

Traditional Public Schooling in the United States: A Brief History of Educational Change over Time

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Abstract

This paper offers a brief history of educational change and traditional secondary schooling in the United States with a focus on three distinct areas: the historical definition of a “traditional” public school in the United States, relevant educational change literature during pivotal and influential time periods in our nation's history, and finally secondary schools in particular. Using a historical lens, this research frames secondary school reform over time through movements in our nation's schools from the national push to cherish and teach all students in the classroom regardless of social standing based on the teachings of Horace Mann to present day accountability movements. In an effort to challenge traditional grammars of secondary schooling that inhibit or discourage innovative practices that support all students regardless of social standing, suggestions for meaningful, sustainable reform that consider the technical, cultural and political aspects of school change are made.

Keywords: public schools, history of schooling, educational change

Introduction

Historically, Americans have relied on the public school system to protect and institutionalize the democratic values of their states and local communities. The cornerstone of democracy in the United States is linked to education in schools “where we learn about the possible meanings of patriotism,” and “what it means to own one’s community and have a stake in its reputation” (Meier, 2002). A national push to cherish and teach all students in the classroom regardless of class or social standing commenced as early as 1779. In his ‘Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge’ (Spring 2004, p. 10); Thomas Jefferson advocated that all non- slave children receive at least three years of free schooling through public funding. Years later, in the 1830s, Horace Mann asserted that education was a natural right for every child and promoted taxation for public education. This movement to educate all children was motivated by the premise that through education, students could be identified as future democratic leaders and become productive citizens. If all children were educated in a similar fashion with a focus on civic responsibility, they would have a common pride and understanding of one another and contribute to their country in beneficial ways.

This paper offers a brief history of educational change and traditional secondary schooling in the United States. The research focuses on three distinct areas: the historical definition of a ‘traditional public school in the United States, relevant educational change literature, and finally secondary school change in particular considering the three necessary perspectives on school reform as a guide (House & McQuillan, 1998).

Historical definition of ‘traditional’ high schools in the United States

Michael Katz in his landmark study, *Class, Bureaucracy and Schools*, argues that by about 1880 the American school, “had acquired its fundamental structure and characteristics and that they have not altered since” (Katz, 1971, p. xix).

This consistency and regularity in the traits and structure of schools have over time “imprinted themselves on students, educators, and the public as the essential features of ‘real school’” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 7). According to Tyack and Cuban, the reasons for high schools’ intractability to change are often oversimplified. Apathy, ignorance, and inaction are blamed for slow responsiveness to reforms, but often educators and communities have their compelling reasons for maintaining the status quo. Aptly put, “If reformers have had their plans for schools, people in schools and local communities have had their own ways of dealing with reforms” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 7).

The cultural template of “real school” was set as the primary pattern of schooling during the early years of public schooling in the United States. Tyack and Cuban (1995) call this template the “traditional grammar of schooling.” The grammar of schooling is what teachers learned when they were students and what they replicate as educators. Changes that survive long-term are ones that either coincide with existing structures or may be considered ‘structural add-ons’ that are non-threatening to the overall ways of conducting business. Metz (1989), finding the similarity among American high schools striking and problematic, described what she and her colleagues found when entering a set of eight Midwestern metropolitan schools.

“There was little variation in school schedule and all schools had long hallways with nearly identical classrooms lined up along them. Class size and teachers’ normal assignment to meet five groups of students for instruction five times a week varied little. The scope and sequence of curriculum differed only in detail from school to school though a number of sections available in subjects like advanced foreign language or vocational education varied significantly. Students were expected to attend all their classes promptly every day. There were extracurricular activities after school, or occasionally during the last hour of the day” (p. 76).

These similarities create the template “real school.” Understanding the creation and history of this template sheds light on why reformers tend to pay little attention to the many contextual differences among schools and instead look at similarities; explaining why attempts to alter or change the existing grammar fall short.

Over time cultural beliefs, societal needs, and legal mandates shaped the traditional grammar of schooling into a powerful means of educating the masses, containing the predictability and comfort of what was perceived as “real school.” The history of American schools has demonstrated a push-pull between tradition and innovation. This pendulum swing between traditional structures and values and progressive approaches and ideals tended to favor traditional structures in the long-term. Outliers and pockets of innovative schools survived, but in large part, the secondary structure held on to its traditional defining features for over 150 years. It was tuition free, district based, with four grades and a focus on key subject areas (Cuban, 1984).

According to Tyack and Cuban (1995), the grammar of schooling is characterized by several key factors. First, traditional high schools are public, tuition free and for all students. They are district based and controlled by the local or state governments. Students are divided into self-contained classrooms within four separate grades (i.e., first-year, sophomore, junior, senior). There is a focus on core subject areas, generally math, English, science and history with a set amount of time dedicated to each. Teachers belong to specified departments. Classrooms are teacher-centered. A final feature of the traditional grammar of school is that grades are given for each class and Carnegie Units reward students upon each course completion. A Carnegie Unit, as defined by Henry Pritchett, founder of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, contains five periods weekly over an academic year (Cuban, 1995).

To gain a more thorough understanding of traditional high schooling in the United States and the reasons for the long-term dominance of the traditional grammar of schooling, it is helpful to first consider its history, beginning with its origins in the 1890s with the influence of higher education. Secondly, with a historical underpinning in place, the three perspectives in creating educational change and reform will be explored – political, cultural, and technological. “An adequate understanding of school reform necessarily involves all three perspectives, though many reformers emphasize only one, a partial knowledge which often results in reform failure because of neglect of the other powerful factors” (House & McQuillan, 1998, p. 198). This is a useful framework for organizing the extensive educational change literature and provides a more thorough and comprehensive definition of the grammar of schooling from all three perspectives.

The origins of traditional secondary schools

Prior to the late 1800s, schools were small and highly localized and provided education predominantly to elite white males. It was not until the late 1800s that the structure of American high schooling as we know it today began to take form, and it has not changed considerably since.

Characterizations of contemporary secondary schooling generally begin with mandated public schooling for all white males, as it was not really until the 1930s that women and minorities became involved (Katz, 1987).

In the 1850s, the small schoolroom was gradually supplanted by the public high school. Public high schools were initially built in urban areas to strengthen democracy, advance prosperity, and control the masses (Katz, 1971). They needed to accommodate the large numbers of students who could no longer be contained in small schoolhouses. Children were often unattended and misbehaving in the rapidly growing cities. Public schools were seen as an answer to this growing problem (Mintz, 2004; Thelin, 2004). This switch to a larger, more bureaucratic form of schooling spread into the rural areas of the country towards the latter part of the century. There was a wide range of socio-economic levels among students in the public schools and students were generally placed in one of two tracks. Students of wealth, generally Caucasian boys received a collegiate, classical track of education that prepared them for college. Students of lower socio-economic levels followed an English (British Language Arts) curriculum that trained them for vocations such as business and mechanics (Angus & Mirel, 1999).

In addition to different curriculum tracks, the structures of individual schools were diverse and decided upon by local school boards and citizens. There were no universal standards to follow. Colleges did not have a huge influence at this time on high schools, although some of the latter may have geared coursework towards fulfilling college requirements (Angus & Mirel, 1999). Towards the end of the century, educational elites, wanting directly to influence educational policy and practice, launched a massive study and consequent document detailing guidelines to create a “general uniformity in school programmes and in requirements for admission to college” (Eliot et al., 1893, p. 1930; Reese, 2005).

The Committee of Ten

This significant document called *The Report of the Committee of Ten on Secondary School Studies* was the first notable attempt at control over local lay boards of education through the ‘professionalization of curricular planning’ (Angus & Mirel, 1999, p. 9). Andrew Carnegie, the inventor of the Carnegie Unit, funded the research conducted by the Committee of Ten. It set the scaffolding for the powerful influence of today’s contemporary colleges on secondary schools. In 1892, an elite Committee of Ten was chosen and appointed by 60 members of the National Educational Association (NEA). Principal Oscar D. Robinson was the only member from a high school, albeit a wealthy, elite high school in Albany, NY. The rest were a mixed contingency of educational leaders including Charles W. Eliot, the President of Harvard University; William T. Harris, Commissioner of Education; James B. Angell, President of the University of Michigan; John Tetlow, Head Master of the Girls’ High School and the Girls’ Latin School; James M. Taylor, President of Vassar College; James H. Baker, President of the University of Colorado and Chair of the NEA; Richard H. Jesse, President of the University of Missouri; James C. MacKenzie, Head Master of the Lawrenceville School; and Henry C. King, Professor in Oberlin College.

The Committee of Ten set up 10 task forces that they named ‘committees’ (Eliot et al., 1893, p. 1932) to give counsel on nine chosen subject areas including: “(1) Latin; (2) Greek; (3) English; (4) other modern languages; (5) mathematics; (6) physics, astronomy and chemistry; (7) natural history (biology, including botany, zoology and physiology); (8) history, civil government, and political economy; (9) geography (physical geography, geology, and meteorology)” (Eliot et al., 1893, p. 1932). In addition to researching basic questions such as which subjects should be offered and how much time should be allotted to them, the Committee asked more considerable questions.

One issue concerned whether school subjects should, “be treated differently for pupils who are going to college, for those who are going to scientific school, and for those who, presumably, are going to neither” (Eliot et al., 1893, p. 1933). Another concerned the best practices in methods of teaching and testing. It was decided unanimously that all students, regardless of career path, should be taught the same curriculum in the same manner. This was in direct contradiction to past practices in Europe that treated college bound and vocational track students in very different ways.

The Committee stated that “every subject which is taught at all in a secondary school should be taught in the same way and to the same extent to every pupil so long as he pursues it, no matter what the probable destination of the pupil may be, or at what point his education is to cease” (Eliot et al., 1893, p. 1935).

Although the Committee stated in their report that individual schools would have some freedom in their curriculum, there was little space left for them to do so. A required focus on “the main lines” (Eliot et al., 1893, p. 1938), (i.e., language, science, history, and mathematics) with equal instruction time given to each of these subjects alongside a standard number of 20 weekly periods with “at least five of the twenty periods...given to unprepared work...” (Eliot et al., 1893, p. 1940), would make it difficult for schools to find time for courses deemed less valuable by the committee. Students could substitute some courses for others, but these options were generally contained within the major subject areas (i.e., bookkeeping for arithmetic).

The Committee recognized that not all schools were immediately capable of achieving their proposed model and suggested that schools use the report as a guide to consider “a standard towards which secondary schools should tend; and not a standard to which they can at once conform” (Eliot et al., 1893, p. 1937). This ‘standard’ was their prerequisite for gaining access to college. Although only a small percentage of students went to college at this time (as was readily acknowledged by the Committee,) the Committee believed that all students should complete the requirements for college in case they decided to attend, even if this decision was not made until late in their high school career. The British public school movement of the 1830s influenced the concept of state supported and state-supervised schooling (Goodson, 1988).

“By the twentieth century [in England] the batch production rhetoric of the “classroom system” (for example, lessons, subjects, timetables, grading, standardization, streaming) had become so pervasive that it successfully achieved a normative status...The sequential curriculum, primarily organized in subjects has been, since the emergence of the classroom system, a vital prop in substantiating this dominant version of schooling” (Goodson, 1988, p. 8).

In many ways, the Report of the Committee of Ten resembles the climate of standardization our schools face today. Historians Angus and Mirel (1999) refer to this document as “the first and only ‘back to basics’ movement led by professional educators” (p. 10) as there was a clear focus on core subjects including math, science, English and history. The courses deemed most valuable in this document are the same as today, with the exceptions of Greek and Latin. In addition, the Committee of Ten set a standard for high schools to strive for, understanding that it may not be reached immediately but should be attained over time. This is similar to the current system of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) of the No Child Left Behind Act where schools must make yearly gains in basic subject testing or face severe consequences. The difference between the two was the amount of time given for reform. The Committee of Ten did not have a way to enforce their standard so their reform could be seen as highly flexible in comparison.

In today’s schools, students compete for access to prestigious colleges and universities. Gaining access to these institutions requires strength in coursework and testing in key subjects. Although huge strides have been made towards creating equity in the areas of social class, gender, race, and religion since the late 1890s, many schools are still drastically inadequate (Fink, 2000b; Metz, 1986; Stoll, Fink & Earl, 2003).

The pendulum

Both the Report of the Committee of Ten and educators in American schools today advance the premise that all students should be afforded an equal opportunity to a quality education. In the late 1800s, the motivation to provide free public education for all students came from surprisingly different groups.

On the one hand, socialist and liberal reformers wanted to decrease social inequities and improve living conditions for the urban poor. On the other hand, promoters of scientific management and business efficiency wanted to maintain order in the cities and train children to be useful and obliging citizens (Katz, 1987). Regardless of the motivation, the various groups reached the same conclusion - all students would be required to attend public schools. Furthermore, the reformers’ desire to help the poor and improve society led them to join the School Health Movement towards the beginning of the twentieth century.

Although the School Health Movement did not alter the overall structure of schooling, it did add to the purpose and responsibilities of the schools. It was clear that children could not learn if their basic needs were not met.

Food, good health and hygiene were vital to learning. Despite this knowledge, the decision for schools to take on this massive responsibility was not taken lightly. According to Reese (2002), the debate between reformers was many-sided, “At every turn, the possibility of feeding starving or poorly nourished children at public expense raised a host of competing ideas: parental versus school responsibilities, socialist versus capitalist perspectives on the social order, and the rights of the child and the state” (p. 189).

The debate as to the extent of responsibility of public schools has continued throughout the history of schooling in the United States. The School Health Movement raised the issue of health care that led to an extended debate over mandatory vaccinations. During this time, schools also added the responsibility of providing vocational counseling for students. Contemporary public schools have taken on all of the responsibilities and more of the past. They are expected to teach an array of competitive courses from basic subject areas to languages, drama, art, music, and computer; provide health and safety courses; keep children physically and mentally competitive; create law-abiding and democratic citizens; and compete successfully with all of the nations of the globe.

The Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education

In 1918, 25 years after the Committee of Ten set standards for college admission, the NEA wrote *The Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*, to reflect the increasing democratic involvement of the country and accommodate the massive population growth in public schools. This document was in large part meant as a rebuttal to the Report of the Committee of Ten. Indeed, its principles did not even mention the academic disciplines and mental development of schooling that was so evident in Eliot’s document, but instead focused on teaching citizenry, patriotism, behavior, and morality. The Cardinal Principles included: health, command of fundamental processes, worthy home membership, vocation, citizenship, worthy use of leisure, and ethical character (Raubinger, Sumption, & Kamm, 1974). Writing, reading, oral and written expression, and math were lumped under the second principle of ‘command of fundamental processes’ and it was decided that they should be taught using newer material instead of using old traditions (i.e., English curriculum).

The Cardinal Principles, in direct contrast to the Report of the Committee of Ten, saw teaching higher-level learning and preparing all children for college as unnecessary. According to the proponent of the Cardinal Principles, the scholarly curriculum of the Committee of Ten led students away from the vocations and professions for which they should be tailored. The authors of the Cardinal Principles felt that they were being more reflective of the changing society and allowed educators to adapt to the needs of individual students through differentiated learning. In addition, they were confronting the elitist value system portrayed by Eliot and the academics working with him. The NEA supported their claims with research by leading thinkers such as John Dewey that followed a curriculum of education for life.

The Progressive Movement

Dewey and his supporters viewed schools as agents for society to ensure the ideal of democracy³². To Eliot’s opponents, such as G. Stanley Hall, it was necessary to teach the social significance and utilitarianism of a lesson in a spontaneous and open-ended manner based on the interests and needs of the students, and not to teach for standardization and utility³³. Dewey believed that the educational system at the time was “highly specialized, one-sided and narrow...and...dominated almost entirely by the mediaeval conception of learning” (Dewey, 1932).

Interestingly, the teachings and writings of John Dewey did not support either side entirely. Dewey felt the Committee of Ten was encouraging antiquated teaching styles that provided little utility for children in real life. But he did not believe in maintaining the current power system either. In fact, he felt educators should create settings where people of different and diverse lives could work together towards a common understanding, thereby constructing a more democratic society (Eliot et al., 1983). He argued that separating social classes or favoring one over another would be a major disservice to all socio-economic levels.

“In order to have a large number of values in common, all the members of the group must have an equal opportunity to receive and to take from others. There must be a large variety of shared undertakings and experiences” (Dewey, 1944, p. 84).

Dewey sought to break down the barriers of class, and race through dialogue and finding common interests, giving “individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder” (Dewey, 1944, p. 99).

As in the late 1800s and early 1900s, we are still struggling to break down the barriers of race and class in society. Determining the purpose of public schools remains difficult as they are the places to teach socialization, patriotism, equality of opportunity, morality, racial and cultural harmony, health, nutrition, and of course the basic skills of math, science, history and English. The quest for a balance between nurturing the individual and the good of society persists today.

The Cardinal Principles

The Report of the Committee of Ten, the Cardinal Principles for Secondary Schooling, the Health School Movement and the teachings of John Dewey are starting points for understanding today's traditional secondary schooling. Schools are the first place people turn to for solutions to societal problems. The expectations placed on the public schools are massive and multifaceted.

The Cardinal Principals were at the inception of the progressive movement in American education and challenged the traditional grammar of schooling more than any other movement. Although the progressive movement did not change the overall structure of secondary schools in the long-term, it did challenge core practices of traditional schooling, predominantly, the value of favoring key subject areas such as math, English, science, and history. Progressives rejected traditional beliefs such as: preserving an academic focus, maintaining a set daily schedule, evaluating programs through testing, and teacher-centered classrooms (Ravitch, 1983). By the 1940s, the progressive movement gained so much strength that it was no longer referred to as a 'movement' but as 'good educational practice' (Cremin, 1989).

Progressives believed that the main goal of school should be socialization and therefore should be reflective of real life in society. A popular proponent of progressive education was William Heard Kilpatrick. He believed that teaching should evolve from the interests of the students in the classroom (Ravitch, 1993) and not from textbooks or pre-planned lessons. Proposing that social utilitarianism outweighed academic rigor, he encouraged practices such as girls playing with dolls in the classroom to further their maternal skills (Ravitch, 2001).

Perhaps one of the biggest setbacks to this movement was from John Dewey, the patriarch of the movement (Dewey, 1938). In *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1938) clarified his stance regarding the ongoing debate between traditional and progressive education. He argued that going from one extreme to another was not the solution. He disagreed with the absence of textbooks in the progressive classroom, "Books, especially textbooks, are the lore and wisdom of the past, while teachers are the organs through which pupils are brought into effective connection with the material" (Dewey, 1938, p. 18).

Dewey (1938) stated that while he supported the general philosophy of the progressive movement, he felt that it was in many ways a negative reaction to the stifling traditional ways of the past - not an original contribution. He further stated that the moral and well-meaning ideals of the movement were not always translated into moral practice. "There is always the danger in a new movement that in rejecting the aims and methods of that which it would supplant, it may develop its principles negatively rather than positively or constructively. Then it takes its clew in practice from that which is rejected instead of from the constructive development of its own philosophy" (p. 20).

As dissatisfaction and opposition grew, the pendulum of change began to swing back towards the traditional grammar of schooling. Criticism of the progressive movement ranged from disagreement based on philosophical grounds, to curricular deficiencies, and even materials that promoted sinister communist plots (Ravitch, 2001). According to Ravitch, the main reason for the fall of the progressive movement was that the schools did not grow with the changing times. Proponents of the movement did not recognize the negative social implications of tracking students into academic, general and vocational routes. As the concept of meritocracy grew more popular throughout the century, tracking students into their future professions fell out of favor.

Katz (1971) contends that a major weakness in the progressive movement was that pedagogical changes were not in alignment with the overall structure of schools. For the long-term success of progressive education, efforts needed to be directed towards breaking down the bureaucratic nature of schools and confronting the political power structure that aligns itself with incipient bureaucracy (Katz, 1971; Sarason, 1990). Dewey created a model school but offered few suggestions on how "to deal with the relationship between the structure of school systems and the content of education" (Katz, 1971, p. 119).

Dewey was aware of the impediments and described the structure as “something comparatively external and indifferent to educational purposes and ideals” (Dewey, 1902, p. 22), and suggested that educators consider this in their reform efforts.

Tyack and Cuban agree that progressive reformers did not focus on convincing the general public to question existing norms regarding the grammar of schooling, but instead gave their attention to their peers already enthusiastic towards the movement. “Concentrating on convincing their professional peers, they did not cultivate the kind of broader social movement that might nourish educational and social change. Failure to enlist the support and ideas of the community was especially harmful to fundamental reforms that violated the public’s notions of real school” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 108).

By the 1950s, the debate between traditional and progressive education was coming to a close. The progressive movement did survive in pockets of schools, particularly in the lower grades; and some popular curricular practices such as cooperative learning and student-centered learning are frequently used in today’s schools. Even though some aspects of the progressive movement were integrated into the broad curriculum, the overall bureaucratic structure of schools persisted due in part to the necessary and increasing role the federal government would take in public schooling.

The role of the federal government

In 1957, the Russians launched the satellite Sputnik. The traditional grammar of schooling regained dominance in the schools as fear increased over the nations’ global competitiveness. Conservatives blamed the social efficiency and progressive ideals for the supposed dismal state of the public schools and this blame continued through the 1970s and 1980s (Spring, 2004). A large-scale program in math and science ensued (Angus & Mirel, 1999; Spring, 2004). Through the National Defense Education Act, (1958) the federal government provided a billion dollars in direct aid to education to apply towards math, science and foreign languages.

Sputnik was a catalyst for the federal government to become more involved with education and regulate nonstandard modes of schooling. Until 1957, the schools were run at the state and local levels; therefore there were opportunities for some, particularly in rural areas, to break the mold of the traditional grammar of schooling. Rural schools had more freedom in their structure and curriculum than city schools as they were smaller in size and managed by their surrounding local communities. By the 1950s, even the small grammar schools came under attack by the promoters of bureaucracy, calling for centralization and accountability among the nations’ schools in the name of global competitiveness (Katz, 1987).

Promoters of incipient bureaucracy directly attacked the inefficiency and inadequacy of democratic localism in the *Coleman Report of 1959* (Conant, 1959). The report, sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation was titled *The American High School Today*. The enrollment and diversity in the nations’ schools increased following the Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) that declared racial segregation unconstitutional. As the schools became the panacea for carrying out desegregation, the necessity for creating equitable institutions at a rapid pace promoted the benefits of bureaucracy. James Conant, the lead author of the Carnegie Report recommended merging smaller high schools into large entities, with senior classes containing a minimum of 100 students (Graham, 2005). According to Conant, these large schools would be more capable of handling the rapidly changing demographics in an efficient manner. As the former President of Harvard University, Conant also wanted high schools to offer College Entrance Examination Boards’ advanced placement classes and tests in an effort to locate strong college applicants. This was a precursor to the current climate of standardization where students are tested and ranked on a national scale.

The federal government has continued its involvement with the nation’s schools since this time. During the Reagan administration in 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education published *A Nation at Risk* (1983) calling for more rigorous academic standards. *A Nation at Risk* appealed to the traditional grammar of schooling, gearing to bring back the basics in instruction as introduced almost 100 years prior by the Committee of Ten. Blaming American schools for economic decline in the United States, the report stated that there was a “desperate need for increased support for the teaching of mathematics and science” (p. 8). It further elaborated: “This movement is but a start on what we believe is a larger and more educationally encompassing need to improve teaching and learning in fields such as English, history, geography, economics, and foreign languages” (p. 8).

This alarming report was highly influential in leading to national standards and gaining compliance and amalgamation from districts and schools straying from the traditional grammar of schooling. It was also during this time that the movement to privatize schooling began through creating a voucher system that gave businesses more control of education (Baptiste et al., 2005).

Recent reauthorizations of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*; President Bush's *Goals 2000*, linking schools to the global economy; and *The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002* have in many ways strengthened the grammar of schooling. The frequent testing of content knowledge in core subject areas is required during specific years of high schooling, cementing graded schooling, and maintaining specialized subjects with a focus on math, English, science and history. Since *The Report of the Committee of Ten on Secondary School Studies* in 1893, there have been challenges to traditional structures, but over time the pendulum repeatedly swings back to favor the grammar of schooling. The rise of industrialization combined with the contradictory values of protecting the individual and producing citizens renders change difficult (Katz, 1971).

From a political standpoint, the swinging pendulum continues, as reform tends to follow those currently in power. Angus and Mirel (1993) state "Americans need to recognize that the very partisan nature of the current educational controversies can have a devastating impact on efforts to achieve significant educational change" (p. 2). They support a bi-partisan approach to educational reform that builds "support for less extreme but clearly effective methods" (p. 2), thus shortening the back and forth swings of the pendulum and moving reform in a more direct path.

Some educators do not view reform as inherently political and take a more technological stance, blaming reform failure on poor implementation. Still others feel that ineffective consideration of the culture and context of individual schools is the main problem. Consideration of political, technological, and cultural viewpoints is necessary to gain a holistic understanding of the fate of educational change and reform. Regardless of the viewpoint, enduring change cannot survive without challenging both the system and questioning long-term assumptions.

Long-term intractability to change in secondary schools

It is necessary to consider the technological, political and cultural underpinnings when implementing a reform, particularly when the reform challenges long held assumptions and values and existing power structures. House and McQuillan's (1998) three perspectives on school reform may serve as a guide to examine the complexities of educational change.

Historically, reform efforts that challenged the traditional grammar of schooling in the United States failed in the long-term. Technological reasons motivated by industrialization and the need to educate the masses in an effective and efficient manner solidified the grammar and weakened less efficient reform efforts. Political pressures to demonstrate accountability to the public encouraged the division and testing in core subject areas, thereby discouraging creativity in grading, and curriculum planning. Finally, the comfort of the grammar of schooling exerted a pull on the cultural perspective. Challenging the long held cultural template of 'real school' was perhaps the biggest obstacle facing reformers.

Conventional secondary schools experience pressure from various internal and external sources to maintain traditional structures and the combination of these pressures makes the process of change difficult. According to House and McQuillan (1998) the majority of literature on educational reform may be considered from technological, cultural, or political viewpoints. To gain a complete and thorough understanding of change in schools, it is paramount to understand each individual perspective as well as the interrelationship and connection among them. The authors explain that often one of the reasons for failed change efforts is that reformers do not fully consider all three.

The technological perspective

Research in the field of educational change from a technological perspective considers both the technical and systematic execution of reform and how the structure of schools affects that execution. "The technological perspective takes production as its root image or metaphor. Examples include concepts like input-output, specification of goals and tasks, flow diagrams, incentives, and performance assessment. How to do the job is the dominant concern" (House & McQuillan, 1998).

Current research maintains that the size and bureaucratic complexity of high schools renders change difficult (Katz, 1971; Tyack & Cuban, 1995); and at the school level, this includes the balkanization of specific subject areas (Hargreaves, 2003). Some other technological reasons given for the lack of change in high schools are: the rapid, numerous, and often contradictory waves of reform imposed on secondary schools (Hargreaves, 2003; Sarason, 1990); poor implementation of reforms (Datnow, Hubbard & Mehan, 2002); high leadership and staff turnover rates before reforms can be inculcated into the culture (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006); and lack of system thinking (Fullan, 2007; Sarason, 1990).

Educators are often not given the time, resources and professional development to build the capacity to achieve desired outcomes. This is especially the case in large-scale reforms with compulsory standards and high pressure for compliance. According to Richard Elmore (2000), “Stakes, if they work at all, do so by mobilizing resources, capacities, knowledge, and competencies that by definition are not present in the organizations and individuals whom they are intended to affect. If the schools have these assets in advance of the stakes, they would presumably not need the stakes to mobilize them” (p. 18). Until the preconditions for reform are in place and there is a fundamental investment in and restructuring of teachers’ work (Gitlin, 1995) so that they are given the time, opportunity and training to make choices for their own schools and students, it is likely that schools will continue to be intractable to change.

The cultural perspective

Research from a cultural perspective addresses the human side of change, such as habits, meanings, and perspectives and how they relate to factors such as age, generation, and years of teaching experience. The cultural perspective “rests on an image of community. Central concepts include culture, values, shared meanings, and social relationships...the primary concern is cultural integrity” (House & McQuillan, 1998, p. 198).

Many reasons for the lack of change in secondary schools are cultural, such as the impact of reform on teachers in various career stages (Bailey, 2000; Hargreaves, 1994; Huberman, 1989; Riseborough, 1981) and generational resistance to change (Hargreaves, 1994; Lortie, 1975). The comfort of the status quo and maintaining institutional images of normality is powerful and often prevails (Metz, 1990; Meyer & Rowan, 1977), particularly in schools with a long history of subscribing to the grammar of schooling. Within these schools, veteran teachers are a powerful force for retaining long-standing practices due to years of teaching experience in traditional classrooms (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Habit and memory may result in feelings of anxiety towards reforms outside of existing ideologies and structures (Hargreaves, 2001).

Schools with uncollaborative cultures, lack of support, lack of capacity or the inability to build capacity (Elmore, 2000) may contribute to feelings of instability and distrust regarding reform efforts. In addition, many reform efforts do not include teachers in policy making (Heifetz, 2002). This is often the case with large-scale reform efforts, where schools must comply with top-down scientifically based curriculum requirements (Datnow et al., 2002). Research describing rapid leadership and staff turnover, particularly when there is a loss of a charismatic leader (Fink, 2000b), demonstrates the difficulties schools encounter sustaining positive change. Innovative schools that challenge traditional grammars are especially prone to setbacks when new leaders fails to renew the vision of their predecessors (Fink, 2000a; Hargreaves & Goodson, 2003; Sarason, 1990). Smith and Keith (1971) discovered that weak community ties and inaccurate public perceptions contributed to difficulties in their study of an innovative school named Kensington School. The ‘formalized doctrine’ of the school or ‘cloaking of organizational activities’ kept structures and practices from external view. This led to inaccurate public perceptions and the school could not maintain public support from one principal to the next.

In ingrained traditional cultures, teachers hold to their practices by teaching the way they were taught as students (Britzman, 2003; Lortie, 1975). Often teachers experiment with new techniques and practices within their first few years of teaching but return to the way that provides them with the most comfort and sense of productivity (Britzman, 2003). Teachers who worked in places with “powerful norms of privacy and unchallenged sacred principles or personal beliefs” (Little, 1994, p. 99) never received the critical feedback and introduction to new ideas and practices necessary to renew and reflect upon their teaching. Their learning reached a plateau and their practice continued unchanged and unchallenged for many years. These teachers also tended to become angry and cynical towards new ideas since their norms were so ingrained in their classrooms.

Professional development that allowed time for the veteran teachers to question the benefits and weaknesses of their existing practices did not occur.

The balkanized structures of high schools or the division of subjects into separate areas leads to balkanized and isolated cultures. The structural separation of groups creates subcultures, making communication infrequent and teaching cross-departmentally difficult. The traditional practice of dividing time and space by subject area also has a measurable impact on cultures in schools. Subjects and departments become fragmented, and teachers often view things from the standpoint of their subject area (Hargreaves, 1994). These subcultures or subject identities make it difficult to achieve a common meaning or vision within the overall organization, impeding sustainable change efforts and reform.

The political perspective

In addition to the emotional side of maintaining the comfort and convention of the grammar of schooling, there is political pressure for compliance to preserve and revert to existing structures. The political perspective “takes negotiation as its underlying image. Key concepts include power, authority, and competing interests...and the primary concern the legitimacy of the authority system” (House & McQuillan, 1998, p. 198). Reformers who interpret educational change and reform in a school or system from the political perspective may frame problems or successes as an issue of centralization or decentralization. As the authors point out, reformers may have a consensus that an issue is political, but they may disagree on a course of action.

Political reasons such as prior assumptions and beliefs about ability and tracking (Oakes & Lipton, 2002), defense of unearned privilege, and the ignored realities of unfair advantages among the nations’ schools (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lareau, 1999; Metz, 1986) all contribute to the lack of change in secondary schools. Schools encounter macro political issues such as federal and state standardization mandates and micro political issues such as lack of and internal power struggles between departments, administrators and teachers. These internal and external power struggles add to the complexity of implementing change and reform in schools.

Macro-political pressure to preserve traditional grammars can take many forms, the most recent and well-known being standardization. Recent waves of reform have pressured schools to follow traditional practices (Hargreaves, 2003) by leading towards business led school reform (Cuban, 1984). Compelled to gain quick results on test scores in core subjects such as math and English, school leaders and teachers often gear lessons toward the basics and forego innovative practices (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Sergiovanni, 2000). Although the implementation of a reform is technical, the reform and its anticipated result are often politically motivated with the purpose to either maintain or challenge existing structures.

Within the micro-politics of the school itself, many teachers maintain vested interests in their individual subject areas. This is strengthened by the structural balkanization of subjects. The traditional grammar tends to favor core subjects as represented by large-scale reform efforts such as the recent No Child Left Behind Act. As a result, more focus is placed on math, English, science and history. This creates a hierarchy of subjects, leaving subjects like art, music, and foreign languages less valued. Micro-politics have a significant effect on the lives of teachers and administrators in schools.

Blase (1990) found that control-oriented principals often use “protective political strategies and tactics” (p. 727) to wield power and manipulate teachers and this has a negative impact on crucial aspects of teachers’ work. Ball (1987) reported that principals belonged to one of three major ‘control’ styles – interpersonal, managerial, and political/authoritarian. The authoritarian type principals used seclusion, secrecy, and concealment as tactics for control and more adversarial principals used more public forms of persuasion. The effects of their manipulations had differing effects on teachers. Teachers who were happy with the current division of power were satisfied with their principals, but teachers unhappy with the current system became either pessimistic or despondent from attempting change. Micro politics can have a positive influence on teachers’ work as well. Strong political leadership has been linked to effective teaching such as increased creativity and risk taking among teachers, a more active stance advocating for students, and shared governance (Blasé, 1998).

The political perspective entails negotiation, group conflict and compromise, power and authority, and conflict over interests (House & McQuillan, 1998). The most public of the three perspectives, it has the largest span of influence but should not be exclusively considered.

The three perspectives collectively

House and McQuillan (1998) explain that school reforms fail in part because they ignore, neglect, or are unable to control forces related to all three perspectives. “Purely technological reforms fail because they lack adequate consideration of political and cultural factors. Purely political reforms fail because they lack appreciation of technical and cultural factor, and so on” (p. 199). They explain that reformers want to create broad appeal for reform efforts and are thus inclined to impart simplistic and one-dimensional views of complex problems.

Central Park East in District 4, East Harlem, founded by Debbie Meier, is a successful reform story in the United States. The reforms implemented by Meier and her community have shown lasting and sustainable results, in part due to their consideration of all three perspectives of reform. Because the school is small, faculty can work collegially and collaboratively on integral decisions and keep the innovative school culture a high priority. Only student and teacher volunteers willing to take on all aspects of the reform are invited to be a part of the reforms, alleviating much political conflict. On the technological side, teachers are required to do substantial professional development and the practice of viewing each other’s work and providing critical feedback encourages constant learning (House & McQuillan, 1998).

Conclusion

This paper described the beginnings of public school and traditional high schooling. Since the 1982 Committee of Ten scaffolding of “the main lines” (Eliot et al., 1983, p. 1938) of core curriculum, little has changed in secondary schooling design and structure. The proposed model was strongly challenged by the Cardinal Principles in 1918, and the Progressive Movement in the 1930s and 1940s. Sputnik (1957) and *A Nation at Risk* (1983) brought the pendulum back to favor the traditional grammar of schooling. The reform efforts that challenged traditional structures and ways have historically failed. House and McQuillan’s (1983) three perspectives of reform offer an explanation for the failure of reforms that fall outside of the traditional, existing structures.

Providing a brief history of secondary schooling in the United States, this paper focused on three areas. The first part of this research provided a historical and working definition of a ‘traditional’ public school in the United States. The second shared a background on related educational change literature.

The third area focused on change in secondary schools in particular, using the three perspectives of school reform as a framework to understand the pendulum of reform over time in schools as well as the reasons for high schools’ intractability to change (House & McQuillan, 1998).

American schools have revealed a continuous imbalance of power that has proved sluggish to rectify since the formation of public schooling. Educational elites decided the direction of the educational future and often choices were made to perpetuate existing power relationships (Eliot et al., 1893; Sarason, 1990; Spring, 2004; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). These elites received support from industry such as urban mechanics and industrial workers under the premise of the common school movement and the desire to create schools that could support the masses. From the conception of common schooling to present times, the nation has struggled to create a truly equitable system. Its failures are revealed by the achievement gap among students, unequal school facilities, and unqualified teachers and staff in many low socio-economic areas. A large-scale solution to the problems in schools remains to be found. Understanding the complex political, technological, and cultural reasons for secondary schools to choose and maintain traditional structures and values is key to sustaining future change and reform initiatives, particularly those that challenge traditional grammars.

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