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in the Twentieth Century



Herbert M. Kliebard

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IN THE 20th CENTURY

Herbert M. Kliebard



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Dedicated to Arno A. Bellack
A great mentor and dear friend

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Acknowledgments

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INTRODUCTION

Reform and Change in the American Curriculum

Pessimism about school reform is nothing new. As early as 1922, W. W. Charters, one of the twentieth century's leading curriculum reformers, was already declaring that "the history of American education is a chronicle of fads."¹ Since that time, the failure of educational reform has continued to be the subject of persistent concern and frustration. There is good reason for this. Although curriculum reformers were unusually active over the course of the twentieth century, their actual successes were sporadic and notoriously short-lived. The term *pendulum swing* has become the most widely used characterization of this phenomenon, implying, of course, that educational reform is nothing but a series of backward and forward movements with, in the end, everything remaining in place. Whatever the merits of *pendulum swing* as the controlling metaphor for the course of educational reform, it reflects a profound disillusionment with the enterprise.

In recent years, educational reform, although still very much with us, has taken a decidedly different turn from the efforts that prevailed during most of the twentieth century. Policy makers continue to try to improve school practice, of course, but the most widely touted reform takes the form of specifying rigorous achievement standards accompanied by high-stakes testing.² When students do not measure up, school officials are urged to deny them promotion or graduation. Presumably, positive results will ensue if children and youth are so coerced, but the actual outcome of such a policy is not clear. A recent front-page article in the *New York Times* reports that in Arizona, where high stakes testing has been adopted with enthusiasm, 70% of sophomores in a middle-class suburban high school failed the mathematics examination. Statewide, the failure rate was 84%. Needless to say, policy makers are taking such results under advisement. Moreover, Arizona's experience was not an isolated one. California, Maryland, Massachusetts, Delaware, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Alaska also are reconsidering their testing policies,³ but the impulse to provide what is euphemistically called accountability is politically difficult to resist. The problem is that, in and of itself, testing is not a reform at all; it is at best a measure of success and in the right circumstances may become a spur to reform.

At the same time as this surrogate for educational reform seems to be taking hold, the kinds of pedagogical reform that were prevalent during most of the twentieth century are becoming the subject of not only political but scholarly criticism.

Generally speaking, this re-examination of earlier school reform pursues two rather different paths. One takes the form of a substantial rejection of the pedagogical reforms that were pursued during the so-called progressive era in education on the grounds that they were simply ill-advised to begin with or have had undesirable consequences. Two recent historical works, for example, impart a rather caustic view of the course that school reform has taken in the twentieth century. Even the titles of David Angus and Jeffrey Mirel's *The Failed Promise of the American High School, 1890–1995*⁴ and Diane Ravitch's *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms*⁵ convey the sense that the concerted efforts to change school practice over a period of many years somehow have gone awry. According to such accounts, it is not simply that many of these reforms failed to accomplish their purposes, but that they were ill-conceived to begin with. To the extent that they have affected school practice, they need to be undone. The second kind of critical examination, best exemplified by David Tyack and Larry Cuban's *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform*,⁶ takes a balanced view of the reforms themselves, but undertakes to examine the particular question of why so many well-meaning and even well-conceived reforms failed to make their way into school practice. This line of historical research tends to be less judgmental about the reforms themselves and more concerned with the reasons why some reforms succeeded while others failed to make much of an impact on school practice.

In one sense, the nine essays that constitute this volume reflect both these streams of historical criticism. Some of the essays unquestionably take a dim view of certain of the reforms that were undertaken and focus on their ideological and conceptual shortcomings. Other essays address the reasons why certain reforms collapsed while different ones succeeded, in much the same way that Tyack and Cuban do. In another sense, however, taken as a whole, these essays do not so much render a general verdict on the record of school reform over the past century or so as attempt to differentiate among various kinds of reforms and address the sources of their failure to make a lasting impact. As I hope the essays in this volume convey, reform is not one thing. *Reform* is one of those portmanteau words that incorporates a wide range of efforts, some noble and worthy and some misguided and even reprehensible. Although the word *reform* carries with it nearly universal positive connotations, it should be cause for celebration when certain reforms fail; on the other hand, the failure of some efforts to successfully redress the obvious shortcomings and injustices of schooling is deplorable and in some cases even tragic.

Guiding my efforts to assess the nature of these reforms is a particular view of what has come to be called *progressive education*. As I see it, a good part of the problem of interpreting the nature of curriculum reform over the course of the twentieth century lies in the inclination to lump together disparate and even contradictory reforms under that one familiar label. That tendency invites a global

judgment as to the wisdom or folly, success or failure, of a single entity. In other words, it is presumably that entity that needs to be examined and appraised. Rejecting *progressive education* as anything like a unitary enterprise permits a more nuanced view of what actually was going on over that period of time. Some lines of reform during what familiarly is called the progressive era were surely ill-considered to begin with and detrimental in their effect on the education of schoolchildren, while others were not only perspicacious in the way they addressed the persistent problems of schooling but reflected a truly democratic spirit, a force for liberating intelligence, and a strong sense of social justice. It is no cause for celebration when those reforms fail.

There is no question that in the latter part of the nineteenth century and in the first 6 decades or so of the twentieth, reform in the sense of departing from the status quo was in the air. In terms of the curriculum, the status quo was represented by the standard academic subjects such as history, geography, English, mathematics, science, and foreign languages. In terms of teaching, the status quo overwhelmingly took the form of the recitation method (largely textbook based) in which the teacher asked questions and pupils were called upon to respond. With few exceptions, firsthand accounts gathered by the crusading journalist Joseph Mayer Rice point to a pattern of school practice in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that was largely dominated by rote recitation of seemingly trivial factual information drawn, at least loosely, from the academic subjects.⁷ There was, in other words, good reason to undertake to change what was by and large a sterile and mindless pattern of schooling.

Some of the efforts to reform this practice took a rather moderate turn. Charles W. Eliot, revered president of Harvard University, for example, sought to give high status to the study of modern foreign languages in secondary schools as opposed to Latin and Greek, on the grounds that modern languages would elicit more interest on the part of students and thereby have a more beneficial effect on their mental functioning.⁸ He was also a strong supporter of a wide array of elective subjects in an effort to evoke interest on the part of students. Similarly, over the course of his long career, William Torrey Harris, highly respected superintendent of schools in St. Louis and later long-term U.S. Commissioner of Education, argued for the virtues of teaching academic subjects as a way of initiating children and youth into the great resources of civilization rather than treating school subjects as an array of disjointed facts and skills. What he called the five windows of the soul—arithmetic, geography, history, grammar, and literature—were in his mind ways of opening up the accumulated wisdom of the human race to a new generation.⁹

For other reformers of roughly the same period, these proposals were just too tame. One prominent reformer, William Heard Kilpatrick, for example, sought to substitute the project for the subject as the basic unit in the curriculum.¹⁰ Such a revolutionary change, Kilpatrick believed, could lead to overcoming the pas-

sivity of the learner, still a significant problem today, with intelligent action replacing the process of simply storing information. He and his devoted followers initiated a movement that achieved limited success in its time but is barely alive today. By contrast, the movement that became known as social reconstructionism, led by such reformers as George S. Counts and Harold O. Rugg, sought to focus the curriculum on persistent and pressing social problems in an effort to make schools more responsive to social needs and consistent with their conceptions of social justice. Here again, the movement was able to make some modest inroads into schools, but, although something of the spirit of that movement survives in the proposals of a handful of contemporary reformers, its successes in terms of actually affecting school practice were few and far between.

By far the greatest successes were achieved by reformers such as Franklin Bobbitt, W. W. Charters, and David Snedden, who sought to create a supremely functional curriculum guided by the criterion of efficiency. Principles of efficiency were introduced not only to affect day-to-day school practice but to make the curriculum as a whole socially efficient by ensuring that whatever children and youth studied would relate directly to their ability to function in their future adult roles. Subjects that could not be shown to be directly functional in this sense were curtailed, reconstructed, or eliminated, thus reducing waste. A key component of social efficiency ideology was vocationalism, which singled out projected work roles in particular as the principal guideposts for driving the curriculum.¹¹ Although the aspirations of the social efficiency reformers were not fully realized (they never are), the American curriculum moved substantially in that direction.

With such contrasting visions of how the curriculum should be reformed, it obviously would be futile to try to arrive at global judgments as to reforms generally or to an entity called *progressive education* in particular, either with respect to its feasibility or to its moral and intellectual legitimacy. Rather, one needs to examine the main lines of reform in terms of their guiding theoretical presuppositions as well as their prospective or actual impact on the practical world of schools. When reforms are propelled by such widely disparate social and pedagogical visions as were evident in the so-called progressive era, it becomes virtually impossible to treat them all as if they were of one piece and still do them justice. Sweeping praise or condemnation simply covers up too much. Accordingly, the essays included here, insofar as possible, try to address those distinctive visions in particular terms.

Another theme running through some of the essays is the question of the way in which reforms actually make their way into school practice. Two of the essays, for example, the case study of the one-room Otsego, Wisconsin, school in the nineteenth century and the Rugg series of social studies textbooks in the 1930s, treat the subject in terms of the considerable success that was achieved in those cases, rather than along the more familiar theme of the failure of reform efforts.

My own understanding of what contributes to success and failure in this regard is actually quite similar to the position taken by Tyack and Cuban. Reforms that are inconsistent with the basic structures of schooling (what Tyack and Cuban call “the grammar of schooling”), such as replacing the subject with something else or sharply redefining the roles of teacher and student, tend to collapse even when they meet initial success in terms of implementation. Another way of putting it is that pedagogical reforms either need to be consistent with existing structures or reformers need to undertake ways of altering those structures in order to make them compatible with the pedagogical reforms. Otherwise, the reforms, whatever their merits on other grounds, simply will be disgorged. Incidentally, the reverse also is probably true. The introduction of an important structural change such as age stratification—as in the one-room Otsego school in the first essay—can have a profound effect on the pedagogical process. Similarly, it seems perfectly reasonable to assume that the introduction of a structural change such as high-stakes testing would affect in very important ways both what is taught and the manner in which teaching goes forward.

Another theme that runs through some of the essays is the connection between educational reform and the social context in which it is proposed and implemented. It almost goes without saying that the fate of reform is affected by the social and political climate of the period. Reform movements, such as those just enumerated, find strength or weakness depending on their compatibility with the tenor of the times. It is probably fair to say that none of these movements becomes totally extinguished; rather, they gain momentum and favor when the times are right and then lose their impetus and fall into disrepute when the social and political context changes. The ideas that prompted social reconstructionism, for example, existed before the period of the Great Depression but attracted relatively little attention. Once massive social dislocation set in and severe economic problems came to the fore in the 1930s, the idea that curriculum reform somehow could become a vehicle for addressing those problems gained currency. When social and economic problems eased, at least in the public consciousness, social reconstructionism as a force for school reform lost momentum.

The arrangement of the essays in this volume is roughly chronological in terms of the periods under consideration. They range from the period just after the Civil War to contemporary times. In terms of subject matter, they include specific reforms such as Thomas Jesse Jones’s efforts to reconstruct the social studies in line with prevailing conceptions of social worth and E.D. Hirsch’s advocacy of the concept of cultural literacy as a way of addressing the widespread lack of cultural knowledge on the part of many schoolchildren and citizens generally. In some cases, the focus is more general, such as the way in which the *Cardinal Principles* report reflected a broad range of reform efforts with one predominating ideology, social efficiency, and the long-standing insistence that college-entrance require-

ments have posed a major obstacle to secondary-school reform over the course of many years. The book concludes with an effort to see whether there are any lessons to be learned from the historical record. Each of the essays is preceded by its own brief introduction, which attempts to relate the particular concerns expressed in the essay to broad themes of reform and change in American schooling.