

Life as Education and the Irony of School Reform

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Abstract *Alternative philosophies and forms of education – particularly those that blur the boundaries of time, space, and subject – have much to offer institutional schooling. Unfortunately, dominant reform movements in the United States advocate a simplistic, prescriptive form of schooling that relies on narrow notions of what it means to be educated and how to measure it. The constant upheaval of new programs and practices, while perhaps offering the appearance of reform, is ultimately counterproductive; the best schools cultivate a consistent, long-term vision for improvement based on relationships, consistency, and persistence. Efforts to provide a more individualized learning experience for students are praiseworthy, but should take care not to abandon the common school vision of cultivating a shared sense of the common good.*

Keywords reform, testing, interdisciplinary, policy, civic, homeschooling, home education

Introduction

In the United States these days, advocating school reform is akin to endorsing patriotism: almost everyone can get behind the idea in the abstract. Few people will claim that schools don't need to improve, and those who resist the latest reform efforts are typically demagogued as defenders of the "status quo." Politicians call for school reform as readily as they affix flag pins to their lapels.

This journal is about educational alternatives – different forms of education, and different visions of what it means to be educated. We have entered an era, I believe, when institutional schooling has enormous potential to draw from such alternatives. Yet much of the dominant school reform agenda is pushing us in the opposite direction: emphasizing an ever-narrower vision of what it means to be educated, how to make it happen, and how to measure it.

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A journal devoted to the exploration of educational alternatives has an invitingly broad canvas with which to work, and it certainly needn't entail the framing of institutional schooling in opposition to such alternatives. All sorts of "other education" thrive in a world where institutional schooling is the norm; a thousand educational flowers can bloom and coexist. At the same time, however, some forms and visions of education will merit critique – particularly when those visions threaten to crowd out worthy alternatives. My primary purpose in this essay is to suggest how we might re-envision and re-form institutional schooling while avoiding the dangers of these dominant school reform efforts.

Reform Idols

Over the past decade, private foundations have begun to dictate the public conversation about schooling in profound and unprecedented ways (Barkan, 2011; Sawchuk, 2012). They often employ the rhetoric of crisis, despite the fact that many of the problems they identify – the correlation of poverty and low test scores, disproportionate dropout rates among marginalized student populations, inexperienced teachers in the poorest schools – are historical patterns we have endured for generations (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Phillips et al., 1998; Rothstein, 2010). Convening blue-ribbon panels, issuing white papers, and directing huge sums of money to favored causes, these private groups exert growing influence over the way society perceives its schools.

One such group, the Fordham Foundation, sponsors an annual "Reform Idol" contest. Modeled after the popular television show *American Idol*, the event features a question-and-answer session with top education officials from several U.S. states, in search of the "Reformiest State." The implication here, of course, is that the more reform you have, the better. The more you shake up the status quo and end "business-as-usual," the better. Reform itself *becomes* the idol, and operates as a self-justifying rationale: disrupting the system, forcing teachers and administrators to change the way they work, qualifies as a good unto itself.

But reform is not an unalloyed good, and change can make things worse just as easily as it makes things better. Policymakers and reform advocates who manufacture endless streams of programs, recommendations, and regulations – with the apparent strategy that if we try ten new ideas, one might work – lack sufficient appreciation for the literal costs of time and the psychic costs of reform fatigue. A favorite refrain of many teachers, when confronted by the latest and greatest reform initiative, is "This too shall pass." Contrary to the suspicions of reformers, this perspective typically doesn't stem from laziness or an unwillingness to try new approaches. Rather, it is a recognition by veteran educators that many of the most complex, persistent dilemmas of schooling are not going to be solved by the next program or technique; instead, the best schools cultivate a consistent, long-term vision for improvement based on relationships, consistency, and persistence.

Meaningful reform requires time, measured not in the quarterly or even annual reports of the business world; even more crucially, reform must match the school context, developed collaboratively with those who will implement it.

So we need to pay attention to language, reminding ourselves and others that while “reform” might *imply* improvement, it’s essentially a Rorschach inkblot that means different things to different people. I have been struck by the number of terms and concepts that have been effectively co-opted by those with a particularly narrow view of reform: “student achievement” is now used by policymakers, politicians, journalists, superintendents, and even school administrators as a synonym for standardized test scores. Likewise, the terms “growth” and “progress” have become associated with No Child Left Behind mandates for yearly improvement on test scores. These rhetorical losses are a big deal – *language matters*. When these terms become unthinking references to test scores, then cultivating a public discourse around educational quality more broadly becomes a far more daunting task.

Reform can become not only a conceptual straightjacket, but an operational one as well. Consider the current fixation with numbers among school reformers: test scores, value-added measures, and data-driven instruction. Who wouldn’t want to make evaluations of quality and instructional decisions based on data and evidence? But there’s a profound difference between decisions informed by numbers and decisions made by numbers. Many vital facets of school and educational quality are extraordinarily difficult – if not impossible – to quantify. A recent initiative of the Gates Foundation aimed at measuring student engagement comes to mind here (Simon, 2012). Researchers have been awarded \$1.6 million in grants to explore student engagement via Galvanic Skin Response bracelets (which measure electrodermal activity) worn by students. Drawing a helpful link between the numbers produced by these bracelets and ideal instruction seems a tall order, to say the least. As one skeptical teacher mused, it seems relevant – and quite a delicate process to determine – whether students are stimulated by the lesson or an attractive classmate.

Even if we retain a certain degree of methodological humility in what we strive to measure, a fundamental danger remains. If we privilege such numerical data over all other sources of information and insight, and make decisions based primarily on what’s easy to quantify, we resemble the drunk who looks for his keys under the streetlamp because the light is better there.

As an example of this, my home state recently decided to assign each public school a single letter grade, drawn largely from students’ performances on standardized tests, as a way to inform the populace as to their relative quality. This reminds me of a scene from the 1989 movie *Dead Poets Society* (Haft et al, 1989), where the teacher lambasts the poetry-rating system described in the students’ textbooks: “We’re not laying pipe, we’re talking about poetry! How can you

describe poetry like American Bandstand? – ‘Well, I like Byron, I give him a 42, but I can’t dance to it.’” Schools are incredibly complex places, almost inevitably filled with a vast range of strengths and weaknesses. To have that complexity reduced to a single letter grade tells us so little about the quality of students’ experience as to be useless – except it’s worse than that. It also sends the message to schools that “if we can’t measure it with a number (or a letter), it doesn’t count.” One of the other metrics used in the grade calculation besides student test scores is the graduation rate – an empty measure of quality if ever there was one. Then the motivation becomes getting the students out the door, and time trumps learning.

Simplistic notions of time seem to dominate reform discourse, with politicians and policymakers staking the high ground of “higher standards” and “more rigor” with calls for longer school days and longer school years. Again, time becomes the pivotal metric, because increasing the amount of time in schools provides the surface-level reassurance that we’re serious about education.

But the irony here is that reforms such as these simply replace the status quo with another singularly prescriptive vision of schooling, a one-size-fits-all response to the daunting complexity of student needs, interests, and opportunities. I hope this journal will remind us regularly that there are many good ways to become educated – and many worthwhile visions of what it means to be educated as well. As learning options proliferate, these alternative methods, avenues, and visions become increasingly accessible – not only to those willing to step outside conventional schooling, but hopefully also to the majority of society for whom institutional schooling remains a practical reality.

Changing Our Grammar

So what prospects are there for such changes in schooling? In their historical analysis of U.S. public school reform, David Tyack and Larry Cuban (1995) observed that while policy talk and reform efforts are nothing new, changes that actually impact the fundamental “grammar of schooling,” the organization of schools and the shape of instruction, are remarkably rare. Certainly efforts to “raise standards” and demand “accountability” from teachers and students through high-stakes testing will do little to change the fundamental experience of schooling, beyond narrowing the formal curriculum to only what is tested (Morton & Dalton, 2007; Srikantiah, 2009). Even if current reformers succeed in efforts to dismantle public education in the United States, there is little evidence that what supplants it will be substantively different in form or function, at least at the level of the classroom.

Nevertheless, potential does exist to change the fundamental grammar of schooling, both in terms of its structure and its purpose. From my perspective, the most significant and potentially transformative shift in schooling is the way that

boundaries of space, time, and subject area are beginning to blur, creating the opportunity for us to re-form the very structure and vision of schooling.

While these changes are starting to occur in a variety of contexts, it may be instructive to consider – as an example, not necessarily a model – a form of education particularly well-suited for such a transformation: homeschooling. Emerging in the 1970s, modern homeschooling has experienced explosive growth over the past decade – particularly in the United States, but increasingly around the world as well (Aurini & Davies, 2005; Glenn & de Groof, 2002; Planty et al., 2009; Webb, 2011). Until recently, as its name suggests, homeschooling took place largely in the home, taught almost entirely by parents. Now, however, a common refrain among homeschool families is that there are more learning options than they can possibly accommodate in their schedule: homeschool co-ops, college and community classes, part-time public school enrollment, extracurriculars, and online learning have all made the “home” in homeschooling increasingly a misnomer.

Homeschool parents vary, of course, in how much they access resources outside the home. What also varies is how much their homeschooling environment resembles a conventional schoolroom: lessons given and received on a fixed schedule, pen-and-paper tests administered, grades recorded, and credits awarded. But many homeschoolers – particularly, it seems, those with more years of experience – view their homeschooling as an endeavor that extends beyond traditional schooling boundaries of time, place, and subject areas; the whole of life provides educational opportunities, oftentimes in more authentic and engaging contexts than conventional schooling can provide.

For all children, not just homeschoolers, there is obviously more to education than institutional schooling. Some learning experiences occur within other social structures, such as religious groups, service organizations, or athletic teams. Other types of education take place in far less formal settings, such as shopping excursions or dinner table conversations. It is no exaggeration to say that the whole of life can be educative for those attentive to its lessons. But a conventional notion of schooling – focused on counting time in school – maintains inflexible boundaries between itself and broader life-as-education.

Technology is obviously a central means by which these boundaries of space, time, and subject area begin to blur. Online learning – whether through self-directed exploration, formal coursework, or somewhere in between – can occur almost anywhere and at any time. But it’s important not to assume that the flexibility and access that technology provides will inevitably lead to changes in the grammar of schooling. Much of the breathless rhetoric and promises regarding technology overlooks this distinction. Giving every child a laptop, a tablet, an e-reader, a workstation instead of a desk – these are all just expensive and soon-obsolete gadgets if they are not accompanied by a broadening vision of what it means to be educated and an appreciation for the myriad shapes that journey can take.

The educational philosophy at the core of the best homeschooling, I would suggest, is also at the core of the best institutional schooling: knowing your students as individuals; avoiding standardization for efficiency's sake; and enabling students to follow their interests and passions, thereby cultivating true engagement with their learning and authentic motivation to learn new things. The boundaries of space, time, and subject area blur. Learning happens in a variety of contexts and locales, and isn't defined by artificial scopes, sequences, class periods and school schedules. Interdisciplinary exploration – the way we actually engage with the world – becomes the authentic norm.

The flexibility of homeschooling lends itself very well to such an educational vision and practice. But for many practical reasons, institutional schooling isn't going to disappear, and it doesn't need to in order for such a transformation to be realized. Some schools have already begun this journey (e.g., Castleman & Littky, 2007), providing students a teacher-mentor who knows them well and works collaboratively with them to shape their learning goals and craft a learning plan to help them get there. Some of their learning experiences occur in traditional classrooms, but others take place in the local community, and still others online across the world. Learning emerges from genuine questions and interests, and isn't measured by time and credits and subjects "covered."¹ Schools become not the locus of learning, but rather an anchor for advising, support, and coordination.

Tinkering Toward Transformation

One of the great drawbacks of education reform is its tendency to discard old forms and practices without adequate recognition of their value and rationale. As we pursue alternatives to the institutional schooling of the past 150 years, we need to consider carefully the purposes they aim to serve. Common schooling emerged in the mid-nineteenth century for a variety of reasons. Some of them were practical in nature, such as the need to provide supervision for children whose parents were now working in factories instead of in the home. Even common schooling's noble aspirations, such as the preparation of democratic citizens, were entwined with the paternalistic desire to homogenize recent immigrants.

But democracy depends upon the cultivation of a citizenry capable of exercising wise self-rule and committed to active and respectful engagement with diverse perspectives, if it is to survive and thrive. Common schools identified such a vision, although their enactment of it has certainly been flawed. Thanks to residential segregation, most modern public schools are not sites of socioeconomic and cultural diversity; thanks to testing pressures and aversion to controversy, there is relatively

¹ A term constituting, as Wiggins & McTighe (2005) note, an unfortunate but apt descriptor of what we often do to subjects.

little opportunity for students to learn the skills of deliberating about our most profound social disputes.

It may very well be that schools aren't the most effective places to learn to become democratic citizens. Developing the skills of and the commitment to democracy is probably best achieved amidst authentic engagement in the democratic process – and blurring the boundaries between school, community, and the broader world seems a promising way to encourage more such engagement. But the civic ideal needs to be preserved, promoted, and pursued as part of a rich, multi-faceted philosophy of education – it will not maintain itself amidst the pressures for occupational preparation and academic advancement. A new grammar of schooling cannot simply be a free market of consumer choices; it must also uphold a vision for what it means to be a public, and to contribute to the broader social good.

This need for a public vision underscores an important tension in the evolving grammar of schooling. Parents' desire for a customized, individualized education for their child is not only understandable, it's laudable and sensible. Requiring the same experience, the same standards, the same goals for every child in the name of fairness is not only profoundly unimaginative, it's a recipe for the worst of institutional schooling. At the same time, however, treating schooling as an entirely private good where no compromises and accommodations are required of educational "consumers" devalues the idea of the common good in a way that not only hurts society, but neglects a vital facet of what it means to become educated. We must not abandon the obligation we have to one another in a headlong and uncritical embrace of individualized education.

It seems, however, that an unreflective pursuit of educational upheaval is too often the norm in the world of educational policymaking. Many reformers, including the current U.S. Secretary of Education, call for drastic and dramatic changes to our schools. Tinkering around the edges, they assert, is for the timid and unimaginative. But Tyack & Cuban's (1995) historical analysis – entitled *Tinkering Toward Utopia*, by the way – offers a different perspective, one we would be wise to consider:

Although policy talk about reform has had a utopian ring, actual reforms have typically been gradual and incremental – tinkering with the system. It may be fashionable to decry such change as piecemeal and inadequate, but over long periods of time such revisions of practice, adapted to local contexts, can substantially improve schools. Rather than seeing the hybridizing of reform ideas as a fault, we suggest it can be a virtue. Tinkering is one way of preserving what is valuable and reworking what is not. (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 5)

The irony is that the most vocal school reformers today, the ones who rail so passionately against the status quo, are ultimately seeking to replace it with another singularly prescriptive vision of schooling, one driven by a testing regimen that narrows the learning experience even further. Just when boundaries of schooling are blurring and conventional notions of time, place, content, and pedagogy are being questioned and transcended, policymakers are grasping at unsophisticated and ultimately counterproductive formulas, beguiled by the promise of “raising standards” by demanding more accountability. But this vision of accountability is one that, in the end, bases its terms of success on yet more simplistic “countables” – credits, hours in school, test scores, graduation rates.

Instead, what our schools and societies require is a steady commitment to navigate the necessary tension between educational forms and options that honor the individual while also preserving an appreciation for and dedication to the common good. Re-forming our schools into institutions that support this vision means understanding time, place, and subject matter as variables in service of an education where critical thinking and authentic learning are the ultimate goals. That may not work well as a catchy reform slogan, but perhaps that’s a virtue.

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