Returning to an Ideal That Never Existed: Business Management and the Rhetoric of School Reform

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Abstract

The rhetoric of conservative reformers and big business seems to have found favor with a public dissatisfied with the limitations of earlier more liberal approaches to public education. Bennett, Hirsch, and Finn (among others) have capitalized upon the "back to basics" approach to educational reform. As the name suggests, theirs is an approach rooted in the past. Unfortunately, these conservative reformers have too readily forgotten the lessons learned from attempts at reform by their ideological forebears. Their historically shortsighted notion of going "back" to basics suggests an idyllic era that never existed. More specifically, the conservative language of school reform mirrors that of another era: industrialization and its corresponding focus upon social efficiency. Reformers at the turn of the last century followed the model provided them by the management of big business. Today's trend appears to be a recycling of this tradition sans reflection upon some of the more salient and disturbing outcomes of it. The current trend, led largely by business leaders themselves, establishes a respective identity of "consumers" for students and "managers" for educators while ignoring the need for critical thinkers and critical consumers who truly have power to engender change in themselves and their worlds.

Introduction

When studying any major aspect of a society over time significant and often predictable patterns emerge. Seldom is historical development truly linear; rather, historical patterns tend to be cyclical—or, more precisely, spiral—in nature. Political, economic, and social trends of the past are repeated, albeit with significant modifications. This pattern holds true for educational trends, especially in the arena of educational change and reform (Wexler, 1998). Very few suggestions for educational reform today are truly unique; rather, they in many ways mirror and/or build upon earlier attempts at bettering America's schools.

The modern age has brought with it pleas from all sides of the political spectrum for major changes in the ways in which we school our children. Suggestions for change—whether conservative, progressive, or radical—are usually predicated upon the respective foundations provided for us by earlier educational reformers. At one time or another in the recent past, advocates for each approach have found varying degrees of success in attempts at changing the ways schools operate. Yet, no matter what approach taken, the successful reform of schools has always been partial and limited. Such limitations result in pseudo-paradigm shifts: when any one approach fails to produce dramatic results quickly, it gives way to another approach. This trend is not unique to educational reform. Rather, the failure of or limitation in a conceptual approach is, at its core, the root cause of paradigm shifts; when faced with seemingly unanswerable problems, we seek solutions via new approaches to that problem (Kuhn, 1962). In educational reform, however, the paradigms to which we have a tendency to shift our focus are already established. Today, we argue, the focus of educational reform is shifting towards a vision of education that in many ways parallels that of educators and politicians during the industrial revolution; "good" or "efficient" education is

increasingly equated with industrialization, social efficiency, and consumerism.

Partially in response to the progressive and radical approaches attempted in the 1960s and 1970s, conservative reformers have found favor with a public that is largely dissatisfied with the limitations of earlier more liberal approaches (Giroux, 1998). William Bennett (1987), E.D. Hirsch (1988, 1996), and Chester Finn (1991), among many others, have capitalized upon what they have labeled a "back to basics" approach to education. As the name suggests, theirs is not a new approach to educational reform; instead it is one deeply rooted in the past. Unfortunately, in their zeal to try something different conservative reformers have, this paper posits, too readily forgotten the lessons learned from attempts at reform by their ideological forebears. Their notion of going "back" to basics is highly selective and biased towards an egalitarian power structure. Conservative reformers are, we suggest, in danger of providing an example for Hegel's cynical notion that "What experience and history teach is this—that people and governments have never learned anything from history, or acted upon the principles deduced from it" (1832).

More specifically, the conservative language of school reform so popular among politicians today largely mirrors that of another era: industrialization and its corresponding focus upon social efficiency. School reformers at the turn of the last century attempted to follow the model of big business. Borrowing from the example provided by industrialization, conservative educators and business leaders saw notions of standardization—e.g., through statewide and nationwide curriculum, routine testing, and rigid rubrics for teacher training—as the elixir to the myriad problems confronting schools (Elson, 1964; Tyack, 1974). The conservative movement today has, evidence shows, revived and refocused upon notions of managing schools in the business tradition. Yet this trend appears to be a recycling of an older tradition *sans* reflection upon some of the more salient outcome(s) of that tradition. Similarly, by borrowing the rhetoric of an earlier era—that of industrialization and corporate management—the current reform agenda not only presupposes that learning and maximum financial efficiency are synonymous, but also it equates students and consumers. The current trend in school reform, led largely by business leaders themselves, helps to establish a respective identity of "consumers" for students and "managers" for educators.

This paper examines the cyclical and/or spiral nature of school reform. More specifically, the paper historically examines the rhetoric of school reform, both as it exists today and as it existed at the beginning of the twentieth century. The paper shows the consistency across time of the language—and with it the ideology—of business management for schools. After illustrating the similarities in language, we conclude with a discussion or manifesto on how to change the rhetoric of school reform by focusing on reframing the debate and the language used.

Conceptual Framework

Understanding the role of language in a reform movement is imperative to gaining a true understanding of the ideology of that movement. The language of a movement can neither be separated from the ideology nor the action that such a movement entails. Walter Ong (1982) posits that language is itself the foundation of culture. The manner in which we communicate speaks to more than linguistics; it reveals who we are and how we think. Because any form of language is so imbued with cultural meaning, it cannot be value neutral (Bourdieu, 1970). Similarly, Norman Fairclough (1992, 1995) suggests that meaning is made through the interaction of language and context; his approach to discourse analysis is premised upon the belief that the language we employ

in any given situation speaks to more than the words themselves. Language, or more specifically discourse, is not merely the transference of ideas from one person or people to another; it is the very making of meaning and shaping of identities. The language used within and/or authorized by the powers of a society shapes who we are and how we think (Fairclough, 1995). The role of the discourse analyst should, therefore, be critical; linguistically-minded academics must examine not only what is said or written, but also the manner in which types of discourse (e.g., legal and political discourse, academic discourse, media discourse, the discourse of reform, etc.) authorize and shape some ideas while summarily editing and thereby silencing other ideologies and voices (Elson, 1964, Ladson-Billings, 1998).

This paper ties together the ideology and the language of current school reform efforts and links the current "back to basics" and statewide assessment movements to similar approaches undertaken at the very beginning of the twentieth century. In so doing, it attempts to reveal some of the significant dangers underlying such an approach, namely its tendency to perpetuate consumerism and hegemony in new generations of American students.

Method

Historical research is integral to this study. To gain a representative sample of the language for and efforts at school reform at the beginning of the last century, we conducted a literature review of the history of American schooling, focusing specifically on the language and ideology of past reform movements. We also searched databases and archives to find examples of the language (and ideology) of past school reformers. More contemporary data was obtained from an examination of national and local newspapers, newsmagazines, governmental reports, proposed educational legislation, as well as from the recent efforts at school reform in one state (Colorado). Specifically, the New York Times archive was searched using the key words education reform high school from the years 1880 – 1920. The searched generated 193 articles. Titles and abstracts of articles were read to as an initial screening. A total of "X" articles were selected for further analysis. Due to the quantity of data found through initial searches, articles for further review were selected based upon the appropriateness and correlation of the article title to the purposes of this essay. We intentionally limited the time frames searched to the years 1880-1920 and 1990-2008. We hypothesized that the period of the late industrial revolution would yield rhetoric and ideology not unlike the business-focused school reform rhetoric and ideology of today.

Findings

Sadly, and despite a century of social and technological advancement, the rhetoric of school reform from one hundred years ago is strikingly similar to the rhetoric that today frames debates on the state of schools and what can be done to "fix" them. Such rhetoric has served, we posit, to frame debates about educational reform in the same ways in both eras; the discourse used to discuss the debates has, a comparison of historical and contemporary evidence suggests, framed and limited possibilities for change. Debates about school reform have been—and remain—rooted in the discourse of business and industry and thus have focused consistently on efficiency, quality controls, inputs and outcomes, and on the student as a commodity. Four primary themes emerge from our reading and interpretation of this historical and discursive data: teacher quality and preparedness (the teacher as a production-line worker), students as products (viewed in the aggregate and as standardized rather than as individuals), standardized and 'appropriate' curriculum for *all* students

(creating consistent products via consistent inputs), and fiscal conservatism (producing the product at the lowest possible cost).

Teacher Quality and Preparedness

During the industrial revolution, critics and reformers alike attributed many (if not most) of the problems of our schools to problems with our teachers. Poor teacher quality was frequently cited as a cause of student academic failure and as in need of reforming. For instance, a New York Times (NYT) article in April 1891 stated that "the greatest need of reform in our school system is in the quality of the teachers. First of all, we need to get rid of about a third—perhaps a fourth might do—of the present force, who are incompetent and unfit for the service." However, despite this focus on "quality," educators, administrators, and policymakers alike cannot agree on what makes a high quality teacher. Throughout the past hundred years, there has been great debate on how to identify or nurture quality. An another NYT article, in 1891, it was suggested that the solution to finding quality teachers could be a combination of using a type of merit system as well as "a system of competitive examinations for teachers in various positions" while also offering only temporary or probationary positions. But while some were arguing for more testing and qualifications (i.e., is more control and oversight) others were arguing, as is evident in a 1899 NYT article, that instead of making it harder to be a teacher, we should "break down the [licensure] barriers … for teachers in the high schools."

Debates like these have resurfaced during the past 20 years with one side arguing for the importance of traditional teacher preparation programs, while others arguing for the need to abolish barriers to teaching. Each supposes that poor student performance is based, at least in part, upon the fact that there are too few quality teachers in the classroom. For instance, the No Child Left Behind Law (NCLB) suggests—though more through implication than direct critique—that public school students are failing largely due to poor teachers and therefore poor teacher preparation. NCLB argues that, to increase student academic achievement, reformers must first improve "…teacher and principal quality" and therefore increase "the number of highly qualified teachers in the classroom" (NCLB, Title II, §2101.(1), (2).). The obvious suggestion here is that many of the teachers of the past few generations have not been 'highly qualified.' Yet, while the No Child Left Behind Act originally specified that all teachers need to be "highly qualified" by the year 2005-2006 (NCLB, §1119. (a)(2)), it was far from specific as to what "highly qualified" means. Teachers could be alternatively considered highly qualified if they completed a teacher education program or any number of alternative programs (the Act suggests that states be open to a variety of such programs); teachers could be highly qualified if they demonstrated content knowledge in a field via work experience in that field or via successful grades in that content area in a college or graduate school, and they could be considered qualified if they had any number of viable pre-teaching life/career experiences (but no formal training as teachers (Block, 2006).

Further, critics have debated about the importance of content knowledge. For instance, in a 1914 New York Times article (2.15.1914) it stated that "The remedy for these conditions...[is to] require that the teachers know thoroughly the subjects they propose to teach. Second, require them to teach only those subjects."

Finally, others have argued or seem to suggest that the quality problem is related to pay. The argument goes, if you would pay your teachers more, more high quality people would want to be teachers. For instance, in a 1912 New York Times article, it states, "we are underpaying our school teachers even now, and, therefore, are not getting ... the men and women fitted best to give that training" *New York Times 1.14.1912*

Student's as Products

Education and school as type of industry or business that produces products is another theme that emerged. There are a few different elements and manifestations of this theme; that is, efficiency, school as machine,

A commonly cited theme is the depiction of schools as machines. Take for instance the following quote from a April 29, 1897 New York Times article, "The public schools are a huge machine, managed by a board of clerks". Some have compared schools to machines in a positive manner. Often this description is used in a negative way. Take for instance, the following statement, "the old and wide-spread complaint that education is but too often machine-made" (New York Times 2.15.1914). Or the following from a 1912 article, "we are turning out machine-made pupils, fashioned without much regard for the material of which they are composed" (New York Times 1.14.1912). Or even, "these is a strong reaction coming in general methods of education, and that growing feeling, which is gaining rapidly in strength, that the human element must be recognized, and cannot be so disregarded as to make the future workers mere automatic machines" Times Nov. 12, 1909.

However, schools tend to be favorably described as machines when politicians and policy makers are making a plea for "efficiency." For instance, in a 1891 article in the New York Times, it stated that "efficient teachers all other changes are of little avail". Further, in a later article in 1910, the author suggested that the uneconomical and inefficient nature of district schools were "only a little better than no school" Times March 6, 1910. Then later, in a Sept 27, 1915, it is suggested that "the more efficient organization of the teachers' efforts which… is so richly productive that, rivaling the achievements of the best efficiency engineers in factories, in enlarging output with the same expenditure of worker's energy, we may be able to secure as good an educational result with a 10 per cent. reduction of the teaching staff!... besides, there are other parts of the school system where increased efficiency and greater economy can be newly conjoined"
Times May 23, 1908
"it may be that our system of confining all initiative to a central body of experts is not producing education so superior to that of other cities"

Standardized Curriculum

A common theme then as well as now is to blame our schools for what is (or is not taught) in our classrooms. Boiled down to its most basic level, the most common critique about curriculum has been that it has not been adequate to the task of preparing students to become efficient and productive workers in an industrial/technological society. Debates on curriculum have, thus, been focused largely around its ability to perpetuate and build upon the industrial system. There are a number of different facets of this theme; each of them will be addressed below.

One component of this theme is the tension between teaching the "classics" and teaching "practical" skills. For instance, in a March 8, 1903 New York Times article, high schools are described as "positively bad" because of what is taught in high schools. In a March 19th, 1905 article, a veteran teacher argues that "With the tendency toward instruction in non-essentials there will come a time when the city will find the burden too great. Fadism is going too far. Retrenchment is in order both in time and money. The more complex the system grows the greater its cost becomes." Similar critics can be found during the past 20 years by criticisms that non-essentials (e.g., computers) are getting in the way of the essentials like reading, writing, and mathematics.

Historically, while some have argued for a vocational or practical curricular focus, others have argued against it. For instance, in a Times Oct 27, 1907 article, it is argued that part of the problem with our schools is that "grammar school is preparing the pupil for high school…the high school is preparing the pupil for the college" but in fact "the greater percentage of its graduates are going immediately into business." Similarly, in a Nov 12, 1909, NY Times article it stated, "if the American workman is to maintain the high standard of efficiency, the boys and girls of the country must have an opportunity to acquire educated hands and brains, such as may enable them to earn a living in a self-selected vocation, and acquire an intelligent understanding of the duties of good citizenship".

Related to what is taught is a common criticism of how much time is spent teaching each subject. For instance, in a March 8 1903 article, it was suggested that because "manual training does not produce the beneficial results . . . [that] the elimination of the time devoted to this subject would afford further facilities to teach the essentials." During the past few years, we have essentially seen music or art pushed to the side or decreased in time to make more room "to teach the essentials."

Fiscal Conservatism

One complex theme that emerged is related to education and money. This is a multi-faceted theme that addresses things such...

Historically, money has been used as a motivator for both students and teachers. That is, if we could pay teachers more, more people would become teachers. As mentioned earlier, in1912, an article stated that "we are underpaying our school teachers even now, and, therefore, are not getting for the desks 'from which our young are trained' the men and women fitted best to give that training" (New York Times 1.14.1912). Similarly, we continually try to "sell" students on the importance of staying in school by quantifying how much money they will be able to earn. That is, we set school up as an investment in one's future. For instance, In Oct 27th 1907, it states: "it was found that the graduate of the elementary school, who took up a trade without any previous technical training, earned at 14 years of age $4 a week, and at 25 years, $12.75 a week. The student who spent four years at a technical school and then took up a trade at 18 years of age earned $10 a week, and at 25 years earned $31… these figures are a convincing argument in favor of industrial training."

Education has also, historically, been seen as an investment in one's community or country.

Related to this is the idea that as an investment, if someone puts time (or money) into an investment that it should pay off over time. School is often depicted as a Waste of Money.
A common theme is about getting one's money worth. For instance, in a March 19, 1905, it states

"the people of New York are [not] getting their money's worth in the education of their children" March 8, 1905, "Retrenchment is in order both in time and money"

[insert summary/transition paragraph]

Discussion and Implications

As Cuban (2004) and Gelberg (1997) illustrate, the school reform movement today is similar in a number of significant ways to efforts at reform at the turn of the last century; however, what these authors do not adequately focus on the language and ideology used. The themes previously identified are simply an effort to confirm what Cuban and Gelberg have shown. The ties between schools and corporations are becoming increasingly obvious, more so than at any time in the past. This is happening largely through the power of discourse and rhetoric. Today, it would appear, conservative advocates for reform are achieving successes only dreamed of by their ideological forebears during industrialization. Yet with this "success" comes significant dangers—dangers that were foreshadowed by the successes of the earlier movement.

The rhetoric of reform does closely mirror the rhetoric of business management today and from the past; however, this discourse is largely historically laudatory; it ignores the many failures of industrialization and laissez-faire consumerist capitalism. Most notably, the current rhetoric/discourse highlights the benefits of competition while ignoring how, in the past (and today) there were victims of competition (people who were already disadvantaged and who, in the case of education, are left with even fewer chances at social and economic mobility). Highlighting competition and meritocracy, the rhetoric of school reform presents a rosy—and unrealistic—picture of the benefits of privatizing (or at a minimum appropriating a business model for public education). Even ignoring the inevitable 'losers' in this (re)new(ed) educational model, with the "standards" and "back to basics movement" also comes the increasing danger of creating a new generation of consumers rather than a new generation of citizens trained in or inclined to critical thinking. By buying into the business-marketing rhetoric that is increasingly conflated with the rhetoric of school reform we are, in short, in danger of returning to an idyllic past that never existed.

Metaphors We Live By—Education as Business

Part of the problem we—progressives and conservatives a like—face is an inability to seriously reflect on the language we use and how it impacts our thinking. Despite the early work by psychologists like Vygotsky (1962), and later work by linguists like Gee (1996) and cognitive scientists like Lakoff (1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), we seem to forget—or not even acknowledge in the first place—how the language we use influences and structures thought. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) did some early work on how we think in terms of metaphors. They explained that, "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (p. 5).

We have been caught in a trap of conceptualizing education metaphorically as a business. Lakoff and Johnson (1999) explain that,

> In this metaphor, students are consumers, their education is a product, and teachers are labor resources. Knowledge then becomes a commodity, a thing with market value that can be passed from teacher to student. Test scores measure the quality of the product. Better schools are the ones with higher overall test scores. Productivity is the measure of test scores per dollar spent. Rational-choice theory imposes a cost-benefit analysis in which productivity is to be maximized. Consumers should be getting the "best education" for their

> dollar. (p. 532)

However, many people involved with business will recognize that this metaphor does not represent every type of business. For instance, not every business owner focuses solely on profit or productivity. Further, nearly every educator—even those who find themselves inadvertently using the language that perpetuates it—recognizes some of the shortcomings of this metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson go on to explain that,

> This metaphor stresses efficiency and product quality above all else. In doing so, it hides the realities of education. Education is not a thing; it's an activity. Knowledge is not literally transmitted from teacher to student, and education is not merely the acquisition of particular bits of knowledge. Through education, students who work at it become something different. It is what they become that is important. This metaphor ignores the student's role, as well as the role of the student's upbringing and the culture at large. It ignores the nurturing role of educators, which often can only be very labor-intensive. And it ignores the overall social necessity for an ongoing, maintained class of education professionals are appropriately reimbursed for the immense amount they contribute to society. (p. 532)

But it is not enough to simply acknowledge how we conceptualize education metaphorically as a business. We need to begin reframing how we think and therefore talk about education.

Reframing the Debate

While Lakoff focused his earlier work primarily on linguistics and cognitive science, he has spent the past few years working on the language of politics. Recently, he has focused on the concept of "frames". Frames are mental structures we use to both create and to understand reality (Lakoff, 2006). While Lakoff argues that frames have an "enormous bearing" on politics (p. 25), we believe that they have an equal impact on education and school reform—which are in themselves inherently political. Lakoff elaborates that "frames facilitate our most basic ideas and concepts, they shape the way we reason, and they even impact how we perceive and how we act. For the most part, our use of frames is unconscious and automatic—we use them without realizing it" (Lakoff, 2006, p. 25). Further, "frames not only define issues, problems, causes, and solutions; they also hide relevant issues and causes" (Lakoff, 2006, p. 35). Lakoff's work has shown how we think in terms of frames and metaphors.

Regarding politics, Lakoff illustrates how conservatives "have managed to dominate the farming of issues and have profoundly changed American politics in the process" (p. 28). While it would be convenient—and not inherently inaccurate—to situate school reform in a progressive vs. conservative debate, the history and rhetoric of school reform is more complicated. While business minded professionals might have developed the frames we use to understand education (as a business), progressives have equally helped perpetuate the rhetoric of school reform.

We posit that educators need to go on the offensive to take charge of the debate and thus become more influential in shaping educational policy. Too often, historically and today, educators have tended to react to changes in policy and educational reform rather than being at the forefront of change (Fullan, 2001, 2003, 2006). Their voices have largely remained silenced in these debates. "language can be used to reframe a situation" (Lakoff, 2006b, p. 11).

This is not to say that teachers—individually or even via teachers' unions—ought to 'go it alone.' Rather, we propose that there needs to be more unity and cooperation among all like-minded educators, from teachers, to principals, to administrators, to teacher educators, to local and state-level policy-makers. The power to have a strong voice in the debates on educational reform requires such unity of purpose and voice: "to cultivate new deep frames requires going on the offense with your values and principles, repeating them over and over and over... and it must be done by many organizations working in concert across issue areas" (Lakoff, 2006, p. 31).

Further, "the most powerful form of thinking is strategic. It is not just a matter of thinking ahead. It is a matter of setting many things in motion by setting one thing in motion. It is a matter of reconfiguring the future by doing one thing in the present (Lakoff, 2006, p. 102).

A critical, but nonetheless overlooked, area for gaining a voice in the debate is to develop a vocabulary that can both help educators clearly and coherently elucidate their position and play a role in shaping the debate itself. Words and names are important; they shape ideas, identity, position/place, and possibility. Words are, Vygotsky showed, tantamount to shaping possibility (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978).

"Conservatives have worked hard to redefine our words—that is, change the frame associated with a word so that it fits the conservative worldview. In so doing, they have change the meaning of some of our most important concepts and have stolen our language" (Lakoff, 2006, p. 43-44).

As Lakoff shows, we need to stop using their words and metaphors and stop negating their frame.

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