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HONORS THESIS

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"For over a century and a half, Americans have translated their cultural anxieties and hopes into dramatic demands for educational reform" (Tyack & Cuban 1995).

School Reform and the Metaphor of Redemption

The social construction of a redemptive culture of schooling

From Horace Mann's crusade for the common school to the 1983 federally commissioned report, "A Nation at Risk," to the contemporary assimilation of state standards into planning and assessment, the history of American education expresses the belief that schools are the primary vehicle for social change. Public consensus and commonsense agree that, once correctly identified, problems in the social, economic, political, or moral sphere can be effectively resolved through the schools. Lying barely submerged beneath the language of school reform is the metaphor of redemption. Education is the source of individual improvement and eventual success as well as of societal progress towards the ideal society. Through education the individual is saved from the failures, pitfalls, and vices of her time. Society is saved through the aggregate success of its members.[1]

In this paper I establish the antecedents of American faith in school as a redemptive institution, paying particular attention to how the incorporation of science as an authority is linked with historical concepts of change and progress. The contradictions between perception and practice reveal multiple and conflicting tensions embedded within the public education system. Within this context I discuss the language of reform and the significance of rhetoric in defining the boundaries of educational change. I futher explore how the image of redemption manifests itself in the contemporary "excellence" movement at the national and state levels, as well as in the current president's educational

[1] Examples include tobacco education to save the individual and taxpayers from tobacco related illness and "morality" education to save the individual and society from the consequences of criminality.

agenda. Finally, I consider the nature of redemption and ask what lies beneath and beyond education's redemptive theme.

The context: Laying the groundwork

The redemptive culture of schooling developed as a consequence of the interplay of multiple historical phenomena early in the 19th century. These circumstances laid the basic groundwork upon which the framing events and ideas of the public school system were formed. Among these were the values of small-scale rural capitalism,[2] republicanism, and Protestantism.

Schooling in the United States was originally a characteristic of rural, agrarian life. In 1840 the United States was overwhelmingly rural; only 20% of the population lived in settlements of over 2500 persons. Until the 1920s school enrollment was higher in rural areas than in urban, industrial ones (Rubinson, 1986; Richardson, 1994). Enthusiasm for education since colonial times is reflected in every state constitution's provision for instruction of the young. This enthusiasm is related to the value placed on hard work, entrepreneurship, and the "self-made man." Independence and hard work were considered the keys to success. The predominance of rural life combined with a republican ideology to promote the development of a decentralized education system. For example, in 1795 bureaucrats in Washington, D.C. designed township settlements in the Midwest mandating the inclusion of both a church and a school. However, while schooling was mandated, it was not centrally regulated. (Interestingly, three years later the settlements were revised: while a school was still mandatory, a church was no longer required.)[3]

The values of Protestantism played a long and enduring role in the construction of beliefs about schools and education. From its roots in the Reformation, American

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[2] Despite Bowles and Gintis (1976) contention that the common school was the direct result of the influence wage-labor capitalism, the United States was not a wage-labor society until after the Civil War. Certain cities (e.g. Boston, Pittsburg, Chicago) may qualify as such but by no stretch can these isolated pockets of industrialism be termed "America."

[3] The emphasis on local control does not, however, belie the fact that the construction of the common schools was integrally linked to the processes of nation building. While formalization of the school

Protestantism sprouted a new concept of the individual. The boundaries of this new self resulted in the individuation of salvation. Social regulation moved from the strong arm of externally imposed violence into the internal mind and habits of the individual (Foucault, 1976). Protestantism also emphasized the importance of literacy for salvation. Like Luther, each newly conceived individual was now responsible to discover salvation through personal study of the Word. In addition, the Reformation generated the notion of childhood as a period of innocence, which in turn led to Rousseau's notion of the child as a "blank slate." Subsequent theories of pedagogy embraced the idea of innocence claiming that the content of education could be printed on the young's blank minds. Education was thus capable of either redeeming the soul from sin or society from immorality and chaos. The link between literacy and the inculcation of religious values is evident in the parochial/sectarian nature of the first wave of "public" schools. Learning was connected to moral knowledge and to the salvation of the sinner.

Thus, despite a high degree of heterogeneity between and within regions, the conditions contributing to the rise of a secular redemptive motif included:

a) a high value on education by virtually everyone (of course, the meaning of education was plural),

b) values of rural, small-scale capitalism and republicanism (practical knowledge was valued over classical knowledge), and

c) Protestant values on literacy/learning as connected to knowledge for salvation.

How can we account for the transformation of the motif of religious redemption into one of secular redemption guided by rational, scientific thought and manifested in individual improvement and change? Prior to this transformation, social and personal change were the domains of religion. By the middle of the 20th century science had become the authority governing change and the savior of society and the individual. What had happened?

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institution through the construction of state school systems did not occur until late in the 19th century, the seeds of institutional isomorphism were sown.

Framing events and ideas: A critical period for organizational formalization

As the young school system grew it became firmly embedded in an environment influenced by interacting, conflicting, and compromising forces. Midway through the 19th century certain guiding events and principles emerged to contribute to the formation of the public school system. These included the Common School Movement, the Social Gospel, immigration and nation building, and reform as the social administration of change.

The advocates of the Common School Movement between 1830 and 1870 significantly contributed to the expansion of schools' redemptive power to improve the understanding and practice of individuals and thereby society. By providing universal education, common schools prioritized the creation of competent citizens, the building blocks of a sustainable republic.[4] "In Horace Mann's time the common school crusaders believed that the main function of schooling was to produce literate, moral citizens capable of fulfilling the millennial hope of making the United States God's country" (Tyack & Cuban 1995, p.141). The common school advocates also hoped to increase uniformity and integration among schools. By making schooling universal and free, as well as increasing centralized regulation, advocates intended the common school to emerge triumphant from the hodgepodge of private, religious, and charity schools also in operation. Most importantly, common school supporters believed in the millennial possibility of progress via schools.

Within American Protestantism in the late 19th century, the Social Gospel Movement arose in response to changes brought about by industrialization. This movement was joined by many prominent educators and scientists and continued into the early 20th century, fading only with the rise of the organized labor movement. The Social Gospel united social and religious salvation by applying Christain principles to the problems of industrialization as reflected in the lives of the poor. The merger of concepts from science, social planning, and welfare policies with Calvinist concerns about moral redemption produced a new idea of progress. The salvation of the individual would now

[4] The primacy of citizen production as the function of common schooling reappears today in the context of contemporary needs and perspectives in the work of scholars like Benjamin Barber.

be brought about through institutional changes whereby the individual could overcome sin (Popkewitz 1998, p.4).

The Social Gospel movement overlapped with a steep increase in immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe prior to the Immigration Act of 1925. This influx of people, culturally and linguistically different from the primarily English speaking and Protestant "Americans," placed new expectations on schools. Since Frederick the Great's iniation of mass education in Prussia after the Seven Year War, schools had been a basic instrument of modern nation building, in the assimilation of newcomers, and in the mediation/transmission of common myths[5] (Ramirez & Boli, 1987). The United States responded to its population's increasing diversity by reinvesting interest in the nation building goals of mass schooling.

Schooling in the U.S., however, took mass education further by extending it as an ubiquitous tool of social redemption. With modernization, teaching became increasingly linked to social welfare, and schools to social reform (Popkewitz, 1998). The growth of the education and social science professions directly influenced the expanding role of schools. Early 19th century images of teacher professionalism required a profession of Christian sincerity. At the turn of the century, the teacher had been transformed into the ideal redemptive agent "bringing progress to society through the social administration of the child" (3). Prospective teachers, now trained scientifically, were expected to display commitment to the ideal of social service and to be professionally ambitious (3). Through social movements in both the slums and the academy the missionary zeal and millenial hopes of reformers shine.[6]

The popularity and eventual institutionalization of the kindergarten reflect the belief that schools, disassociated from religion, are vested with powers of social redemption.

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[5] Though the term *myth* is often used colloquially to mean "false," as in "that's just a myth," in the context of this paper *myth* is taken to include those images, stories, and metaphors that contain the truths of a culture. In this sense there cannot exist myth that is "just" myth. All elements of a culture's patterns of meaning are significant towards an understanding of how that culture views the world.

[6] As C.A. Bowers (1997) observes this messianic drive is inculcated in contemporary students of education in terms such as emancipatory pedagogy and schools for freedom. These ideas/causes are essentially redemptive and allow the teacher to retain her status as redemption agent and bring salvation to her students.

The Kindergarten

The first kindergartens were established by German refugees of the 1848 Revolution, but it was not until Elizabeth Peabody established the first English speaking kindergarten in Boston, in 1860, that the kindergarten came to the general public's attention. The kindergarten embodied the pedagogical principles of Friedrich Froebel[7] and stood in stark contrast to the methods and perspectives of the regimented and authoritarian schools of the mid to late 1800s. In the next twenty years, the private kindergarten spread across the Eastern and Midwestern states serving the middle and upper classes. As part of a second wave of public schools, the humanitarian or charity schools, kindergartens were introduced among the urban poor as "preventative charity" to counter poverty and vice. The kindergarten embodied the dual goals of providing a "cure for urban social evils as well as a model of education for young children" (Tyack & Cuban, 65). As a "social mission of child saving" in the slums, kindergartens became the province of elite women who extended the kindergarten package beyond its original pedagogical principles. The Kindergarteners (that is, the teachers) fed children breakfast, washed them, and attended to general health issues. After morning class with the children, afternoons were spent on home visitations in the tenements instructing mothers about cleanliness, citizenship, and proper child raising.

While the private charity kindergarten program highlighted socialization on middle and upper class women's terms, it was immensely popular among its clientele and the demand outstripped the supply. The incorporation of kindergarten into the public school system meant, naturally, conflict and compromise for all parties involved. Original reluctance to bring kindergarten into the fold stemmed in part from the expense of adding an additional structural element to schools at a time when the increase of immigrant children strained existing resources. Later criticism would point to the intrinsic mismatch between the kindergarten philosophy and socialization and the rest of the school system. Eventually, the advocates of state-supported kindergarten prevailed, led by the enthusiasm of those like William T. Harris, U.S. Commissioner of Education

[7] The German educator, Friedrich Froebel, is best known as the originator of the kindergarten. Froebel believed people are essentially productive and creative and that children's education should emphasize engagement and harmony with God and the world. Unity of man with the divine law was to be encouraged through education.

in 1903, who announced, "The kindergarten is really essential for the salvation of the children of the slums, that is to say, the children of the three weakling classes of society: [the thriftless, immoral, and unintelligent]" (Tyack & Cuban, 66).

Reformers championed kindergarten as a multifaceted solution to diverse social problems. A policy of state-funded kindergarten would "rescue" children from poverty and crime, create Americans out of immigrants, solve racial problems and "tame the unruly city." In the view of advocates like Harris, kindergarten provided "compensatory socialization" around the values of self-respect, perseverance, moral ideals, and industry (Tyack & Cuban, 66). Reformers also hoped to change the regimented and uniform nature of grades 1-12.

In a process of mutual influence and change the message of social redemption faded and was replaced by "a much more modest bureaucratic rationale...that the kindergarten would prepare five-year olds for first grade in a scientifically determined developmental way" (Tyack & Cuban, 69). The kindergarten became more efficient, for example, by trimming away home visitations and taking on the characteristics of the other primary grades. However, it also must be noted that the kindergarten also influenced its institutional environment. As a consequence of subsequent reforms led by advocates of a child-development philosophy, the primary grades came to resemble the original precepts of Froebel's kindergarten. [8]

The authority of science in the pursuit of progress

To understand how contemporary school reform continues to draw on a redemptive metaphor of social progress, we must understand how science came to occupy an authoritative role in schools. At the turn of the century the process of modernization was under way and the qualities of a "real school" began to take shape. The early 20th century was a critical period in the formation of the public school system as schools were faced with "a theoretical or philosophical problem concerning the

[8] This resemblance can be described namely in the constructive organization of children's play and the emphasis on creative expression and social cooperation.

meaning and authority of whatever organization was used" (Cohen & Rosenberg 1977, p.130).

In the early twenties "scientific" quickly became an adjective of power. Science was the key to social progress. Science produced the wonders of modernity and became the most legitmate authority for interpreting and acting within the world. Public opinion demanded organization by "scientific management" as an emblem of modernity (Callahan, 1962). Cohen and Rosenberg (1977) argue that the rise of standarized testing during this period—a scientific method of determining student achievement and legitimating outcomes—was a ritual expression of what modernity was supposed to be (125). The most important aspect of testing was that it was "scientific." Such authority was indisputable. Science meant progress and progress was what schools were all about. Today, teacher education programs draw on this same authority emphasizing "research based" practice.

Thus faith in schools as the engines of social progress was coupled with faith in science as authority. Schools were henceforth organized on the basis of three principles: science, merit, and progress (128). This brought the schools into harmony with American beliefs about science, knowledge, and modernization. Cohen and Rosenberg discuss this in terms of the "mythology of modernity" and faith in the "redeeming power of science, formal learning, and modernity" (132). From this point on, the organization of the modern school required deference to the scientific expert and legitimacy became tied to keeping up with latest demands of progress. [9]

The idea of progress

The notion of progress is intricately woven into the discourse of reform reflecting beliefs about the nature of society, change, and schools. The idea of progress as a given attribute of the world is manifested in the practice of school reform. Beliefs about schools reflect the image of a world progressing towards a utopian goal. Setbacks

[9] While subsequent reforms muted the "scientific management" model where students, teachers, and curriculum are thought about in overt economic terms, certain residue remains. For example, students, teachers, and curriculum remain the principle players and it is they who are to be modified by reform, not the structure of school.

(regress) are deviations from this predetermined and sequential path.[10] Schools are seen as instrumental to progress: socially, economicly, morally, and politically.

This idea of progress derives from a pre-Darwinian notion of evolution as a "goal-directed" process. In this view each stage is closer to the final, predetermined goal, the "real thing." Each point along the continuum moves one closer to the realization of the ideal. From this perspective, progress resembles moving up a series of stairs, each step logically follows another and each brings one closer to the eventual destination.

Science, then, is commonly conceived of as the gradual accretion of knowledge, the cumulative process of individual contributors, moving closer to "truth." Thomas Kuhn (1962), however, suggests that the basis of this notion of "scientific" progress is essentially an illusion. He argues that this view is a consequence of a winner-takes-all historical perspective and neglects the fact that scientific knowledge undergoes Escheresque transformations. Old paradigms gradually shift to assimilate and accommodate new discoveries and contradictions.

Though Charles Darwin suggested that evolution was *not* linear and did *not* inherently move towards any goal, the gradual shift that occurred within the scientific community was overshadowed by Herbert Spencer's popularized notion of Social Darwinism. It was this second version of deterministic progress that was invoked as authority for modern school practice early in the 20th century. By invoking the authority of science, schools formed according to a linear notion of progress, and, perhaps, reinforced the ahistorical nature of school reform.

Common expectations of society and individuals in relation to schools manifest this notion of progress. Schools represent the primary mediator of change whether social or personal. As discussed above, public confidence in schools as instruments of progress is related to the belief that schools act directly, with little or no interference, upon the social world. Progress towards a goal is therefore possible by altering aspects of schools and/or education.

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[10] Until 1969 the dominant beliefs were that schools were a) getting better and b) consequently improving society. In other words, the inherent progressive nature of schools and society were expressed in public opinion and policy. After 1969, Gallup Polls show this view was replaced by a doctrine of regress, i.e. deviation from the true path of progress (Tyack & Cuban 1995).

Parallelling social progress, the individual student literally progresses through a sequential, hierarchically graded school and curriculum. Personal development is measured and evaluated according to a normalized continuum. Improving the self includes acquisition of academic skills *and* of personal characteristics.[11] Education has long been viewed by Americans as both the great social equalizer that eliminates inherited privilege and the great escalator for improving one's circumstances.[12] Schooling has become critical to an individual's personal success, that is, salvation from poverty, from vice, and from failure. When schooling becomes a certifying ritual, a certain level of education becomes a prerequisite of status attainment. This intensifies the privilege of those with access to certain forms of knowledge.

What the schools are believed to be

Certain characterisics tend to dominate the perceptions and professions of the education system. These are closely linked to the school's status as a sacred domain. Beliefs about the function and operation of schools are virtually unquestioned. These beliefs are the framing truths that interpret and guide educational discourse and reform. Education is the nearest thing Americans have to a common faith. Teaching has developed into a "calling," a special field for those who work for more than money. This ideal is buffered and bolstered by the drive to "make a difference" or to "change the world, one child at a time."[13] The assumed efficacy of schools to single-handedly change the world is taken on faith. This alone does not, of course, make the assumption untrue, unreal, or ineffective. The power of school may be socially constructed but it is not an illusion. As Meyer (1977) observes, "If education is a myth in modern society, it is a

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[11] Pierre Bourdieu (1986) argues that personal dispositions and sensitivities are far and away more critical than and preceed acquistion of academic knowledge.

[12] An extension of this is the observation that minority students who wish to succeed on the dominant society's terms must do so at the expense of their group identity. Success is individual and takes minority students away from the group. School redeems only the disciplined and talented. School redeems on its own terms. For further reading see John Ogbu and Richard Rodriguez.

[13] Schools and teachers *do* make a difference in children's lives, indeed even on the fabric of society. The question lies more in the accuracy of assuming that the intentions of change are direct and guaranteed. While some theories argue that schools have little effect on individuals, it seems more reasonable to me to argue that schools may both reproduce social inequality *and* act to create knowledge, redefine people, and create and justify authority.

powerful one. The effects of myths inhere, not in the fact that individuals believe them, but in the fact that they "know" everyone else does, and thus "for all practial purposes" the myths are true" (75). The identification of assumptions, however, allows us to examine the relationship between perception and practice.

In general, schools are perceived as objective, meritocratic, and open. They are treated as neutral conduits, capable of directly transmitting the chosen message. Official policy and professional discourse reinforce these perceptions. Schools are believed and expected to allow every child an equal opportunity to achieve through hard work and personal merit. One of the primary goals of reform is to increase the schools' accuracy as a mechanism for allocating rewards to those students who have earned and, therefore, deserve them. According to this view schools serve as a channel of mobility. Mehan, et al. (1986) trace this model of social stratification to British empiricism and the idea of *tabula rasa*. Skinnerian behaviorism is an extreme form of this egalitarian ideology. A Skinnerian approach emphasizes the influence of external environmental conditions exclusively. Sociological functionalism also shares these roots. Functionalism states that an efficient society must have mechanisms to select and channel "human capital" into the appropriate roles. Two main functions of schools are therefore proposed. First, they teach the cognitive skills desired by the society. Second, they evaluate students' acquisition of these skills. According to this view, position and status are not inherited: they are earned. Success is a function of personal achievement, individual effort and perserverance; it is attributed to internal "motivation" rather than inherited characteristics.

Turner (1960) suggests an alternative model of mobility that better describes popular and professional views of the educational system. He argues that Americans interpret schools' role in society in terms of "contest-mobility," that is, as a race where fairness entails an equal ability to compete for the prize. One competes on the basis of one's abililties alone and thereby earns and deserves the outcome. Contest-mobility manifests a particularly American spirit hearkening back to the values of the early 19th century discussed above. An individualist, capitalist, and Protestant work ethic dominates this metaphor. Education is valued as a way of "getting ahead" rather than as

the cultivation of habits or dispositions.[14] The American system seeks to keep the race open to all contestants as long as possible and delay the final verdict. Unlike other state systems where success or failure on an examination in the early years of life permanently redirects one's life, the American system, at least ideally, allows individuals to reenter the race at any time. However, while the contest system keeps access to schooling open, it restricts the student's passage through the educational tiers. Failure results, not as a consequence of the "open" stystem, but of the student's lack of effort.

The meaning of change

Schools have experienced vast organizational, procedural, and theoretical changes in the last hundred and fifty years. Some effects of reform were intentional, others unintentional. Some reforms left no lasting mark on the system. Others became so deeply ingrained into the "way schools are" that they seem inevitable elements rather than the products of possibility. Previous school reforms have crystallized into rigid structures and incorporated into the rules that identify schools as schools. These structures are therefore highly resistant to counter reform. According to Tyack, Kirst, and Hansot (1980), changes persist if they:

1) alter the structure of schooling;
2) create a new constituency or at least strengthen and expand an already existing constituency; or
3) are easily monitored by outside parties (33).

Examples of reforms that meet these criteria include the development of junior high schools to facilitate the transition between elementary and high school instruction and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975.

[14] The trend of mass education in the U.S. has been towards real life skills and apprenticeship rather than classical liberal education. The conflict between vocational education and college prepatory education has been a continous source of tension and reform proposals. Additionally, the American system has tended to stress the aspect of "social-adjustment training," that is, how to get along with and understand people (Turner, 1960, p.132).

It cannot therefore, be claimed that schools do not change.[15] Schools are neither static nor passive, but constrained by the prevailing paradigms of the environment that supports them. In fact, the maintenance of these paradigms is in the interest of stability and the status quo.[16] Like science, change is also misunderstood as synonomous with progressand, as such, represents a gross simplification. By implying that all change is equal, any movement, alteration, or activity is deemed "change." Change is not a homogenous concept and we must understand the varied nature of what change intends and actually entails. The failure to differentiate between expressive changes, administrative changes, and changes in classroom practice creates an illusion of progress. Structural changes are generally assumed irrelevant because progress occurs by modifying the existing institution.

There are limits on the possible. Tyack and Cuban (1995) suggest that reforms demonstrate "instability within stable limits" (493). Issues of legitimacy constrain what can plausibly be proposed, adopted, and implemented. Plank's (1987) analysis of reforms adopted by all states between 1983[17] and 1985 finds a disproportionate number of reforms were directed at the inputs (sic) to the educational system, the students and prospective teachers. The focus of reform was rarely ever directed toward the structure or operation of the educational system. Plank concludes that,

> "Structural reforms in American school systems are hard to imagine and even harder to achieve, because such changes call into question the legitimacy and claim on public resources of the educational system. They disrupt familiar organizational routines.... They often imply large real costs...in return for presumed future benefits that are widely diffused, difficult to specify, and impossible to measure. They challenge common understandings about what educational systems look like and how they work" (150).

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[15] The concept of "school" itself spans multiple forms and practices. To speak of changing school implies that there is some true constant "school" evident throughout history. However, the concept *school* is socially and situationally constructed.

[16] Radical changes in organization would disrupt society's other institutions. People understand and communally work from what they know to be true about the classifying and legitimatising power of education. For instance, something as deceptively simple as altering high school curriculum runs aground upon the residue of the Carnegie Unit for admittance into university and college.

Similarly, Guthrie and Koppich's (1987) analysis of the attributes of national education reform concludes that, in combination, certain preconditions appear to make reform at the national level possible, but do not guarantee lasting residue.

Schools are not malleable wax. Reformers often act as though schools are neutral and passive "hardware" able (and willing) to run whatever "software package" is thrust upon them by outsiders eager to remake school and society over in their desired image. Moreover, schools are embedded within an institutional environment that includes and supports institutions such as government, religion, medicine, and the family, to mention a few. While schools are unique in many respects, they are not separate from the world, nor are they neutral conduits for the transmission of selected values.[18] Schools are not merely acted upon; they also act to change reform (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

The journey from proposal to policy and the leap to implementation

School reforms are planned efforts to change schools as direct remedies to perceived social and educational ills. However, all change is not equal. Moreover, certain prerequisite conditions limit which ideas are legitimate reform proposals, the likelihood that a proposal will become policy and, finally, the depth and durability of reform at the level of implementation in the micro-processes of classroom practice. The connection between the language of reform and the reality of educational practice is often incorrectly assumed to be a direct one. The connection between the changes promised by reform and actual direct changes in macrosocial structures, relationships, and practices, is even less evidenced.

When a social or educational problem is perceived, school reform is proposed as correction. Initially, proposals for reform rely solely on the power of rhetoric, that is, language, to persuade decision makers that the interests of "policy talk" represent a real problem and must be transformed into authoritatively binding policy. The victory of

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[17] 1983: The year the federally commissioned *A Nation at Risk* report threatened the American public with economic damnation.

[18] Schools do act as conduits, but they are neither passive nor neutral. They are not input-output black boxes. Dynamic and variable things happen internally and are influenced by the medium of the school itself. As a medium, schools reflect cultural values in relation to education and consequently act upon students, teachers, and reforms.

becoming official policy, however, is shadowed by the fact that schools are loosely coupled organizations. The concept of coupling is discussed below.

Multiple and conflicting goals: tensions within the pedagogical mandate

During the period of rapid formalization, significant compromises were embedded within the fabric of the public school system that manifest themselves even today in the struggles over official policy and pedagogy. Herbert M. Kliebard (1986) explains the process of curriculum formation not in terms of smooth, linear progress, but in terms of conflict and compromise. According to Kliebard, between the Report of the Committee of Ten in 1893 and the National Defense Education Act of 1958 four interest groups struggled to imbue American curriculum with their particular versions of the good society. Each assumed control of school content was equivalent to control of school outcomes and society. Kliebard suggests that the shifts in curriculum "fashion" always reflect the influence of more than one set of interests.

> The phenomenon might best be described as a stream with several currents one stronger than the others. None ever completely dries up. When the weather and other conditions are right, a weak or insignificant current assumes more force and prominence only to decline when conditions particularly conducive to its newfound strength no longer prevail (p.208).

Contemporary reform efforts continue to reveal contradictory strains between interest groups, each foregrounding certain ideals as the primary purpose of schools.

David Labaree's (1987) analysis of the history of 20th century curriculum change concludes that these changes can best be understood as the results of the process by which educators tried to deal with the contradictory claims placed upon them. "From the beginning...the common schools were under pressure to promote both equality and inequality" (490) due to the tensions between the liberal and democratic aspects of American ideals. From one point of view the schools were to serve as a collective good, equally benefiting all, promoting civic society and virtue and protecting society from the

emerging specter of capitalism. However, by the 19th century, schooling was also an avenue of individual status attainment. The democratic aims of the schools were embedded within an environment "dominated by markets and the ideology of possessive individualism" (490).

The tension between capitalist markets and democratic politics produced two strikingly different guiding purposes for education. On one hand, reformers claimed that curriculum should be adapted to students' heterogeneous needs and capabilities. This perspective reflected democratic ideals. On the other hand, those who prioritized the market functions of schools claimed the curriculum ought to be tailored for social and vocational relevance to students' adult roles. The crucial compromise arose when, at the close of the 19th century, a high school education had such market value that public demand increased and at the same time was legitimated based on democratic principles of access. Over the following decades the terms of the compromise would be negotiated through additional compromise and coalition. The framing compromise however was "a simple exchange—open access in return for differentiated instruction" (491). In other words, schools became committed to providing knowledge equally, but students were not (and are not) equally privileged to acquire it.

The Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 illustrates the dimensions of this compromise. In 1917 the American public education system might plausibly have adopted a dual system of separate college preparatory and vocational schools similar to the French or British state school systems. A dual system is stratified across schools with separate schools for separate futures. The passage of the Smith-Hughes Act effectively moved stratification *within* schools committing the public schools to a multiple tier education system (i.e. tracking) *and* the Pandora's box of equal education for all.[19] The enactment of Smith-Hughes reflected and continues to reflect American assumptions and beliefs about education and social equality. The act was one step in the historical sequence that houses all types of education (behavioral, special, general) under the same roof. Richardson (1994) finds that as the rules of access to common schools expanded, rules of passage

[19] Interestingly, business interests alone would not likely have been able to push this act through Congress. The deciding factor was the support of Home Economic Associations advocating federal funding of girls' vocational training. These associations feared that defeat of the bill would result in girls being overlooked by businesses as in need of vocational resources.

through the school system were introduced to define the bounds of inclusion. In this way, the mechanisms of social stratification became less evident as they were incorporated into the internal and practical workings of schools.[20]

While previous reforms have crystallized into the rigid structures of collective custom and individual habit, the schools still display multiple and conflicting goals as various groups struggle for the power of definition. For example, the controversy over curricular content involves the opposition of liberal pluralist interests that seek to "open" the canon to represent ethnic and gender perspectives and conservative interests that seek to return to a golden age of classical, "American" knowledge (Guillory, 1993). Each camp shares assumptions and beliefs about schools and social change. Schools may be *for* any number of purposes or ideological manifestations and may be conceptualized in terms of diverse metaphors (Reitman, 1992; Postman, 1995).

As the priority of public values shift, pressure is exerted on schools to shift their rhetorical commitments (Cuban, 1990). The tensions embedded within the institutions surface at times when "external events trigger individuals and groups to voice policy differences and demand change in schools" (8). Reforms seek to push some vision of what society *should* be to the foreground. Definitions of concepts like school, education, or literacy are not neutral; they reflect the agendas of the definers. However, it is also important to note that reform proposals and policy are significantly mediated by the plurality of interests involved in decision making and implementation (Plank, 1987).[21]

The reality of practice

In this section I first offer a critique of theories that explain the reproduction of stratification in terms of simple variable correlations, and then suggest that a closer look at the actual practices of schools, as well as the macrosociological trends, will enhance our understanding of how schools operate as a mechanism in the reproduction of inequality while functioning under a redemptive shroud. It should be kept in mind that,

[20] I elaborate on this aspect in the following sections regarding ability grouping and tracking.

[21] I would also like to note that much of the search for what Neil Postman calls a guiding narrative for public schools is valid in light of the fragmented nature of the modern world. The goal of *this* project,

though we speak of schools as a personified entity, a "school" is a set of visible and invisible relations, routines, and structures, which—due to their emphasized similarity—are identified as part of a set. (For instance, the holly and the mangrove may not appear similar but, due to their botanical characteristics, they are of the set "trees.") Schools do not have a collective motivation or will. They are bound together and act both in concert and in division in accordance with normative myths and an institutional tendency towards isomorphism (Postman, 1995; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

The contribution of schools to the process of social stratification is not attributable to one abstract variable or universally applicable sequence. Schools are not neutral; they have effects on the lives and relations of individuals, on groups, and on the larger society. As an institution, schools participate in the reconstruction of the world in terms of defining and redefining categories of people, knowledge, and legitimate authority, as well as in the reproduction and distribution of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). As we move toward an examination of reform rhetoric, we must first explore school practice as distinct from official policy.

The effects of school as an institution

It is the argument of this paper that schools as an institution have effects on individuals and society. This contrasts with the view expressed above that schools are neutral conduits, processing all individuals rationally and objectively. Schools are places where the interactions of cultural capital, bureaucratic constraints, and particularistic conditions matter.

John Meyer (1977) describes formalized education systems as "theories of socialization institutionalized as rules at the collective level" (65). Meyer suggests that modern educational systems can be understood in terms of two overlapping dichotomies. First, schools act as both legitimating theories of knowledge in that they define bodies of knowledge as extant and authoritative and as theories of personnel that define categories of people as endowed with the authority of knowledge forms. Second, education

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however, is to simply demonstrate how reform rhetoric (no matter how noble the ideal) obscures the practices of schools.

legitimates the position of both elites and citizens. As systems of classification, schools' authority spreads throughout society and generates four types of legitimating effects. Theories of knowledge overlap with elite education to create the authority of specialized competence. By contrast, under the auspices of elite education, theories of personnel justify elite definition and certification. From this perspective, education creates knowledge and roles and at the same time allocates, justifies the authority, and defines who can acceptably acquire either. On the other hand, mass education and theories of knowledge combine to form a universality of collective rationality or a series of common assumptions and understandings. When joined with theories of personnel, the goals of mass education expand membership through nation building and citizenship into a constructed common culture. The effects of education therefore include the extension of a collective reality that organizes knowledge and power around educational classification.

Schools, then, possess the power to allocate students to positions of status that affect further anticipation and socialization, in a word, *habitus*. This power allows schools to create and validate categories of personnel and knowledge. Such a legitimating power is analogous to religious authority. Modern education systems legitimately redefine the world creating and intensifying the effects of socialization and allocation processes. Not only does the experience of schooling have immediate socializing effects, students are conscious of the power of the organization to allocate status and the broader fact that schools have the highest level of legitimacy.

Further, schools are ritually chartered organizations. Charters are externally assigned and designate the differential production of outcomes. In this way, reading groups, high school tracks, and college rankings are analogous to town charters. The effects of charters are antecedent to actual participation in an institution. Anticipation of the collectively understood meaning of the charter, i.e. what it means to be in the basic track or attend an Ivy League school, is a form of cultural capital. As Bowers (1997) notes, knowledge is culturally understood to be either high status (for example, physics) or low status (woodworking, for instance). An intuitive understanding of cultural capital influences individuals' expectations and is interpreted collectively as signifying future status.

In this way schools have effects on the life courses of individuals. The ethnographic studies I discuss below will demonstrate the extent to which schools can arbitrarily and authoritatively change a person's matrix of possibilities.

Theories of reproduction

Between the Coleman Report in 1966 and Jenks' subsequent test study of Coleman's findings in 1972, the differences between schools appeared to make little difference on student outcomes. Coleman found only 15% of the variation in academic achievement could be attributed to differences between schools; Jenks' study raised this variation to a still meager 21%. The unexpected conclusions of these studies led researchers to look elsewhere for explanations. Genetic determinists offer one interpretation of the reproduction of status privileges. A version of biological determinism, this nativist perspective attempts to prove achievement discrepancies are the consequence of hereditary qualities related to race and ethnicity. Jensen's "How much can we boost I.Q.?" (1969) and Murray and Herrnstein's (1994) *The Bell Curve* are popularized examples of the "scientific" literature "proving" the genetic inferiority of people of color and their consequent propensity for school failure.

The nativist critique breaks down on two fallacy charges (Mehan, Hertweck, & Meihls, 1986). First, variations of this argument reify the concept of intelligence treating it as an inherent property of individuals rather than the product of context and location. Second, these arguments rely on the quantification of "intelligence" and the numerical ranking of people. Such techniques have the aura of objectivity and scientific authority and lead to the assumption that I.Q. scores represent "true scores" or the inherent worthiness of individuals and groups.

A second set of theoretical models operates from the premise that groups in society compete for status and power; the schools' role, within this premise, is to maintain the status quo (Mehan, Hertweck, & Meihls, 1986). The two principle variants of this premise consider one of two abstract variables as the primary motivator: either

status (in the Weberian sense) or class (in the Marxian sense).[22] However, critiques of traditional conflict theory point to the tendency to oversimplify complex processes and overlook the widespread decoupling of dominant ideologies and common practices. The salience of competing interests is minimized in favor of one overarching theme. Theories that simply correlate background characteristics (class or otherwise) with measures of adult status assume schools are passive transmitters of whatever the powers-that-be designate and exert no effects on individuals or society.

Ethnographic research, as an alternative, accepts the premise that one school is very much like another, but focuses on what happens inside schools. The findings of such studies seriously contend that the basis of stratification is more complex than the effects of only effort and ability, only social class, or only inherent characteristics. In fact, the consequence of school practices, often unintended and undesired, is the mediation of the relationships among background characteristics, educational achievement, and status attainment. In schools, background characteristics interact with expectations (*habitus*), the possession and conversion of cultural capital (DiMaggio, 1982), practical, technical concerns, and routine procedures. The image of a direct input-output relationship is far too simplistic an explanation despite the apparent reproduction of the status quo.

For example, in their classic study, *Schooling in Capitalist America,* Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue for a direct correspondence between capitalist class interests and the aims and structures of schools. However, in light of the evidence that class imposition and conflict theories are inadequate to interpret the formation of American public education, Rubinson (1986) suggests a reformulation of class theories. His work demonstrates how the political process mediates the interests of capital and thus

[22] On one hand, conflict theories that draw upon Max Weber's notion of status as the primary motivator view schools as a domain wherein groups compete for access to high status culture. According to this view, schooling is directly tied to adult status attainment and schools are committed to preserve and perpetuate the existing distinctions between high and low status knowledge and dispositions. On the other hand, Marxist conflict theorists see schools as instruments of domination whereby the interests of the dominant class are reproduced in order to maintain the existing relations of economic production. This view is epitomized in the famous lines, "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling *material* force of society is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, consequently also controls the means of mental production" (Marx & Engels, 1846). When either status or class is assumed to be the primary motivator behind social phenomena, the related conclusion is that a single abstract interest takes precedence in all relations.

necessitates the reformulation of an effective theory of class forces on American education.

The public education system that emerged in the U.S. in the early 20th century was characterized by low stratification, high enrollment, and common curriculum (the working class was not restricted to vocational-technical training and had access to liberal arts education). These attributes were in the interests of the working class rather than the elite capitalist class. Rubinson accepts the premise that institutions are basically structures of domination, but he examines the evidence to see if *class* domination is the best interpretation. Business, political, and educational elites stated that they wanted schools to control labor; however, these stated desires seem to have been irrelevant due to factors already at work. If, in response to industrialization, imposition of elite interests onto the patterns of schools occurred, certain relationships would be expected:

1) Enrollment rates should increase with industrialization.
2) Rates should be higher in industrial than in agrarian, in urban than in rural, higher for boys than girls, and higher for blue collar than white collar communities.
3) Growth rates should be higher during unrestricted ("militant") working class immigration than during restricted periods (primarily after the Immigration Act of 1925).

The reverse of all these expected relationships is true.

Rubinson refines the concepts of class and class conflict to more accurately describe what took place during this period. He argues that "classes" were weak and ethnicity, religion, and region garnered greater loyalties than class consciousness. (The lack of strong working class parties is attributed to the early extension voting rights. European parties rallied around obtaining the vote.) Rubinson concludes that, "although there were intense class interests in schooling, the nature of the party system and the state limited the political expression of these class forces. Class interests were not politically transformed into the decisions that structured education" (532). The interests of professional educators, more than any other interests, dominated the formalization of school structures.

Why the grammar of schools persists

The core practices of schooling, those elements that identify a "real" school, can be compared to grammar in language. Such practices are the rules that govern practice and by which legitimacy is judged. The concept of institutional isomorphism[23] is helpful in explaining the tenacity of this grammar and the rarity of successful challenges.[24]

Institutional isomorphism begins when a field emerges from a set of organizations. These organizations are recognized as being similar in form and aim. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) examine the trend toward homogenization of organizations' (such as schools) form and practice. They identify four processes by which a field is defined or structured. First, interaction among organizations increases. Second, clear patterns of domination and coalition emerge among organizations. Third, the information considered necessary to each organization increases. Fourth, mutual awareness and a sense of common purpose among organization participants develop. The result of these processes is the increasing homogenization through what DiMaggio and Powell identify as coercive, mimetic, or normative mechanisms. *Coercive* change is related to political influence and the problem of maintaining legitimacy and includes factors like legal and fiscal constraints. *Mimetic* change results from the tendency of organizations to model themselves upon those perceived as more prestigious or successful, especially during times of uncertainty. *Normative* pressures stem from aspects of professionalization such as common training, intellectual networks, and professional journals (Plank, 1987). The screening of potential personnel is a further example of normative pressures (Hester, 1988).

An example of the power of institutional isomorphism to transform and homogenize state school systems is found in Richardson's (1994) study of the process of common school formalization. Richardson examines the institutional sequence followed by all states as the common schools underwent formalization and notes the impact of

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[23] Analogous to the term *isotope* in chemistry, institutional isomorphism refers to the tendency of schools to resemble one another in structure.

[24] It is important to note that educational isomorphism emerged in the United States in the absence of a central Ministry of Education. Pressures beyond state regulation initiated and maintained the isomorphic trend, though federal legislation in the 20th century facilitated the remediation of institutionally young states. Federal legislation concerning education began with the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917. This was

increasing isomorphism on the development of institutional dimensions (i.e. the three worlds of education: special, delinquent, and common). The sequence in which states adopted discourse and legislation created the conditions for enactment of compulsory school attendance laws. These laws were adopted over seventy years, but were virtually identical, each prescribing *in locos parentis*, school form, and provisions exempting or excluding categories of students from participation.

In terms of limitations on reform, of critical significance is how during the initial formalization process schools "construct around themselves an environment that constrains their ability to change further in later years" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148). Ritual legitimacy may become more important to survival than actual practice. This results in decoupling.

An organization may maintain its formal structures, such as standardized policy, (and thereby its legitimacy) by decoupling elements of structure from activities and from each other. For example, the incorporation of a formal structure such as state "learning standards" into formal practices such as curriculum, planning, and assessment may be loosely linked to the actual instructional interactions occurring (the activities) in classrooms. In this way, schools accommodate reform without altering the basic structural quality of educational practices. (Meyer & Rowan, 1977)

Cuban (1990) connects this phenomenon to schools' commitment to display multiple and conflicting goals. Schools try to satisfy their constituencies' beliefs about what a school should be and thus retain legitimacy (10). Because they are tax supported and under lay governance schools face a practical dilemma in retaining the support of their multiple constituencies. Wells and Serna (1991) demonstrate the critical import of convincing and adapting to key constituencies.[25] In order to maintain the image of a "real" school, district mandates are tightly coupled with external requirements. However, Cuban suggests that the strength of this alignment fades at the core level of classroom instruction. Reform proposals that attempt to scrutinize and govern teachers closely have

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followed by critical federal level decrees such as Brown vs. The Topeka Board of Education in 1954 and PL 91-124 (Education for Handicapped Children Act) in 1975.

[25] "Constituencies" include parent groups, professional, state, and national associations, and other diverse interest groups.

historically met with resistance. However, recent developments reinforce a trend of gradual loss of teacher autonomy.

The persistence of school forms: The recurrence of reform as an element of schooling

The recurrence of reform in American education, particularly reforms focusing on similar themes, for example, shifts in emphasis on centralized and decentralized authority or practical and academic curriculum, is typically bemoaned as a perpetual problem of schools. Despite reform recurrence, the elements that define a "real school" have remained relatively constant (Cuban, 1984). Cuban's (1990) study of educational continuity and change leads him to conclude

> Many reforms seldom go beyond getting adopted as policy. Most get implemented in word rather than deed, especially in the classrooms.... Seldom are the deepest structures of schooling that are embedded in the school's use of time and space, teaching practices, and classroom routines fundamentally altered even...when reforms seek those alterations as the goals. The itch may be real but the stroke is gentle (Cuban, 1990, p.9).

Above, I have discussed some of the conditions that increase the likelihood that reform will leave residue, as well the difficulty of altering reforms crystallized by legislation or collective custom. Tyack and Cuban (1995) explore the lasting influences of reforms such as the Carnegie Unit and the Graded School and the fleeting lives of reforms such as the Dalton Plan, High Schools of Tomorrow, and the Eight-Year Study. Labaree (1987) suggests that the basic terms of the compromise between democratic politics and liberal markets have been stable over time. Reforms demonstrate "instability within stable limits" (493) as the deeper compromise between democratic politics and capitalist markets resists radical change. Often compromises—which may satisfy no one—are defendable on the ground that they are neither undemocratic nor impractical.

> Those who seek democratic outcomes from schooling are not likely to be happy with stratified and vocational curriculum; those who seek status attainment through schooling are not likely to be happy when schools

> provide the same diploma to students from all tracks. And neither side is happy about the dilution of curriculum at all levels. One result of this is vague but chronic dissatisfaction... (492).

The dominant explanation of recurring reform derives from a rational model of organizational behavior (Cuban, 1990). The goal of effective reform is to precisely define a problem, identify the necessary reform action, and faithfully implement the prescribed solution. Thus is humanity saved. This explanation locates the source of social and educational failure in the teaching-learning relationship, that is, in teachers and/or students. It also treats schools—and the people within them—as wax easily reshaped. The dynamics *within* the black-box are disregarded.

Alternate explanations for the recurrence of reform stress various combinations of politicized value conflicts, organizational theory, and ethnographic study. By shifting attention to the internal tensions and pluralist politics discussed above and the persistence of institutional customs and mythologies, it is possible to view reform as a *product*, rather than a problem, of schools.

How the practices of schools persist

The grammar of school persists because of the historical process by which group interests are transformed into law, institutional custom, and cultural belief (Tyack & Cuban 1995) thus creating an organizational framework that governs practice. Grammar is less conscious resistance to change than "unexamined institutional habits and widespread cultural beliefs about what constitutes a 'real school'" (88). Ethnographic research makes it possible to peer into the dynamics of school practices. In the following discussion, I turn to the educational classification of students and to institutional resistance to reforms in an effort to show first, how the reality of school differs from the beliefs outlined above (schools as objective, open, meritocratic, and capable of acting directly on society in prescribed ways) and second, how the intentions of reforms are mediated by the reality of practice.

The educational classification of students

Ability Grouping

In elementary schools the practice of grouping students according to homogenous ability is enacted with the intention of maximizing efficient and appropriate instruction. The practice of ability grouping, however, sets in motion a range of unintended consequences. This is a paradox of teaching. Because students may be misassigned and learn at different and varying rates, one would expect ability based groups to vary in size and number. Yet, the number of groups and the distribution of students remain relatively constant over and above ability distribution. Rather than being flexible and porous, ability groups are constrained by pragmatics, parents, and situational behavior understood to confirm placement. The notion of vacancy competition (Sorenson, 1970) explains ability grouping like a game of musical chairs. Reading groups and special programs have a limited number of spots. Once filled, this identity option is withdrawn from other students despite comparable "ability." A close look at ability grouping reveals competencies as properties of situations rather than of persons.[26]

Tracking decisions

The practice of assigning middle and high school students to tracks is an extension of ability grouping in elementary school. The consequences of track placement involve differential access to knowledge, disposition, and networks used for status attainment. As a process, tracking decisions significantly impact students' life chances. The factors impacting these decisions are particularly important in the study of social stratification considering that low income and minority students are disproportionately assigned to low ability, non-college bound tracks.

Oakes and Guiton's (1995) ethnography of high schools refutes both the nativist and single variable conflict theories of social reproduction discussed above. Instead,

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[26] Students come into classrooms possessing status characteristics that are differentially valued and contextual. The set of abilities valued as "smart" reflect the values of the community context and are activated in the context that supports them. Status characteristics also evoke expectations about the relative competence of children to perform a given ability set.

The formation of ability is directly related to the dimensionality of the classroom. Dimensionality affects the differentiation of tasks and the form and visibility of evaluation. It is the variable that determines how children learn to attribute ability to themselves and to each other. For instance, in a context where attention to literacy, listening quietly, and interest in assigned tasks are valued by the teacher, "smart" will represent positive evaluation of these behaviors in the minds of children.

Oakes and Guiton found that tracking decisions were the result of interacting structural, cultural, and political factors. They concluded that students were assigned to tracks based, not on inherent intelligence or background characteristics, but on

> [T]he synergy of three powerful factors: differentiated, hierarchical curriculum structures, school cultures alternatively committed to common schooling and accommodating differences, and political actions by individuals within those structures and cultures aimed at influencing the distribution of advantage (3).

Oakes and Guiton consistently found that schools viewed high school students' abilities, motivation, and aspirations as fixed. To decision makers, race, ethnicity, and social class signaled ability and motivation and thus influenced decisions. The curriculum was intended to accommodate, rather than alter, student characteristics. Curricular adaptions were constrained by structural factors such as staff capabilities, the number of sections of a course offered, prerequisites on enrollment, and other polices regulating enrollment. These contraints were found across the schools studied. Additionally, declining resources and demographic shifts constrained offerings and assignments.

The implications of tracking for the conventional view of schools are further strengthened by studies showing that academic performance is significantly impacted by the situation. Performance can be depressed or elevated. By manipulating the structure of a task or relations in a group it is possible to change performance of group members. For example, a single school study (Rosenbaum, 1975) found random placement in college or non-college bound tracks activated a set of expectations that impacted mean IQ scores over time regardless of background characteristics. The mean score for students in college bound tracks increased, as did the variance between scores. These students became a less homogenous group. The reverse was true for students in non-college bound tracks. In these tracks mean and variance decreased. The students became a more homogenous group. In other words, the track placement affected performance over and above standardized measures of individual ability.

Placement in special education programs

The language of PL 91-124, the act that generated the placement procedure and system studied, firmly locates disabilities *in* children. Yet, Mehan, Hertweck, and Meihls' (1986) study of the process of special education placement finds that, though decisions are ascribed to objective measures of some inherent quality of a child, decisions are heavily influenced by bureaucratic constraints and the particular circumstances. By locating the disability in the child, assessment and remediation focus on changing the child rather than the environment or procedures. Disability is constructed as a "function of educator's categories, institutional machinery, and students' conduct" (166). It is meaningful in the specific context in which it is generated.

Mehan, et al. examine the disparity between the circumstances available in formal organizations like schools and those assumed by rational models of decision making. To begin, schools must adapt to fiscal, legal, and practical constraints and are influenced by prior knowledge of students and committee procedures. Factors are not considered equally. A single factor, such as space available in a funding category, may outweigh others. Placements, the researchers conclude, are less a matter of deliberate choice than the consequences of routine, organizational procedure. Routine bureaucratic practices influence the process of educational classification. These include prescreening teachers' referrals, changing administrative reporting procedures, and discouraging referrals from certain educational programs at certain times of the years (158).

Through the process of placement, identities are constructed by institutionalized practices. Labeling, whether implicit or explicit, is more than recognition of performance, that is, ability, or the use of characteristics associated with social class background. By revealing the dynamics of the processes of stratification it becomes clear that access to knowledge, dispositions, and networks is not distributed based on objective measures of merit.[27]

[27] The influence of structural constraints on the diagnosis and placement of students in special education categories is reinforced by Christine Sleeter's (1986) examination of the rise of the category "learning disabled."

Resistance to Reform

Resistance to Detracking Reform

Wells and Serna (1991) examine the political struggles associated with detracking reforms and the role of elite parents' use of political and cultural capital to influence and resist reform implementation. In the schools, studied elite parents utilized four overlapping and intertwined strategies to co-opt and undermine detracking efforts. Elites alternately threatened flight, co-opted the institutional elites, promoted the buy-in of the "not-quite-elite," and offered symbolic capital as detracking bribes. These practices were used to maintain or alter the school structure when a potential threat to elite privilege was recognized. In the contest between democratic access and competitive advantage, elite parents relied upon an ideology of entitlement to justify the conflation of merit and privilege. Threats to a system that rewarded social distinction as distinction of merit were threats to the value of elites' cultural capital on the school market. While elites employed language that elevated the goal of rigorous academic preparation, the primary and practical issue was the preservation of high status culture as the equivalent of merit.

In this instance, reform that foregrounded democratic principles of equal access were stymied by the role of schools in allocating competitive advantage. The schools in this study needed the support of elite parents and were thus vulnerable to the strategies used to undermine the implementation of reform.

Responses to multicultural education reform

The intentions of reforms are mediated by beliefs about the nature of schools and attributes like race and class as well as the practical constraints on significantly and single-handedly changing the form or content of instruction. Reforms seeking multicultural education provide both a clear example of the redemptive assumption of schools in contemporary reform efforts and an illustration of how the intentions of scholar-reformers are mediated by the world of school. From this viewpoint, curricular revision is perceived as a critical step towards social justice. The power attributed to the redemptive curriculum is evident in James Banks' (1991) claim that "only when the canon is transformed to reflect cultural diversity will students in our schools and colleges be able to attain the knowledge, skills, and perspectives needed to participate effectively

in the global society of the next century" (23). Okamoto, Mehan, and Wills (1995) reinforce the belief that a multicultural reformation of the curriculum will significantly alter relations between identity groups in society. In their review of multicultural education literature, Sleeter and Grant (1987) call multicultural education a "reform movement" though program aims are diverse. Almost without exception multicultural education is seen primarily as an issue of identity representation and value transmission (Guillory, 1993). This is the classic tension between the competitive goals of high status knowledge and the democratic goals of permeating content with a "multicultural education perspective." In practice it is content-focused despite Sleeter and Grant's claim that the movement is directed at educational processes as well. The only commonality their review found was the expectation that changes in curricular content will benefit people of color.

Within the academy advocates of multicultural education reforms explore the depth and breadth required for significant change. However, the proposals of advocates are not equivalent to the practice of schools. The gap between the intentions of reform and the actual degree of implementation is generally wide. The overall focus of these reforms is on changing the attitudes and behaviors of the individual teacher who in turn becomes a redemptive agent (Sleeter & Grant, p.437). As these authors note, the widespread assumption is that the schools are fine—except for the teachers. Reform is expected to trickle down through teachers to students to society.

Textbook selection

Wong's (1991) study of public and professional participation in state-level textbook selection process illustrates the constraints on organizational decision making and the decoupling of practices from the official goals of policy. While interests groups were provided a forum to participate in the selection of textbooks, the influence of these interests was limited due to the "dominance of technical priorities." The practical interests of educators mediated the apparent pluralism of the selection process. While the policy requires a pluralist forum in order to closely coordinate textbooks with the desires of the school's constituencies, in reality the structure of the selection process was based on issues such as timeframe, ambiguities of purpose, and practical constraints (15). Additionally, a significant mismatch existed between the representatives of professional

interests and public interest groups' conceptions of what selection signified. Professionals viewed textbook selection as essentially the choice of an encyclopedic resource rather than a cultural product. Public interest groups considered the selection of textbooks as the selection and transmission of values and representation of identities. The impact of curricular reform by way of the textbook selection forum is thus highly limited by the priority of practical concerns for decision makers.

The Language of Reform

Up to this point my concern has been to establish a framework for understanding education reform. I have addressed the conflicting goals embedded within the educational system and the disjunct between belief and practice. I now wish to turn to rhetoric, the language of reform, and examine the affects of the language guiding federal, state, and district policies, on educational practice.

The purpose of rhetoric in relation to the public schools is to appeal to ideals that draw the support of an influential constituency through eloquent and persuasive language. It does not require accuracy, depth, or the protracted and uncomfortable examination of the implicit privilege, tacit discrimination, and conflicting ideals embodied in school practice. The constituency must be convinced, through phrases that evoke images and promote alliances, to accept the language of the new reform as embodying a real and significant change in school practice and thus in society. America's faith in schools' redemptive power, as stated before, makes education reform a logical response to perceived threats to morality, political stability, economic prosperity, or social harmony. The language of reform consequently relies upon the invocation of cherished ideals (such as equal opportunity, global economic superiority, and the "celebration" of diversity) and subterranean fears (such as loss of implicit privilege or economic prosperity and fear of difference) to persuade the constituency of the imperative for reform. Programs for change are reduced to slogans and buzzwords.

The language of reform serves to perpetuate assumptions about schools, society, and success and to obscure evidence about the political and cultural role of schooling in

social stratification. New programs tinker with the existing structure failing to closely examine the foundation upon which they build. While remodeling may occur on the upper floors, the foundational assumptions remain intact and unshaken. Reforms that challenge the basic structure of schooling stand little chance of large-scale acceptance and, where implemented, generally fail to endure (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Rhetoric ignores the organizational realities of schools, thereby allowing conventional beliefs to remain unchallenged. Rhetoric has alternately called for centralization and decentralization, teacher-centered and child-centered instruction, and academic preparation and vocational training. The current call for "excellence" via higher academic expectations, competent teachers, centralized core curriculum, and internationally competitive standardized tests scores has little to do with the actual institutional capacities of schools. Rhetoric, instead, focuses on ideals, the way people think the world should be, not the uncertainty and ambiguity of reality.

Power & Discourse: Why rhetoric matters

We should not, however, be misled by the protean nature of rhetoric to dismiss the power of language. The language of policy is critically important as it defines the structure and boundaries of and potential ruptures within educational discourse. Discourse, in the Foucaultian sense, extends beyond simple linguistic interchange to the body of practices (e.g. verbal, procedural, architectural) that govern *what* and *how* we see. Discourse speaks through the physical arrangements, schedules, and routine procedures of an institution. Policy language normalizes a particular way of talking about and acting upon schools and education. It produces "natural" priorities and constraints that govern topic, place, and time of discussion. The political importance ascribed to "just" words, the perpetual struggle to codify words as legally binding statutes, and the fact that language signals commitments, however vague, to ideals all point to the tremendous impact of reform rhetoric.

Language, and its counterpoint, silence, manifest dominant themes and truths of the discursive formation; in other words, that which participants perceive as legitimate or relevant to the system, is revealed through language. The knowledge of education forms

and remains meaningful within the boundaries of its field. Created by practices, rules, roles, and power, knowledge supports and perpetuates the dominant discursive formation. Discursive practices generate the defining rules (principles and procedures) of the discursive formation. Rules, in turn, determine the objects of discourse and define gestures, behaviors, and circumstances as appropriate and inappropriate. They determine who is heard and who is not heard by defining who is qualified to speak. Concepts and theories must assume the form of the rules (terminology, presentation, style, etc.) in order to be accepted as knowledge in discourse (Foss & Gill, 1987).

The significance of reform rhetoric, therefore, is that it acts as part of the discourse of power defining educational priorities and trends. Power, in this model, derives from the roles occupied by individuals over and above the personal characteristics of individuals themselves. The discursive practices and the rules of the discursive formation position roles differently within the power structure. For Foucault, power is a network of roots beneath the visible surface. The overall system of relationships spreads throughout the entire discursive formation and "exerts force that is continuous, subtle, automatic, generalized, taken for granted, and present in all aspects of the discursive formation" (Foss & Gill, 10). Though diffused and hidden, power is evidenced by conformity to norms.

According to Foucault (1978), "discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it" (101). The repressive aspects of power are coupled with creative capacity. Shifts in power are possible through shifts in definitions, in the language of policy, legitimized through the existing dominant discourse. Interest groups struggle for control of educational language as a means of controlling educational aims and practices. Dominance is the product of competition and negotiation. "The dominance of a particular discourse inevitably reflects the power structure of society. At the same time, however, the repeated playing out of the dominant discourse reinforces that structure" (Conley & O'Barr, 1998, p.7). For instance, the shifts from "whole-language instruction" to "phonics" to "word identification strategies" demonstrate the importance of words as signals of knowledge, whether political, social, or economic, accepted within a discourse as "true" or valid.

It should be remembered that discourse and its accompanying network of power relations are not necessarily the conscious and controlled agenda of any person or group. In seeking to understand the water of our fishbowl, the danger is that oversimplification and generalization will gloss over the essential element of uncertainty. Just as in water, refracted light causes undulations; our vision of the world has a wavery quality. The grandest, most abstracted explanation of how the world works must always be based upon observations of the simplest, most concrete interactions. For this reason, the abstract is, at best, an approximation of what *generally* occurs. It is never a guaranteed prediction of what *will* happen in any specific context. The rules of discourse develop independently of the motives and ideals of individual actors and should not be construed to invalidate individual actions.

Teachers, in general, sincerely believe that schools should provide equal opportunity to an excellent education for all children. They strive, within a tight web of constraints wholly beyond their control, to make these ideals reality. The individual teacher is concerned with the individual child. Like fish in water, both co-exist within the educational system, which is, in turn, firmly planted in a larger ecosystem of shifting relationships. The conceptual framework of a discursive formation should not justify condemnation of attempts to illuminate or alter it. Nevertheless, research is concerned with the congruence between the actual and the intended effects of educational practices.

The discourse of power in schools, then, requires rhetoric as its instrument. The language of policy defines the legitimate issues of education. Words *do* matter in large part because they define how we think about learning and teaching. This extends to the practices, rules, roles, and architecture that make up the discourse of school. What counts as legitimate content, scheduling, priorities, descriptions of students, classroom "management," attitudes, methods of instruction and assessment are governed by the discursive formation. The language of educational policy subsumes practice.

As the following sections demonstrate, the official rhetoric of reform policy in the last two decades has shifted and shaped professional and public priorities around standards, assessment, and accountability. In the sections that follow I will discuss the federal report, "A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform," Washington State's Educational Reform Act, and the recent education plan proposed by current

President George W. Bush. These examples illustrate how the language of reform, at both the national and state levels, embodies a redemptive metaphor and governs the bounds of legitimacy in education discourse.

From equity to excellence: The crisis revealed

In 1981 President Reagan created the National Commission on Excellence in Education charging it with the task of evaluating the quality of education in the United States. In 1983 the Commission produced its report, "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform," and once again focused the public on schools as the locus of redemption. Unlike prior national level reforms, which had focused on issues of constitutional equity, the "excellence movement" warns of severe national economic peril if the aggregate academic standing of the country's young people does not meet "internationally competitive" standards. The report expressed the firm conviction that schools were and are the foundation of individual and national prosperity, security, and civility. The "erosion" of America's educational foundation, the report continues, is the result of a "rising tide of mediocrity" that threatens the nation's existence. According to the report, the recent decline in educational excellence is evidence of regress from an original foundation of basic purposes, high expectations, and disciplined effort. This downward trend is attributed to "weakness of purpose, confusion of vision, under-use of talent, and lack of leadership [rather] than from conditions beyond our control." Evidence of the loss of international preeminence is presented in terms of "mediocre educational performance" described as equivalent to "an act of war" and "an act of unthinking, unilateral, educational disarmament."

The report, though it acknowledges the multiple obligations of schools to solve personal, social, and political problems, asserts that the "primary goal is the ideal of academic excellence." Only a demanding academic program for *all* students with tests for accountability can halt the specters of foreign supremacy. While the report speaks directly and eloquently to the civic function of common schooling, all but one of the stated risk indicators concerns perceived decline in standardized test scores and failure to be first in international comparisons. Though the report decries the demise of schools as

the origin of civic society, it focuses exclusively on indications that the United State's global economic supremacy is at risk. The report turns solely to standardized tests as a valid and reliable measure of "excellence." The one exception concerns the complaints of business and military leaders. The schools, claims these interests, do not meet society's demand for "highly skilled workers," instead producing graduates ill prepared for college or work who require remedial and costly training.[28]

"A Nation at Risk" defines "policies" of excellence in terms of individual motivation (hard work and "pushing personal limits") and vague school qualities such as "genuinely high standards" and "trying in every way possible to help students." The report broadly states its idealistic aspirations and assumptions as "policy" ignoring the complex realities of schools. Excellence, maintains the Commission, will not interfere with equity. The Commission brushes away real questions of educational reform, triumphantly proclaiming that,

> All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. The promise means that all children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment, and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself (4).

The Commission's recommendations include strengthening promotion and graduation requirements, developing more rigorous and measurable standards, increasing time devoted to schooling, improving the teaching profession, and increasing administrative leadership and fiscal support. The Commission asserts the federal government's ultimate responsibility to establish national interests in education but places primary responsibility

[28] The report claims that the "average graduate of our schools and colleges is not as well-educated as the average graduate of 25 or 35 years ago, when a much smaller proportion of our population completed high school and college." Several questionable assumptions are evident here. Foremost, the report assumes that, as the rules of access to schooling became more inclusive, schools merely expanded their operation on a similar population of students as a neutral provider of skills and knowledge. This neglects evidence that schools are a mechanism of social stratification and a place where competitive individual interests are in conflict with democratic ideals.

for financing, governing, and implementing the proposed reforms on state and local officials, in keeping with Reagan's political agenda of decentralizing government.

The report, infused with a fervent moral call to repentance, speaks directly to parents, educators, and students, exhorting each group to take responsibility for exemplifying the virtues of intellectual and moral integrity, hard work, and commitment. Students, should they ever encounter and care to read this revivalist message, are sternly warned that they "forfeit [their] chance for life at its fullest when [they] withhold [their] best effort in learning." In the end, despite parents and teachers efforts, only a full commitment to the academy as *the* means of grace will enable students to create and control their destiny. The race is open to all students and the federal government announces its commitment to maintaining a fair and equal chance at winning *via the sanctioned means of academic excellence measured by "scientifically" objective tests.* The report ends with a resounding declaration of eventual American success. Progress marches on.

The response to "A Nation at Risk" was rapid, wide, and persistent. Across the country, hundreds of reform measures were adopted by states, on the promise of rhetoric (Plank, 1988). Various reforms promised to improve teachers, the learning environment, and school leadership, as well as develop curriculum standards and measures of student proficiency (Timar & Kirp, 1988). The priorities of this new discourse filtered through state education systems. Excellence might elude definition and be impossible to compel, but the regulation of excellence through standards, assessment, and accountability was accepted, even embraced, by the public and the institution. Though strategies varied by state, one trend was clear: as the isomorphic pattern of homogenization emerged, innovation was discouraged. Who could refuse children excellence? Who could refuse the legitimacy such reforms garnered with the public, state, and federal officials?

The residue of policies vaguely grouped under the pursuit of "excellence" remains uncertain. However, the policies adopted by states attest to the power of the federal agenda to structure the discourse of education. Ten years after "A Nation at Risk", the Washington State legislature adopted the Education Reform Act. The language of this document provides an illustration of how the priorities articulated at the national level

helped focus state level excellence reforms and further define the boundaries of educational discourse.

The Nation Responds: Washington State

An heir to the themes of "A Nation at Risk", Washington State's Education Reform Act of 1993 directs the formation of a Commission on Student Learning charging it with the development of standards, assessment, and accountability. The standards are to be academically challenging, a reflection of the "high expectations" component of excellence. The Commission oversaw the development of assessments and other "scientific," objective measures of student achievement based on the standards.[29] The creation of a statewide system of test score reporting is intended to hold schools and districts accountable for the results of education (Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2001, p.1). The Engrossed Substitute House Bill 1209 (1993) justifies reform by pointing to changes in the workplace and in society in general. ESHB 1209 also specifically states that Washington State's student achievement scores need to appear competitive on international comparisons. The stated intention of the reforms is to improve *all* students' achievement by allowing school boards and educators greater flexibility to determine instructional methods. However, the sole measure of excellence continues to be standardized tests, a method that caters to a particular type of quantifiable knowledge. Flexibility is only freedom as long as it improves test scores, a subtlety that is ignored.

The program outlined for improving student achievement in Washington State includes several themes. First, internationally competitive standards of achievement for all students are required. Second, the report requires parents and students to accept greater responsibility for school outcomes. Third, educators are promised "time and resources" to collaborate and cooperate towards improved test scores. Fourth, the state requires instructional programs, or "educational pathways," to be relevant to students' future plans. Fifth, schools must provide alternative or additional instruction for students

[29] The law required the responsibilities and activities of the Commission be transferred in August 2000 to the Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction.

who have difficulty meeting, meet, or exceed the standards. Via the program themes, state law legally structures the educational priorities of all officials, educators, parents, and students.

The impact of this reform agenda has been most obvious in the standards requirement. To meet this requirement Washington State developed the Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs) and related assessments, most notably the Washington State Assessment of Student Learning (WASL). Together, the EALRs and the WASL, exemplify how standards, assessment, and accountability have come to embody excellence in education. These documents were followed with state "benchmarks" for each curriculum area at each grade level (two givens of the discourse). Currently, the state is developing "frameworks" that will essentially provide a statewide curriculum. From this perspective, educational achievement is viewed as a function of individual hard work and ability, accurately measured by standardized tests and duly rewarded. Moreover, this Act serves as a clear example of how the language of reform perpetuates American's faith in the ubiquitously saving grace of the right kind of schooling. [30]

"Leave no child behind": Transforming the federal role in education

Compared to departments of education in other industrialized nations, the United States Department of Education has historically exercised weak control over public education, a task primarily organized and monitored by states. After several decades of federal concern over educational equity and funding, the policies associated with "A Nation at Risk" sought to withdraw federal involvement, at least financially, in public schools. As recently as 1994, the Republican Party sought to eliminate the Department of Education altogether. However, under George W. Bush's current education plan, the department's power will be significantly increased through the annual assessment of schools and states based on state level standardized testing in grades 3rd-8th.

[30] I am not, of course, suggesting that such reforms have no affect. Indeed, reforms may very well improve measures of their stated goals. However, it is not the purpose of this paper to reduce questions of educational reform to black or white judgments. Again, this paper is concerned with how the redemptive metaphor is perpetuated, despite considerable evidence that schools are not what they claim to be.

The Bush plan continues the metaphor of redemption announcing a "genuine national crisis" reflected in "abysmal" educational results. (The Executive Summary however, neglects to consider the fallacy of comparing radically different educational systems such as Cyprus, South Africa, and the United States, instead focusing solely on aggregate test scores.) The plan prioritizes increasing accountability for student performance as a means of improving academic performance of students, especially the disadvantaged (i.e. poor and minority children in city and rural schools). It also calls for improved teacher quality, movement of limited English proficiency students to fluency, encouragement of safe schools, increased funding for Impact Aid, encouragement of "freedom and accountability," and the promotion of parental choice and innovative programs. This last priority raises the most fuss and frustration on Capitol Hill, in teachers' lounges and on radio talk shows.

Bush plans to allow parents to transfer their student, and the school income attached to their student, from schools that "persistently fail to perform" to successful schools. While cached in the rhetoric of equal opportunity for all, this plan benefits students and families with the *habitus* to believe and resources to achieve alternate possibilities. Moreover, assuming that high scoring districts and private schools will open their doors to any and all students from failing schools, and that student and families will have the resources beyond federal tuition money (e.g. transportation, social networks, and knowledge of school politics) to make this possible assumes a great deal. Indeed, this policy takes for granted that if schools want to succeed (in terms of test scores), they can, and if students want to succeed, they can as well. "Success" is transformed into a function of internal motivation rather than a complex matrix of constraints and possibilities.

The increase in accountability is joined with increased flexibility in how standards are met. Flexibility and bureaucratic reduction are expressed primarily in terms of funding. Financial incentives are promised and sanctions threatened, presumably to motivate those responsible for improving test scores. However, financial incentive, strong trends towards institutional isomorphism, and the "focus on what works" provision of the Bush plan, make the likelihood of innovation and risk slim. According to the Executive Summary, federal funds will only be spent on programs that are "effective"

and "research based." Additionally, the goal of change is to improve test scores. Invoking the pseudo-scientific authority of research limits the range of programs eligible for funding and that qualify as legitimate means of boosting test scores.

The key word of the Bush plan is "responsibility." Bush uses this to mean that schools must focus on the "most important activity of the enterprise" (that is, academic excellence) and that those who will be held responsible, teachers, parents, and students, are "given greatest latitude and support" and therefore expected to produce the desired results. In other words, the priority of all those "responsible" is the successful acquisition of a culturally and personally specific field called academic excellence. Failure and success are attributed to ability and internal effort, *not* the structural organization of schools, cultural mythologies, an economic system that classifies people's worth based on educational credentials, or a definition of a "productive" citizen as one that furthers national economic and corporate interests. Failure is treated as a problem of schools, not as a logical outgrowth of the discourse they embrace.

Overall, the Bush plan strengthens the emphasis on standards, assessment, and accountability and neglects the larger network of relationships embedding schools and their participants. By fine-tuning one aspect of the system, change may well occur, but the entire instrument is not transformed.

Conclusions

In this paper I have endeavored to unearth the redemptive theme that guides and sustains the American school system. Faith in school's power to redeem the individual and society from myriad of social, political, economic, and moral woes is rooted in a set of assumptions about the nature and relationship of schools and society. The belief that school reforms have direct, immediate, and predictable affects on society leads people to treat schools as malleable, easily controlled objects. The official adoption of a reform package, codified in language, is expected to provide a remedy for any and all problems when, in reality, schools transform reform intentions while maintaining their basic structural form.

We must note that, in spite of the rhetorical emphasis on change, the majority of reform policy leaves the basic organization of schools and society unquestioned. Popular belief firmly maintains that schools can and should operate objectively and meritocratically to ensure hardworking, talented individuals success. Dominant discourse patterns organize rhetorical and practical priorities in such a way that radical change is difficult to conceive, let alone achieve, at a popular level. The resilience of elements such as the Carnegie unit, subjects, and standardized tests testify to this. Popular opinion displays the subtlety of discourse boundaries by framing education trends as self-evident, sensible, and natural. From this perspective it appears logical that:

a) schools should articulate exactly what it is they want students to learn and exactly how it can be shown if students did indeed learn a demonstratable skill,
b) schools and teachers should be held "responsible" to the parents, community, state, and eventually the nation if students fail to demonstrate prescribed levels of achievement, and
c) standardized tests are the logical way to assess "essential" learning.

By assuming school's neutrality and objective authority, the language of reform assumes that schools as they are presently organized are the redemptive agent capable of solving society's problems. This organization is deemed sufficient and reform need only tinker with the existing structure.

Such idealized assumptions obscure the realities of school practice. Schools do not sort students solely on the basis of objective measures of merit. The educational classification of students is a process that involves a complex interplay of institutional factors, student characteristics, and unpredictable wild cards. Schools are vested with the authority to define a person's field of possibilities. Common perceptions of schools justify their impact by attributing decisions to a combination of individual ability and internal motivation. The assumptions discussed above fail to take into consideration the character of the institution, its rules of access and passage, and its boundaries.

However, the issue is not eliminating bias in educational classification and testing but in moving beyond recognition of the bias of any institution to confront the consequences of a self-perpetuated illusion of objectivity and doctrinal purity. As long as the redemptive metaphor remains tacit, the language of reform will continue to lead

advocates and the public to place their faith in educational "packages" and expect that, by plugging such reforms into the "machine," schools will clunk out a predetermined product. The dynamic and paradoxical position of a school system committed to enhancing individual competition, promoting democratic community, and surviving as an institution cannot be reduced to so simple an explanation.

While shifts in policy language do not guarantee the intended outcomes, such shifts do alter the way education is thought about and acted upon. The current crusade for excellence, for instance, has shifted schools' focus towards standards, assessment, and accountability. Reforms under the excellence banner have overall strengthened the bureaucratic trends of schools and reinforced the existing organization. Yet, the language of reform requires a change in rhetorical emphasis, in administrative practice, and, on some level, in teachers' practice. Despite the apparent cyclical motion of reforms, trends in the last hundred years have consistently moved towards investing schools with the authority of objectivity. The pervasive image of schools as society's basic and critical redeeming institution remains a significant element of our cultural mythology.

The historical evolution of school reform and the social administration of change have transformed the image of religious atonement into one of social planning intended to recover the social outcast, restore society to the good path, and rescue the weak from ignorance. Learning is linked to moral knowledge and behaviors for social salvation. Redemption in this sense has to do with saving people from socially unproductive lives to fill roles needed in the imagined good society. It thereby normalizes a certain idea of what the world should be and subsequently creates categories of deviance while legitimating outcomes as the result of individual ability and motivation.

Education may be in the service of any number of causes. However, in relation to the argument presented in this paper that schools are not passive transmitters of selected messages but rather participate in dynamic interplay with students, reform, and the social environment, the ability of schools to carry such goals to fruition is questionable. Whatever the crux of the redemptive message, it (and the student) must travel through the medium of the school and this—unless radically altered—has a highly resilient form. Radical change to the form and meaning of schooling presents serious problems of legitimacy. As an institution, schools are intimately intertwined with cultural

mythologies and processes of stratification. The power of schooling is not lightly dismissed. The primary difficulty with the redemptive metaphor is that it creates a ubiquitous good, education, and allows it to become a panacea for problems indicative of larger social trends. The redemptive metaphor has a thousand faces, and each masks the complex power relations manifested in school practices.

Schools influence society in myriad ways, but they are incapable of "saving" society. The more we imbue ours schools with a redemptive mission, the more we create the conditions for reform failure. My recent teaching experience confirms these assertions; we teachers can influence students, but we cannot redeem society. Even still, I am an 8 p.m. cynic and an 8 a.m. optimist. Such a split personality represents the dualism inherent in teaching, especially with regard to the redemptive metaphor in school reform. Social expectation calls us to redeem the world; we struggle to weave together possibilities. The discourse of schooling would be much more constructive, however, if we tempered the former, and concentrated on the latter.

Amen.

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