

Urban Education—Historical Antecedents

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Abstract

Education is a unique welfare institution because it is not viewed as serving the poor but rather as a path of upward mobility, self-improvement, better jobs and economic opportunities.

The present reality is that educational systems are drastically split between serving poor children in the inner city and affluent children in the suburbs. The urban school systems, once perceived as avenues of mobility enabling poor children to rise from the ghettos, and believed to be the foundation of the American way of life, appear incapable of doing so.

The solutions suggested for these problems are many, ranging from designing more relevant curriculum for city students to national financing of education to provide more equitable distribution of resources. Reform efforts have included school decentralization, compensatory education, and alternate schools, but the success of these innovations is difficult to assess.

KEYWORDS: Institution, Mobility, Desegregation, Americanization, Public Education, Decentralization.

Introduction

In America, education is a unique welfare institution because it is not viewed as serving the poor but as a path of upward mobility, self-improvement, better jobs and economic opportunities. This link between education and occupational success was not always strong. In pre-industrial America, schools were justified for two reasons: to insure that every child could read the bible for salvation and to make sure that voters in a democracy were literate enough to read about political issues. Both of these objectives could be obtained in elementary schools or village centers where young children could learn the essentials of reading and writing in a short period of time. Further education was restricted to the wealthy (Sizer,1997).

These two justifications of public education were the foundation of a national debate over “common schools” that took place from 1820 through 1850(Willensky,2005). Charity schools, it was argued, had no place in a democracy because all citizens should have an equal opportunity for a common education which would in turn provide the cultural cement to bind Americans together. Horace Mann, leader of the public school movement, proclaimed three essentials for American education: 1) public schools should be tax-supported and controlled by the public; 2) they should be free; 3) attendance should be compulsory. In 1852, Massachusetts enacted the first compulsory attendance law. New York city experimented with infant schools to educate and train very small children. Even in the South, the common school idea was received enthusiastically although, although by the 1850s the movement was discredited as a dangerous northern view (Taylor,1993). European cities also had instituted forms of common school education, with English and Prussian systems held up to America as examples. The early schools stressed strict discipline memorization, and moral character development (Janowitz,1999). Not all were pleased with the emphasis on morality taught in common schools, particularly, catholic immigrants. By 1840, Catholics began to build separate parochial schools, free from protestant teachings. Others did not welcome the end of elitism, and maintained private schools. These alternatives to the common school have remained in the urban areas throughout American history, influencing thousands of students.

By the late 1800s, urban schools concentrated on a different goal: Americanization. Immigrant children, whose parents came to America to find work in the growing industrial economy, were to be socialized and the “melting pot” theory accepted as “the American way”, basically, this assumed that children from many different cultures could be taught together and in the process become American ; their differences melted away so that all left school with one culture, support for expanding free public education can be traced back to this pressure for citizenship training. It was fueled also by the writings of educational reformers such as the famous John Dewey who saw the school as the institution in American urban society that could replace the family, the church and the small community as an agent of socialization (Taylor,1993). Dewey, argued that schools should deal with “the whole child”, teachers should assist in learning, reading and writing, but also should teach democracy. Students could “learn by doing,” and gain experience in all spheres of life, accumulating both cultural understanding and practical knowledge, especially scientific skills. This influential educator caused a revolutionary shift in American thinking about schools. Instead of schools being viewed as short-term centers for basic instruction, they became pivotal social institutions for the training of youth and the preservation of democracy. Americans have tended to romanticize the common school movement, and believe that the common school successfully accomplished the many tasks it undertook.

Recent historical investigations ,however, suggest that failures occurred as well as successes. Indeed, there never has been a complete melting pot; some groups remained outside the idealized English view of American culture altogether. The costs of melting, even when successful, were high; abandonment of native language and culture, isolation from family, and often only minimal acceptance. Thus, many Polish and Italian children had to give up speaking their native language; German culture became something one was ashamed of rather than proud to share; Catholicism was a suspect religion, as was Judaism; and back Americans were almost totally excluded from educational rewards (Taylor,1993). Furthermore, urban schools did not successfully accomplish many learning tasks. In virtually every study undertaken since that made in the Chicago schools in 1898, more children have failed in schools than have succeeded, both in absolute and relative numbers (Greer,1992). Greer calls “the triumph of the public schools” an article of popular faith” and a “canon of historical scholarship”, but unreal if one examines the actual evidence. Schools did succeed in improving the quality of life for many, but they also failed with many kinds of students, particularly those who did not fit easily into the rigid organization of the institution.

Reformers sought to change schools by standardizing teaching methods and by adopting testing devices. Large city schools developed elaborate bureaucratic organizations copied from business models; the Board of Education(Board of Directors), administrators(Business Managers), and teachers(workers) “produced” the product of educated students. This product could be counted, measured, and standardized. The advantage of educational bureaucracies, as in most bureaucratic arrangements, is that the division of labor and economics of scale make it possible to service many students. However, the usual disadvantages of bureaucracy- impersonality, red tape, reluctance to change, and concern with organization for its own sake-also resulted. Other educational responses to urban needs were the extension of school year and the growth of the secondary schools. Consequently attendance laws were modeled after the Massachusetts’ law, and the Supreme Court’s Kalamazoo Decision of 1872 enabled school districts to use tax funds to provide free secondary education. Within forty years, the concept of twelve grades was firmly entrenched in the United States and the last southern states established free public high schools(Cremin,1985).

Higher Education.

The recognition that modern industrial society and Americanization required more than basic reading and writing skills justified the expansion of public high schools just as it was to justify the expansion of urban institutions of higher education. In 1900, only four out of ten largest cities in the United States had University enrollment of over 2,000, but by 1924, 145 urban institutions (or 15 percent of the total number of universities) enrolled 40 percent of all students. For example, the City College of New York had 1,294 students in 1900, but by 1930 the number had increased to 35,189. Most growth in urban institution took place between 1920 and 1930 and again in the post-world war II era (Anderson,1998). The earliest urban institutions of higher education were either privately owned or municipally supported. Unlike small religious colleges, urban universities reflected the urban transformation of American society, just as many famous European universities reflected urban environments through the centuries. A new form of higher education that developed at the turn of the century was the technical institute. Institutions such as Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the Carnegie Institute of Technology taught students the skills required in a technical society.

Equality of Opportunity.

It is important to acknowledge the myth of the success of the urban school in the Americanization process to understand the debates about a second much process concerning urban education that has received considerable attention since the 1960s—that the schools can provide equality of educational opportunity and thereby equal opportunity for success in society. This relationship between economic well-being and education has involved educational institutions in the welfare debates as a strategy to eliminate poverty and reduce racial inequalities.

Historically, urbanization and industrialization occurred together in the United States. Immigrants arriving at the turn of the century were absorbed in the expanding and dynamic industrial economy. As industrial growth became more sophisticated, technologies such as computers, marketing and communications grew in importance. After 1940 the need for educated workers was almost insatiable. The G.I Bill, for example, provided free college education for returning soldiers after World War II (Hoghman,1996). The purpose of this legislation was to avoid unemployment among returning veterans as the economy shifted from war time to peaceful production. Its effect, however, was to enlarge the pool of skilled and educated workers. The simultaneous development of the tie between education and occupational success that most Americans accept without question appeared to be solid. Limitations on opportunities for sound education were perceived as economic limitations. As in the case of social services, local financing for education meant that cities had insufficient tax revenues to meet the costs of schools. Noted educators such as Conant(1981) denounced the growing disparity between suburban education and urban school decline, warning that the United States was developing “social dynamite” in the cities.

The demand for improved urban schools encouraged the federal government to sponsor new programs. The 1985 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, particularly, Title 1 designed to assist poor children in cities, marked a significant turning point in school federal financing. Levine and Bane(1996) summarize the tie between education and economic opportunities:

The explicit idea of education as a weapon against poverty is a recent development. It has strong roots in the traditional conception of education as the key to social integration and mobility, a notion apparently justified by the assimilation of successful waves of immigrants through the schools. It was reinforced after World War II by the theorists of human capital, who showed that investments in schooling yielded ample returns in the form of life time earning streams. And it had inherent attractions because of its very indirectness. Publicly supported education, it seemed, could give the poor the tools they needed to escape from poverty by dint their own efforts.

The act authorized federal monies to be spent on public education, particularly for poor and minority children. Although federal money had been used in America to encourage higher education through the land grant colleges, and state money had been used to support municipal colleges when cities could no longer maintain these institutions, federal support to basic education was limited.

By the mid 1970s, American faith in education as the social means of providing equality of opportunity was under severe attack. A profound disillusionment replaced the idealistic romanticism of the previous decade; and urban schools faced public indifference as well as the problem of teaching growing number of poor children. One scholar has described the differences in issues confronting urban educational institutions as two separate crises. "The old crisis is the persistence of gross inequalities in educational resources which derive from the local organizational format of public education and the absence of minimal national standards. If the tradition of American public education have been adapted to the social cultural regional and religious diversity of the United States, this advantage has been purchased at the cost of highly uneven minimum performance." In contrast, the new crisis" is linked to the transformation and organization of the labor market under advanced industrialization (Janowitz,1999).

Desegregation of Urban Schools.

Perhaps no single welfare policy has been more controversial than the desegregation policies developed in urban education. Most Americans do not even think of education as a welfare program although they clearly understand that schools do serve the common good. This is partly because the benefits of good education-personal enrichment and highest paying jobs-are thought to be individual benefits and not social goods. Also, the term "welfare" has been clearly identified with income maintenance programs or those policies related to the handicapped or special groups of individuals. Yet, from an economic and social perspective, education is one form of social welfare.

The demands of African Americans for civil rights in the early 1960s were soon extended to the educational institutions that had increasingly become linked with the occupational sphere by providing the necessary credentials for high paying jobs. In 1952, the supreme court rendered a historical decision In the case of Brown vs. Topeka(Kansas) by stating that segregated schools were unconstitutional(Curti,1991). The court decided unanimously that separation implied inferiority and required that all public schools become desegregated with deliberate speed. By the early 1960s very little had changed. Urban schools reflected the residential patterns of urban areas that remained clearly segregated. School boards actually fostered this segregation by developing artificial boundaries and by administrative decisions. Finally federal courts announced that if a school district was found guilty of deliberating segregating students, corrections had to be made. Given the established residential patterns in urban areas, this usually took the form of busing students to different schools.

Busing is a highly controversial method of achieving desegregation in public education. Less drastic strategies include voluntary desegregation, open school enrollments creating magnet schools, and mixing teaching staffs. The courts ordered busing only when other strategies failed and when the school districts were found to be clearly guilty of promoting segregation. Busing was never mandated beyond district boundaries or in cases where schools authorities had not developed segregation policies. Even so, incidents of violence and wide-scale protest followed court orders for desegregation programs.

Research has been mixed concerning the effects of desegregation. Many were disappointed that these programs did not immediately raise the educational achievement scores of students participating in the new programs. Once again, there was a naïve assumption that simply mixing together students of different races would lead to change. One factor that complicated measurement was the concentration of poor children-both black and white-in the urban school systems. Educational researchers had long observed a clear correlation between family income and educational achievement regardless of race. Children from more affluent middle-class homes with educated parents, have historically been more successful with academic tasks than poorer children. Major structural and attitudinal changes in

education are required to assist poor children in learning tasks, and a strong commitment to these pupils would be required at all levels in society. Without this commitment and these changes, the probability of changing educational achievement levels is remote.

Current Realities in Urban Education.

The present reality is that educational systems are drastically split between serving poor children in the inner city and affluent children in the suburbs. The gigantic urban school systems, once perceived as avenues of mobility enabling poor children to rise from the ghettos, and believed to be the foundation of the American way of life, appear incapable of doing so. School achievement scores in large cities are below national averages, crime and violence are familiar in many schools, resistance to judicial orders to end desegregation has torn apart school systems in Boston and other places; teachers have become increasingly militant and defensive, with strikes occurring regularly in large cities; and most urban school districts are in desperate financial conditions.

The solutions suggested for these problems are legion, ranging from designing more relevant curriculum for city students to national financing of education to provide more equitable distribution of resources. Reform efforts have included school decentralization (breaking up the large system into smaller units), compensatory education (special instruction for weak students), and alternative schools, but the success of these innovations is difficult to assess.

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