all is a strategy for keeping people simple, dull, and having no desire except what they need.

Today’s globalized society aims at larger governance that goes beyond any nation-state borders. The problem of the late Spring and Autumn Period was the demise of the feudal system. Large-sized, populous states emerged due to the population growth and the development of technology—that is, the wide spread of iron (Bai, 2009). Laozi argued that actions happen due to large-scale governance of society. The use of technological control occurs in order to control a large scale of governance more effectively. Yet, small governance is a prerequisite for less intervention and following *ziran*.

Identifying specific examples from educational reform where *wuwei* has been employed is challenging. Slingerland (2003) considers the political philosophy of *wuwei* as an ideal form of governance that concentrates on the term itself rather than focusing on its conceptual structure. Confining the formats of governance to a fixed format, ironically, “confine[s] itself mostly to the political context” by ignoring spiritual ideal of *wuwei* (Slingerland, 2003, p. 6). Attempts exist

to connect *wuwei* philosophy into educational practices. For example, Bai (2009) connects Laozi's *wuweiziran* philosophy with that of Rousseau. Rousseau's ideas of natural-centered education as well as resisting popular education are recognizably similar. Nature-friendly educational models can be good educational reform structures to apply *wuwei* governance in education. Small schools that do not rely on institutionalized controls by the state and corporations are good models as well. Small Learning Community (SLC) movements in New York City meet the ideal of small governance with few people as indicated in Chapter 80. Yet, more hurdles exist in current industrialized societies where values of knowledge and learning are limited to college-career readiness as indicated in CCSS. SLCs have potentials for using no-effort approaches and creating a spontaneous, less interventionist model in education.

Unfortunately, if a small size of school governance is used for more effective control of test scores or college-career readiness, the ideal of small governance with few people does not work.

Instead of providing a concrete example of *wuwei*-inspired reform, I postulate that an application of *wuwei* philosophy in contemporary educational theory is rethinking the purposes of education. Slingerland (2000) analyzes Laozian *wuwei* that embraces two components: (a) rejection of conventional knowledge and values and (b) a negation of the conventional sense of action. When values of education are reduced to global competitiveness, desires for economic success, and effectiveness, *wuweiziran* opens up the importance of rejecting the conventional values embedded within these components. If the conventional understanding of knowledge is making the intellectual muscles stronger through math and science, *wuwei* philosophy provides a different goal of education by negating outcomes. Rather, a paradigm shift is needed, such as highlighting spontaneity, lack of desires about treasures, and simplicity in education. Without a paradigm shift in the values of education, coercive interventions of reform suffocate teachers and

students, which lead them to death, not to life. In addition, the reminder of the role of a sage-leader is another important lesson from *wuwei* philosophy.

In Chapter 17, Laozi objected that such visibility is not the practice of sage-leaders. If decision-makers are the targets of fear due to audits and accountability, they are not good leaders as Laozi elaborates. Only if students and teachers do not exert the worthy and enjoy studying and teaching (without external pressures) will the existence of leaders becomes invisible. Returning to the naturalness of Tao is expected for decision-makers in the current chaos of educational reform. Methods and means of *wuwei* explicated in this article may eventually achieve the status where “all things will be in order” (爲無爲, 則無不治) (Chapter 3, as cited in Chan, 1963, p. 141).

Towards Taking Actions of Wuwei

The depth of *wuwei* political philosophy provides different thoughts for educators and leaders on current political actions. Being pushed to the margins leads to taking the opposite side from existing knowing. As indicated in Chapter 14, “We look at it and do not see it; Its name is Invisible. We listen to it and do not hear it; Its name is The Inaudible” (Chan, 2003, p. 146). Taking actions of *wuwei* is timely when more actions are implemented by the logic of competition, audit, and control. Such technological domination and control for maintaining order only destroys the organic nature of society and generates “more deeply rooted disorder” (Clark, 1983, 82). School reform should not be made into a business model by adding more technological controls for the sake of advancing economic competitiveness through education. Rather, it will be more meaningful if decision makers take *wuwei*. Paradoxically, ideal leadership is not what a person pursues as Confucian teaching has taught, including benevolence, generosity, righteousness, and wisdom. Decision-makers are spontaneous leaders without

imposed goals and keep people content and simple. A good example of taking *wuwei* was observed in the Han Dynasty after the Qin dynasty had gone. Due to the Qin dynasty's cruel control of the people, Emperor Jing of the Han Dynasty requested that all officials at court and general people should recite *Tao-Te-Ching* regularly (Chan, 2000).

The paradox of *wuwei* enables educators and leaders to rethink the danger of “taking actions” (*youwei*) by projecting a future with fixed answers or predetermined goals. Wang-Pi, a well-known neo-Taoist, commented on *Tao-Te-Ching* and I end this paper by reminding of the importance of returning to Natural Law and not pursuing any efforts for achieving an artificial goal. Paraphrasing Chapter 47, Wang-Pi says, “If we know [Tao], we do not need to go out of doors [to know Tao]. If we do not know it, the further we go, the more beclouded we become” (Chan, 1963, p. 324). Wang-Pi's statement invites leaders to ponder if current school reform actions push students and educators into the chaos of being beclouded, which is worse than taking no action. Are we wandering around trying to find a single (false) solution, which leads educators and students to more difficulties and problems?

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Table 1

Specific Ideas about Wuwei Governance

	Taking non-action	Chapters		Taking non-action	Chapters
Returning to Nature	Being weak and soft	8, 22, 30, 39, 40, 52, 61, 76, 78	Effortless Action	Laissez-faire (Not undertaking activities; do not split; No use of technological conveniences)	28, 48, 57, 63, 80
	Non-assertive action or commanding orders	2, 32, 34, 37, 43, 47, 48, 56, 64		Vacuity, quietude, remaining sincere/careful	15, 16, 26, 45, 57, 61, 64
	No knowledge and desire of people. Make people dull	3, 5, 20, 37, 49, 57, 58, 65		Rejecting benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom	19, 38
	Keeping balance	77		Not wandering in pursuing knowing; self-knowing	33, 47, 71
	Discarding extremes	29		Not daring to conduct	73
	Selfless Action	No self-interest, no desire, no obsession		19, 34, 37, 56, 57, 64, 77	Less, timely intervention
Retreat after contribution		2, 10, 34, 51, 77	Knowing the opposite side; Take the opposite	13, 22, 36, 39, 42, 45, 52, 54, 61, 63, 69, 73	
Following peoples' ideas (heart)		49	Not contending; using men, not competing	8, 22, 30, 31, 66, 68, 81	
Humble, generous, good at providing		7, 66, 67, 70, 72, 81	Not making people feel difficult; fulfilling people's basic needs	3, 12, 20, 58, 60, 66, 72, 75	
Being frugal		59, 67	Preparing when a task is easy; knowing when to stop	15, 32, 44, 46, 63, 64	

Modified from Lee (2012), pp. 157-158.