

Sixth Edition

Education and Social Change

Contours in the History of American Schooling

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Introduction

History, Social Change, and Education

This book begins with a simple query: Do schools change society, or does society change the schools? Obviously, the answer is more complicated than the question suggests. Influences run in both directions: Education clearly affects social development, and schools also reflect their changing context. Still, the question of basic influence remains. Can schools function as instruments of social transformation? Or are they constrained by larger cultural, economic, and political forces?

History can address such puzzles. Reformers have long believed that education can remedy social problems, and many have vied to do this through schooling. But critics also raised nagging questions: Is educational reform potent enough to affect sweeping change? Or is its impact more limited, destined to ultimate disappointment? This is a persistent dilemma, for Americans have placed uncommon faith in the power of education. As historian Henry Perkinson noted, schooling has been an “imperfect panacea” for curing the nation’s ills, often promising changes it failed to deliver (Perkinson, 1968). But he also said little about what it *could* do.

Education includes a broad range of activities, but this book focuses on schools and other institutions of formal education. It does not pretend to be comprehensive. Instead, as the title suggests, it is thematic, focusing on events that help illuminate patterns or “contours” in the past. By examining key steps in the evolution of institutions, it is possible to see how education was linked to social transformation.

The book’s principal goal is to help with *thinking* about history and social institutions such as schools. In doing this, it draws on ideas from the social sciences. It is important, in that case, to devote some attention to a few of these concepts. At the same time, it is also

helpful to consider the significance of terms such as “education” or “schooling” and “social change.”

Why Study History?

Some people enjoy reading history, others dread it. But, beyond this, does it have any particular value? To grasp educational problems, after all, examining history can seem pretty silly. It may appear more practical to simply examine pertinent data and devise workable solutions to current difficulties. How can experiences from the distant past help anyone today?

Things change, but original circumstances often have a big impact on their subsequent development. It is commonplace to observe that today's society is different from not so very long ago, and yet certain aspects of life remain familiar. “The more things change, the more they stay the same” is an old saying that reflects this perception. It conveys the point that continuity exists in the wake of change, and underscores the importance of studying history to understand exactly what is similar and different (Nevins, 1938). Understanding today's problems sometimes requires looking to the past to find their roots. That can enhance the likelihood of finding effective solutions.

History also reminds us that others have faced significant problems too. People today often remark that change is occurring faster than ever, but the present is hardly unique in this respect. Indeed, ours is an era of considerable stability, even if technology and knowledge are rapidly advancing. Truly revolutionary change occurred in the more distant past (Aghion & Williamson, 1998). And it was those earlier developments that set the stage for today. One of the values in history, consequently, is to appreciate the origins of our own time, and the challenges faced by those who came before us (Tuchman, 1978).

What does this have to do with education and schools? Like social change, education also is a knotty subject. On the one hand, it is an intricate process of human growth and development, which everyone has experienced (Dewey, 1938). It also entails the transmission of knowledge and values from one generation to the next. And because education is linked to power and social status, it is subject to almost

constant debate. In its institutional form, education has become integral to imparting and certifying skills and knowledge seen as critical to economic status, making it a topic of intense public interest. Understanding education in its many dimensions, consequently, can be a daunting proposition.

Because of its manifold purposes and functions, education often has been a centerpiece of important periods of change. It has contributed to economic growth and political shifts, and it has helped to forge a national identity for different cultural and social groups. Of course, the experience of education itself also has evolved over time, influenced by the economy, the political system, and other facets of the social structure. Schools today are quite different from those in the past, and their purposes have changed somewhat too.

It is possible to say, then, that education has been on either side of social change: both as a causal agent and as an activity influenced by other factors. The link between education and society, however, is continually evolving. This makes it especially interesting as a topic of study, and a means for reflecting on the present.

*Prof. Barry: I want to interject here! I am so excited for you to take this course! As you continue your journey in this major, what I also want to make sure that you understand that you are many things: a scholar, a public intellectual, and a professional deeply intertwined with the community you might one day be serving. I will consistently remind you of the first two, but it is this latter point that I want you to think about as you continue this reading. Understanding the history of schooling can help you recognize how schools are not just places where kids learn to read, but *institutions* that are heavily embedded in their communities. Schools themselves have meaning and, as you will see in this course (and briefly ponder in the following few pages), it is important to know that schools reflect the societies in which they exist. Remembering this will help you as you navigate whatever career you pursue in/around schools or education. Okay! Carry on with the remainder of the reading. :)*

The Evolution of American Education

Schools have become an integral element of American culture. Nearly everyone has attended one for a considerable length of time, typically during life's most impressionable stages. And for the most part, people's school experiences have been quite similar, especially in the last 70 years or so. Hallways and classrooms are nearly ubiquitous, as are teachers and principals. Almost all schools divide the day into discrete periods of activity, and follow annual schedules set by state authorities. In the main, schools pursue goals dictated by their sponsoring institutions and agencies, such as state governments or churches. And all share a commitment to individual growth or human development and responsibility to the future of society.

For most people, these and other aspects of schooling are generally taken for granted, one of the most telling signs of a common culture. Historians David Tyack and Larry Cuban have referred to some of these features as the "grammar of schooling," rules and expectations that define the institution's everyday operations. Because schools contain large numbers of children, for instance, they devote special attention to discipline and order, and require adult authority in matters of supervision and training. Schools also place great emphasis on routine transmission of formalized knowledge, and evaluation of learning with standardized methods of assessment. Of course, schools are also places to make friends, play games, and do a variety of other things, but these features do not make it a school. Rather, it is the rules and formal relationships of authority that form the familiar institutional parameters most often associated with schooling. Memories of these aspects of organizational life have been commonplace for many decades, and seem to be essential to the very concept of "school" (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

But schools have not always been this way. Indeed, many of these contemporary qualities of schools did not exist in earlier times. They have evolved historically, in response to a wide array of factors. It is comforting to think of schools as fixed social entities, but in fact they have been quite pliable throughout history. One reason to study the history of education, in that case, is to identify just how the familiar features of schooling developed.

This line of inquiry begins with some basic questions: How did schools develop in the past, and what caused them to change? These matters are central to the history of education, and critical to anyone interested in educational reform. As a prelude to the more detailed discussions in chapters to follow, it is fitting to take a look at some of the big changes that have affected schooling, and consider how they may have been related to some of the social science concepts considered thus far.

Two hundred years ago schools were held in makeshift huts or cabins, or in rented rooms in urban areas. Most of the population lived in the countryside, so small schoolhouses predominated, where any existed at all. Children of all ages attended and teachers conducted different lessons simultaneously. School terms sometimes only lasted a few months and attendance often was sporadic. Teachers did not have regular employment, working from one term to the next, and many were barely more educated than the students. Features of school that people often take for granted, such as age-grading and a common curriculum, all had to be conceived and eventually accepted as widely practiced routines. These changes were largely coterminous with industrialization. In fact, the first modern schools often were compared to factories, which developed at about the same time. Even so, the process of change was painfully slow, and frequently met with stubborn resistance. It may have occurred during a time of rapid social change, but building the modern American school system was often a protracted struggle (Axtell, 1974; Cremin, 1951).

Other features of the now familiar education system developed later. Most teachers in the United States did not receive profession training until the early 20th century, and bureaucratic systems of management became widespread even later. Schools for children of different ages, grammar schools and high schools, were introduced in a piecemeal fashion. Many of these changes were driven by population growth, as more children attended schools. This was especially true in major cities, some of which grew exponentially. Urbanization, it turns out, was a central element of educational change. Without the growth of enrollments, modern, rationalized school systems would not be practical. Larger numbers of children

made age grading feasible, along with the long-term employment of teachers. Just finding rooms for all of these students often became a major challenge facing educators (Tyack, 1974).

At the same time, the process of industrialization and the growing division of labor became associated with curricular differentiation in schooling, and the development of specific courses of study to prepare students for various careers. By the early 20th century, many high school students could choose between industrial education courses, college preparatory programs, and such specialized subjects as home economics and stenography. The idea of linking schools closely to the world of work became known as *vocationalism*. As schooling became associated with a host of different types of jobs, school completion (sometimes called *attainment*) became an important factor in the allocation of people to various types of employment. Schools were becoming adapted to the development of modern, urban America, as it grew more diverse and forward-looking, and the economy expanded rapidly (Rury, 1991a).

American schools have historically been organized in relatively small independent districts, unlike most other countries, which have national systems of education. Until the mid-20th century, there were hundreds of thousands of these entities, with little central coordination to guide their development. This added another facet to the process of historical change: educators in some communities learning from others, imitating practices and policies, or adapting them to new circumstances. Schools or systems judged to be successful or prominent became models for those seeking to improve their practice or augment their status. As non-native settlement moved westward, educators often looked to older systems in the east for ideas about how best to organize schools, even if they were frequently modified in practice. Social scientists use the term *institutional isomorphism* to describe this process (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 1995). It represents the manner in which different institutions or organizations historically come to share similar characteristics, as they sought greater success in a field or domain of endeavor. In the case of schooling, it helps explain how innovations such as age-grading, bureaucratic management

systems, and curricular reform became commonplace, spreading from one part of the country to another.

Institutional isomorphism could take a number of different forms, depending on historical circumstances. Reform by imitation, called *mimetic isomorphism*, was hardly the only way it happened. Change also occurred when educators moved from one district to another, introducing new aspects of professional knowledge and practice learned elsewhere. This is often labeled *normative isomorphism*, when institutions adopt professional standards or practices that personnel bring with them. It became increasingly important as more teachers and administrators were trained in colleges and universities that shared similar curricula. It was also abetted by growing professional organizations, such as the National Education Association (NEA). Shared professional standards became clearer as a consequence, and exerted normative pressure on schools to adopt them. Finally, systemic change also happened when schools were required by state legislatures or education agencies to teach certain subjects, use particular tests or observe many other mandates. These were instances of regulative or *coercive isomorphism*, a process that educators may not have welcomed, but also had the effect of making their institutions appear even more similar. This tended to occur more frequently in the 20th century, as public education systems became more expansive, costly to operate and were increasingly embroiled in politics (LeTendre et al., 2001; Scott & Meyer, 1994).

As a consequence of these developments, today's mature system of education came fully into view by the mid-20th century. By then it had become so big and complex that debates occurred over its purposes and functions. Some would say that it became a mechanism for assigning people to different positions in the social order, a large-scale sorting machine (Spring, 1976). In the words of one observer, the schools helped to produce inequality (Kaye, 1973). Others would argue that the schools were engines of opportunity, allowing individuals to aspire to whatever position their talents were suited for (Ravitch, 1978). It is a debate that continues today.

In any case, a central question facing public education was the link between schooling and the growing complexity of American society.

As the social division of labor became more intricate, the issues of schooling and training people for productive careers became more important. Linked to this was the matter of providing individuals and groups with the skills and knowledge required by the economy. As technology advanced, the demand for people with appropriate skills and knowledge grew significantly. By the latter 20th century, there was a revolution in the perceived importance of human capital, and public interest in schooling grew accordingly (Goldin, 2001).

These developments, in turn, made education a potent political issue, especially in cities but elsewhere too. As schooling was seen as an economic and cultural advantage, it also became a point of contention. The history of American education is rife with groups organizing to demand changes in the schools. Such incidents were commonplace in the 19th century, but became far more frequent with the growing importance of education. Following the World War II, education became an increasingly contentious issue, especially as it grew more tightly linked to social and economic status (Ravitch, 1983; Vinovskis, 1999).

Historically, much of this agitation focused on the question of equity, and whether everyone had equal access to education. In the early 19th century, there were debates about the status of working-class children in schools, along with women in secondary and higher education. In the 20th century, political conflicts often concerned new ethnic groups, along with questions of school funding. These battles were difficult and embroiled educators in considerable conflict, but they also contributed to important changes. As a consequence, many of the greatest inequalities in American education have been reduced or eliminated, even if important disparities still exist. Today the issue of equity in education continues to be a point of frequent dissension, and schooling has continued to be a major issue in national politics. Looking at the history of this issue can help clarify today's struggles over education, and suggest ways to address them (Katznelson & Weir, 1985; Peterson, 1985).

This basic outline reveals how education has evolved in the United States over the past 200 years, as society has developed in response to industrialization, urban development, and the growing complexity of modern life. The educational system that exists today

is the result of a long process of adaptation to shifting social conditions. Most features of contemporary institutions were formed in response to specific historical circumstances. Given this, there can be little doubt that schools will continue to evolve as they react to social change in the future.

Schools Changing Society

While it is clear that society has shaped the development of schooling, there is also the converse question: How has education influenced or changed society? Beyond the process of individual development, what was the cumulative effect of schooling on social change? A number of telling examples can shed light on this.

One concerns the case of women's education. Early in American history women received little schooling, but after the Revolutionary War new attention was given to their education. As public schools were established during the 19th century, most were coeducational, providing boys and girls with similar educational opportunities. Female enrollment grew, and, by mid-century, women's literacy rates in northern states were almost equal to men's. Women also began to attend academies, high schools, and colleges in greater numbers. All of these changes preceded the movement of women into jobs requiring higher levels of skill, and the development of the first women's rights movement. Did education help to "cause" these latter developments? The answer is not entirely clear, but it certainly appears to have contributed to them. Given the historical evidence, it seems likely that these large-scale shifts in female employment and political status would not have occurred without changes in women's education (Rury, 1991; Tyack & Hansot, 1990).

There is a parallel example in the case of African Americans. The ancestors of most African Americans came to North America as slaves and thus were excluded from conventional schooling, even if they cultivated a rich tradition of informal education. After gaining freedom in the Civil War, African Americans enrolled in schools on a massive scale across the South. Although their institutions often received less financial support than those for Whites, these opportunities expanded the ranks of articulate leaders who could

voice challenges to racism and discrimination. Eventually African Americans made schooling a defining issue in their struggle for civil rights, with the historic *Brown* case in 1954 standing as a turning point in the movement for equality. Without the development of education as a resource for the Black community and as an object of struggle, it is doubtful that these changes would have occurred quite as rapidly as they did (Anderson, 1988; Sitkoff, 1993).

These are just two of the most dramatic and profound changes in American society that have been affected, at least in part, by the development of schooling. Some of these concerned ideology and the American ideals of freedom and equality. Schools have played an important role in legitimizing and spreading such popular ideas as democracy, equity, and fair play. Ideology typically changes at a slow pace, so such developments are often difficult to ascertain precisely. But this does not mean that they did not occur. Part of the problem of studying education and social change, in that case, is identifying less obvious developments such as these, and assessing how they fit into relationship of schools and society.

All things considered, it appears that schooling and education clearly have had a substantial impact on society, even as they have been shaped by urbanization, political conflict, and other societal changes. All of these events have established the features of modern schools that exist today. It is the analysis of this process that makes the history education interesting and worthwhile, to help understand how the present has arrived and perhaps what the future holds.