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Educational Reform

‘Reform’ is a complex concept. As a noun, the term is used to describe changes in policy, practice, or organization. As a verb, ‘reform’ refers to intended or enacted attempts to correct an identified problem. As an educational aspiration, its’ goal is to realize deep, systemic, and sustained restructuring of public schooling.

Throughout the history of American public education, reform has been a means of conceiving and enacting visions of the collective good. From the establishment of common schools, through struggles over John Dewey’s advocacy for public education as the primary method of social reform, to the far-reaching ambitions of No Child Left Behind, reform efforts have responded to conditions of broad consequence that require ethically-centered and future-oriented deliberation and action.

Approaches to Reform

Reform movements in American public education have been framed by declarations of *crisis*, with rhetoric of intolerable urgency, and visions of *hope*, with inspirational themes to guide principled action. What constitutes crisis and hope has been largely shaped by three competing conceptions of educational reform—**Essentialism**, **Progressivism**, and **Holism**. Reform can be glimpsed in terms of the controversies raised for educational principles, policy, and practice in American public schools.

Essentialism: For Essentialists, educational philosophy and policy center on providing access for all citizens to a common literacy—a core of knowledge, skills, and values applicable across time and cultures. Heavily informed by Idealist and Realist philosophies, learning is conceived as an individual quest for excellence. Learners are to

accumulate the knowledge base and higher-level cognitive skills necessary to lead an intellectually, morally, economically, and socially productive life. The learner's progress is acknowledged and rewarded by achieving and maintaining positions in competitive hierarchies. Public schools, through teachers as primary agents, lead individuals along a clearly defined path by articulating, modeling, and holding learners accountable to universally held standards. Teachers, as respected authorities, skillfully guide learners to humanity's highest thoughts (e.g. Socratic method, liberal studies) and most useful methods for shaping the world around them (e.g. formal logic, critical reasoning). As all are offered the same invitation to excel, manifest variations in needs, abilities, and interests are understood and accepted as differences in personal motivation and merit. As all receive a common grounding in prevailing traditions and expectations, learners experience a sense of shared purpose and social unity.

Contemporary Essentialists are critical of most aspects of public school performance. Current reform objectives and initiatives feature national standards for student achievement and teacher preparation (citing significant discrepancies in state-based standards and requirements); the emergence of a national curriculum (emphasizing advanced placement, 'cultural literacy,' 'numeracy,' and scientific reasoning); strengthening student, school, and district accountability for academic performance (emphasizing standardized tests); expanding school choice (emphasizing open enrollment, charter schools, and home schooling); enhancing connections between educational and economic goals (emphasizing job-readiness and consumer education); and promoting 'character development' (emphasizing role modeling, patriotism, and traditional social values).

Progressivism: Progressive educators also pursue universal access to personal fulfillment but work to promote social justice (emphasizing civil rights) and social change (emphasizing educational, economic, and political equity). Progressives draw from a broad range of philosophical perspectives including Romanticism, Humanism, Pragmatism, and Social Reconstructionism. Education remains largely an individual journey, but one leading to a broadened self-identity and heightened sense of social responsibility. The definition of valued knowledge is expanded beyond the intellectualized priorities of the Essentialists, to assert inclusion of emotional dimensions of learning and to recognize education as an explicitly political endeavor. The central purpose of public schooling shifts from preparing ‘the best and the brightest’ to compete academically and economically, to empowering those disadvantaged by their social position to pursue their educational goals and improve the quality of their lives. Knowledge is explicitly acknowledged as a form of power. Learners are encouraged to acquire knowledge to strengthen their skills in self-efficacy (e.g. values clarification and affective learning) and social advocacy (e.g. feminist and critical pedagogy). The Progressive teacher guides learners through carefully designed experiences (i.e. developmentally appropriate and responsive to diverse learning styles) so that they might work together to construct knowledge (e.g. constructivist pedagogy and cooperative learning). Knowledge is valued for its relevance and utility to specific persons in specific social contexts. Progressive classrooms are to extend into all aspects of community life. Communities are called upon to restructure patterns of social and economic privilege to guarantee movement from goals of equal access, toward goals of equal power, participation, and performance.

Current Progressive reform advocacy includes more equitable school financing (e.g. increased state and federal funding, decreased property tax dependence); power-sharing through de-centralization (e.g. site-based management, charter schools); multicultural, bilingual, anti-bias, and gender-fair curriculum (i.e. responsive to academically and socially significant dimensions of diversity); strengthened ties between schools and communities (e.g. service learning, community partnerships); and teaching the skills of democratic deliberation and social activism (e.g. contemporary issues-driven/discussion-based curriculum, civic engagement, authentic democratic school governance).

Holism: The third approach, Holism, draws from Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, Transcendentalism, indigenous belief systems, and ecologically-centered philosophies. The primary purpose of public education is to encourage full development and integration of mind, heart, body, and spirit while promoting social and environmental communion. For Holists, knowing is essentially relational—it occurs within the context of connections that are close, compassionate, enduring, and mutually beneficial. Holists work to design schooling to encourage supportive relationships across multiple dimensions of learning: *intrapersonal learning* (i.e. promoting integration of mind/heart/body/spirit); *interpersonal learning* (i.e. enhancing the quality of relationships among people and building community); and *transpersonal learning* (i.e. connecting in life-affirming ways with non-human entities, spiritual values, and social and environmental forces). As each individual is fundamentally connected to the whole of humanity and non-human nature, deep knowing is at once intensely personal and profoundly social. Personal transformation occurs in harmony with social and biophysical worlds, resonating outward

through intricate webs of relationship. Its effects are strengthened when communion is created across dimensions of difference. Individual, societal, and biophysical diversity is valued and protected because it provides opportunities for creative synthesis and renewal. Holists struggle to develop and integrate a spiritual dimension along with intellectual, emotional, and moral aspects of learning and life. Spirituality is described and experienced as the inspirational moment at which elusive and complex understandings suddenly become clear. Though difficult to capture in words, such moments are characterized by intense and elegant integration of sensation, emotion, insight, and mystery.

Contemporary Holist educators favor shaping public education to be more interdisciplinary (emphasizing interdependencies between fields and methods of inquiry); multi-sensory (emphasizing opportunities to synthesize perceptive, cognitive, emotional, and kinesthetic learning); and exploratory (emphasizing student inquiry over content-coverage). Also featured are broadly conceived understandings of environmental sustainability (emphasizing environmental ethics and both social and economic consequences of consumption) and civic education (emphasizing non-violent conflict resolution and coalition-building). Holists further envision public education reform that supports spiritual development (emphasizing intuition, aesthetics, and non-materialism).

Challenges to Reform

Advocates of Essentialist, Progressive, and Holistic approaches have actively engaged in reform, but remain deeply dissatisfied with the results and sharply critical of the status quo. Essentialists have attempted to influence decision elites—some target master teachers, local school boards, state departments of education, and state legislators,

while others lobby national policy-makers. They have generally adopted a top-down implementation style, seeking mandatory standards from higher authorities and directing their preferred changes downward through the school system. They have been frustrated, however, by incomplete compliance attributed to resistance from mid-level administrators, professional curriculum developers, many classroom teachers and their unions, and special interest groups championing specific categories of students and their needs.

Progressives have also attempted to influence decision elites, often petitioning the courts to bring sweeping changes in federal, state, and district level policy. Although their reform aspirations are broad and systemic, initiatives are most frequently implemented locally, as targeted demonstration projects. While much frustration flows from bureaucratic indifference and interference, at the same time Progressives confront widespread public and professional ambivalence toward what is perceived as an excessively critical perspective and overtly political agenda. Transforming public education to be the primary site for social change is as politically volatile as it is pedagogically challenging.

Holists have “dreamed impossible dreams” in an implementation environment that sometimes shares their broad objectives, but effectively thwarts most of their programmatic attempts. Their aspirations for a fully integrated public school experience confront increasingly competitive, specialized, and segmented bureaucratic, social, economic, and political realities. Professionalized division of labor and fragmented curricula, along with entrenched hierarchies and their oppositional politics, are usually successful in resisting Holism’s distinctively expansive and integrative reform efforts.

Most initiatives are relegated to the margins, or struggle to survive outside of traditional public school systems.

Comprehensive Reform

Essentialism, Progressivism, and Holism present competing educational principles, contrasting approaches to policy, and distinctive pedagogies. All three share advocacy for comprehensive, systemic change. Yet given the barriers to enacting any complex vision in large, resource-constrained, bureaucratic, and authoritarian socio-political systems, *deep reform is a daunting ambition*. In practice, implemented reforms generated by all three positions have been fragmented, incremental, and programmatically fragile. None have resulted in broadly sustained philosophical, institutional, or participatory change. In education, politics, and the economy, fundamental patterns of opportunity and interaction are rarely altered in structural ways.

If we are to reduce the gap between reform aspirations and their realization, radical changes—those that are deeper and more systemic—are necessary to ensure greater equity and effectiveness in schools and society. While advocates often claim widely shared values, the politics of education reform has been divisive and oppositional. The exclusivity projected by the most ardent Essentialists, Progressives, and Holists as they have pursued change on their own terms, has limited cooperation and depleted imagination. New reform perspectives, with new political and pedagogic practices, need to be composed through collaborative discourse and hard work among proponents of the three approaches.

Comprehensive, systemic public education reform can be negotiated and implemented through local strategic coalitions among the three competing positions.

Reform strategies that build from diverse perspectives are necessary to support continuing participation of ideological adherents, as well as those who demand a predetermined organizational form or pedagogic design. Continuing connections will then need to be established linking school and district level initiatives to state and national policy development.

Comprehensive, systemic reform is an evolving project that brings new insights to perennial public education concerns, that requires reconfiguring both human and material resources, and that challenges advocates' imagination and stamina. Comprehensive educational reform must embrace deeper visions, bolder proposals, and sustained innovation.

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Further Readings

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