THE WINNING WAYS OF A LOSING STRATEGY: EDUCATIONALIZING SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN THE UNITED STATES

David F. Labaree

School of Education
Stanford University

ABSTRACT. In this essay, David Labaree examines the paradox of educationalization in the American context. He argues that, like most modern Western societies, the United States has displayed a strong tendency over the years for educationalizing social problems, even though schools have repeatedly proven that they are an ineffective mechanism for solving these problems. He starts by examining the ways in which the process of educationalizing social problems is deeply grounded in American beliefs, social processes, political and organizational tensions, and structural possibilities. These include utility, individualism, optimism, professional interest, political interest, political opportunity, structural limits, and formalism. Then Labaree examines the roots of education's failure in the role of social reform agent. Finally, he closes with an analysis of why we continue to pursue educationalization in the face of its ineffectiveness.

Modern Western societies have shown an increasing tendency to educationalize social problems, and nowhere is that tendency more pronounced than in the United States.[1] We ask education to ameliorate race and class inequality through school desegregation, compensatory coursework, programs to reduce prejudice, and free lunches. We ask it to counter gender inequality by developing gender-neutral textbooks and encouraging girls to pursue studies in science and math. We ask it to attack public health problems by hiring school nurses, requiring vaccination for students, and providing classes in health and physical education. We ask it to promote economic competitiveness by developing programs in vocational and career education and by adapting its curriculum to the skill needs of the knowledge economy. We ask it to reduce crime by requiring school attendance, developing school discipline codes, and mandating courses in good citizenship. We ask it to promote sexual responsibility through sex education, traffic safety through driver education, healthy eating through nutritional education, and preservation of natural resources through environmental education. American society asks its system of education to take responsibility for remediating all of these social problems, and for the most part educators have been eager to assume the burden.

At the heart of this process of educationalization, however, is a puzzling paradox. Education is perhaps the greatest institutional success of the modern era. It grew from a modest and marginal position in the eighteenth century to the center of modern societies in the twenty-first, where it consumes an enormous share of the time and treasure of both states and citizens. Key to its institutional success has been its facility at educationalization — its ability to embrace and embody the

---

1. This essay draws in part from David F. Labaree, ''Educational Formalism and the Language of Goals in American Education, Educational Reform, and the History of Education'' (paper presented at the ''Proofs, Arguments, and Other Reasonings: The Language of Education'' conference, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium, May 2008).

social reform missions that have been imposed upon it. Yet education has been remarkably *unsuccessful* at carrying out these missions. It has done very little to promote equality of race, class, and gender; to enhance public health, economic productivity, and good citizenship; or to reduce teenage sex, traffic deaths, obesity, and environmental destruction. In fact, in many ways it has had a negative effect on these problems by draining money and energy away from social reforms that might have had a more substantial impact. As David Bridges notes in his contribution to this symposium, educationalization has consistently pushed education to expand its scope well beyond both what it *should* do and what it *can* do, and the result is a record of one failure after another.[2]

So how are we to understand the success of this institution in light of its failure to do what we asked of it? One way of thinking about this is that education may not be doing what we ask, but it is doing what we want. We want an institution that will pursue our social goals in a way that is in line with the individualism at the heart of the liberal ideal, aiming to solve social problems by seeking to change the hearts, minds, and capacities of individual students. Another way of putting this is that we want an institution through which we can express our social goals without violating the principle of individual choice that lies at the center of the social structure, even if this comes at the cost of failing to achieve these goals. So education can serve as a point of civic pride, a showplace for our ideals, and a medium for engaging in uplifting but ultimately inconsequential disputes about alternative visions of the good life. At the same time, it can also serve as a convenient whipping boy that we can blame for its failure to achieve our highest aspirations for ourselves as a society. In this sense, then, we can understand the whole grand educational enterprise as an exercise in formalism. We assign formal responsibility to education for solving our most pressing social problems in light of our highest social ideals, with the tacit understanding that by educationalizing these problem-solving efforts we are seeking a solution that is more formal than substantive. We are saying that we are willing to accept what education can produce — new programs, new curricula, new institutions, new degrees, new educational opportunities — in place of solutions that might make real changes in the ways in which we distribute social power, wealth, and honor.

In this essay, I explore the nature of educationalization in the American context. The rationale is this: We cannot come to understand the growth of educationalization in the United States — in the face of education's continuing failure to fix the social problems assigned to it — unless we consider some of the social needs that this process expresses and the social functions (apart from fixing the problem) that this process serves. In line with this aim, I start by examining the ways in

2. David Bridges, ''Educationalization: On the Appropriateness of Asking Educational Institutions to Solve Social and Economic Problems,'' included in this symposium.

DAVID F. LABAREE is Professor in the School of Education at Stanford University, 485 Lasuen Mall, Stanford, CA 94305-3096; e-mail <dlabaree@stanford.edu>. His primary area of scholarship is the historical sociology of education, with particular attention to the peculiarities of the American approach to reforming schools and developing higher education.

which the process of educationalizing social problems is deeply grounded in American beliefs, social processes, political and organizational tensions, and structural limitations. Then I examine the roots of education's failure in the role of social reform agent. Finally, I close with an analysis of why we continue to pursue educationalization in the face of its ineffectiveness.

How Educationalization Is Grounded in American Culture and Society

The tendency to educationalize social problems arises in response to a number of characteristics of American culture and society. In particular, it is grounded in the following social principles, practices, and possibilities: utility, individualism, optimism, professional interest, political interest, political opportunity, structural limits, and formalism.

Utility: The urge to educationalize social problems arises from a deep American commitment to the idea that education both is and should be socially useful. It would be nice if education had intrinsic value — as a source of enlightenment, aesthetic stimulation, or personal enjoyment — but that is not why we pour such enormous amounts of time, effort, and money into it. We do so primarily because we see this as a critically necessary investment in the improvement of polity, economy, and society. Its value is extrinsic. One social goal that has driven American education over the years is democratic equality — the effort to produce the competent citizens needed to sustain a democratic society. The idea is to provide citizens with the knowledge, skills, and civic commitments they need in order to function effectively in political life, and to head off social problems such as criminality, narrow self-interest, and radical inequality that might undermine democratic politics. A second social goal of education has been social efficiency — the effort to create productive workers for a growing economy. From this perspective, the issue is human capital production, which means not only supplying workers with the productive skills they need to contribute to economic prosperity but also providing remedies for social problems that might undermine worker productivity, such as poor health, bad attitude, and weak work discipline. A third social goal that has driven education is social mobility — the effort to provide access to social opportunity. This means that education should give individuals the skills they need to enhance their social prospects, which reinforces their commitment as citizens and workers while simultaneously heading off social problems (such as class and race conflict, social alienation, and apathy) that might threaten this commitment.[3]

Individualism: Liberal democracies in general are prone to emphasize individualism in interpreting social life, but this tendency is particularly prominent in the United States, and it is critical in helping us understand why in the United States education is seen as a useful institution for solving social problems.[4]

---

3. For a more extended discussion of these three social uses for education, see David F. Labaree, ''Public Goods, Private Goods: The American Struggle over Educational Goals,'' *American Educational Research Journal* 34, no. 1 (1987): 39–81.

4. I am grateful to my colleague, Francisco Ramírez, for suggesting that individualism is at the heart of our tendency to seek solutions to social problems by means of education (personal communication with Francisco O. Ramírez, May 20, 2008).

American individualism tends to reduce social problems to individual problems, locating the root cause of everything from poverty and illness to criminality and racism in the capacities and motives of individuals. If these are the primary roots of social problems, then education is the natural solution, because its central focus is on changing the capacities and motives of individual students. For example, consider the problem of racism. Leah Gordon's finely textured study of the link between individualism and educationalization in the United States shows how, in the years after World War II, American social science shifted from a sociological view of racism (seen as a function of social structure and intergroup relations) to a psychological view (seen as a function of personal prejudice).[5] The result was to provide strong intellectual reinforcement for two educational efforts to attack racism — the racial desegregation of schools and the development of instructional programs to undermine race prejudice — which sought to accomplish this end by equalizing individual capacity building and changing individual beliefs. Of course, if race is seen as a problem arising from social structure or status group competition rather than individual prejudice, then the educational solution makes no sense. But when we individualize the problem, we make education the obvious site for solving that problem.

Optimism: Another major ground for educationalizing social problems that is also characteristically American is a faith in progress. We are a perennially optimistic people, believing that social improvement is not just possible but likely. In part this is an extension of individualism, which portrays personal will as more powerful than social constraint, but it also connects with a faith in utility. If we want education to be useful in solving social problems, and if we believe it is effective in this pursuit because it is able to attack the roots of these problems in individual capacities and motives, then we have reason to be optimistic about the possibility that educational reform will be able to produce social progress. James March discusses this mindset in a rich essay titled ''Education and the Pursuit of Optimism,'' which opens by noting: ''The modern history of American education is a history of optimism. We have believed in the successes of our past and the good prospects for our future.''[6] Education has become our all-purpose tool for realizing our hopes to improve society by fixing its problems; but once we invest all our hopes in the vehicle of educationalization, we can no longer afford to find failure in the enterprise of educational reform:

> By insisting that great action be justified by great hopes, we encourage a belief in the possibility of magic. For example, read the litany of magic in the literature on free schools, Montessori, Head Start, Sesame Street, team teaching, open schools, structured schools, computer-assisted instruction, community control, and hot lunches. Inasmuch as there appears to be little magic in the world, great hopes are normally difficult to realize. Having been seduced into great expectations, we are abandoned to a choice between failure and delusion....The conversion of hopes into magic and magic into delusion describes much of modern educational history. It continues to be a dominant theme of educational reform in the United States.[7]

5. Leah Gordon, ''The Question of Prejudice: Social Science, Education, and the Struggle to Define 'The Race Problem' in Postwar America, 1940–1970'' (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2008).

6. James G. March, ''Education and the Pursuit of Optimism,'' *Texas Tech Journal of Education* 2, no. 1 (1975): 5.

7. Ibid., 11.

Professional Interest: Building on the foundation of a commitment to utility, individualism, and optimism, we have constructed an educational profession with a strong interest in extending the reach of educationalization. The profession attracts people who have a vision of saving the world by fixing the child. This means educators do not have to be conscripted into the ranks of the educationalizers; they volunteer for duty, eager to take on new missions and work their magic on new problems. In his account of educationalization in contemporary Great Britain, Bridges shows how this tendency is fed by the idealism of the educators, who share "an honest conviction that they can thereby contribute in some general or more specific way social benefit, perhaps even help to build a better world."[8] But he also notes a strong element of self-interest in the willingness of educators to take on new social problems, since this brings in new resources to support the educational enterprise:

> The elementary point is that if educational institutions can convince government that they are the ones who can deliver on social and economic change, then they can call in the additional financial support that is attached to advancing such policies. In some circumstances this additional support is, of course, simply money in and money out, but in other circumstances some of it can be siphoned off to support what the institution might regard as its core agenda.[9]

In this way, then, educationalizing social problems offers educators the opportunity to do good and do well at the same time.

Political Interest: Like educators, politicians also have an interest in promoting educationalization that combines the idealistic and the pragmatic. One of the primary motives for seeking political leadership is the urge to fix social problems, and education offers a credible mechanism for accomplishing this. Operating within the cultural frame of utility, individualism, and optimism, it seems only natural for an American major, governor, or president to ask education to take on the responsibility for carrying out the desired reform, which educators are only too eager to accept. If the problem exists at the individual level and school is the primary tool for tinkering with the skills and beliefs of individuals, then there is no better place to turn for help. Of course, schools also offer some pragmatic political advantages over other, more direct mechanisms for social engineering. Particularly in the American context, where schooling is radically decentralized and loose coupling is the organizational norm, promoting social reform through educational reform is notoriously slow and indirect. The push for change needs to move from the state government to the state educational bureaucracy, local school districts, individual schools, and individual classrooms, where teachers need to carry out the reform in the instruction of individual students. As Richard Elmore and Milbrey McLaughlin point out in their book on the problem of school reform in the United States, *Steady Work*, school change and political policy operate on radically different timelines:

> There is abundant evidence that the time it takes reforms to mature into changes in resource allocation, organization, and practice is substantially longer than the electoral cycles that

8. Bridges, "Educationalization," 466.

9. Ibid., 463.

> determine changes in policy. Elected officials can generate new policies at a much greater rate
> than schools can implement them. Policy reforms are generated on "electoral time," but they
> are implemented on "administrative time" and "practice time."[10]

By the time the mayor or governor is leaving office after four or at most eight years, the school reform process may just be getting in gear. This time lag allows the politician to enjoy all the benefits of initiating a major effort to solve a social problem without ever having to take responsibility for the outcomes of this reform effort, which occur on someone else's watch. The next leader can easily blame the failure of the problem solving effort on the flaws in the predecessor's policy. Or — and this is a particular political advantage that comes from educationalizing social problems — both new leader and old can always blame the educational system for failing to carry out the reform effectively. So the politician can have it both ways — taking credit for initiating reform and blaming the failure of reform on the schools, which then means initiating a new educational reform to make schools more effective in solving the problem the next time around. This why Elmore and McLaughlin call school reform "steady work." Both as savior and whipping boy, educationalizing social problems is an indispensable political tool.

Political Opportunity: Another factor that makes educationalization attractive to politicians is that schools are readily accessible to their influence. They may not be effective in solving the social problem, but they are an institutional arena that politics can affect. As Bridges points out, the government already owns the schools; they are already established in every community (no need to hire staff, set up an organizational structure, or rent offices); they already have the children of the community under their control and subjected to programs designed to shape their skills and beliefs; and the system is quite used to receiving new mandates from above and undergoing continual retraining for the latest reform effort.[11] Educationalization may not be the right tool, but it is the tool at hand.

Structural Limits: The urge to educationalize social problems also arises from a pragmatic consideration of what kinds of social reforms are feasible within the limits of the social and political structure of a liberal democracy. This is particularly true in the United States, where the liberal component of liberal democracy is emphasized more heavily than in most Western European countries. In a system such as ours, which values individual liberty more than the public good and which values the freedom to accumulate and dispose of property more than the benefits that derive from greater equality, the most direct mechanisms for resolving social problems have already been removed from the table. Americans are unwilling to deal with medical problems by adopting universal health care, so they rely on the weak reed of school nurses and health education programs. They are unwilling to redistribute wealth and subsidize income in order to equalize social opportunity, so instead they offer the opportunity for more education in

---

10. Richard F. Elmore and Milbrey W. McLaughlin, *Steady Work* (Santa Monica, California: Rand, 1988), 36.

11. Bridges, "Educationalization."

the hope that this will allow individuals to get ahead in society. They are unwilling to attack the structural roots of racial inequality, such as by desegregating the racially homogeneous neighborhoods that most Americans live in, so they opt instead for desegregating schools and increasing the number of black and brown faces in school textbooks. Under these kinds of restrictive limits on what is socially and politically possible, schools often look like the best option for attacking the problems at hand.

Formalism: Ultimately, all of these elements, which provide the foundation of the pattern of educationalizing social problems, lead to a willingness to accept a response to social problems that is more formal than substantive. Schools may not be able to do much to resolve these problems, but they do align nicely with our cultural values and our sociopolitical structure, and they do stand as a formally credible if not substantively effective way to respond to demands for reform. In this way, educationalization rests on a kind of confidence game. We believe that schools are a good way to deal with social problems, in part because they express our values (utility, individualism, and optimism) and in part because they are accessible to the reformist impulse in a way that other institutional arenas are not. So we assign them the responsibility for resolving these problems, but we are unable to accept the possibility that they are not up to the task. In this way, as March points out, optimism leads to magical thinking and eventually delusion. At best, we are willing to accept what schools can do as sufficient. So we accept educational opportunity as a proxy for social opportunity and multicultural textbooks as a proxy for a multicultural society. At worst, we can always blame schools for getting it wrong and then demand that they redouble their efforts to reform themselves in order to reform society. Either way, we need to keep the faith that educationalization works. This is not a con game in the criminal sense, with con artists deliberately duping the suckers. Instead it is a form of good salesmanship, where the first principle is to sell yourself first. We sell ourselves on the value of education in solving social problems, and then we buy what we are selling. The whole thing rests on the uncertain foundation of our collective willingness to continue in believing the con. As March notes, delusion can lead to disillusion; but so far, the con of educationalization is holding steady.

THE GENERALIZED FAILURE TO ACCOMPLISH SOCIAL GOALS THROUGH EDUCATION

So we come back to the central problem, which is that the effort to educationalize social problems in the United States has been enormously successful even though educationalization has been a failure at solving these problems. Consider the fate of the three social goals I have identified as central to the educational systems in the United States and in other modern liberal democracies.

Democratic Equality: Perhaps the strongest case for an educational goal that has actually had an impact on school and society is the goal of democratic equality. At the formative stage in the construction of a nation-state, virtually anywhere in the world, education seems to play an important role. A variety of historical studies make a strong case in support of this proposition in the United

States and elsewhere.[12] The key contribution in this regard seems to be the formation of a national citizenry out of a collection of local identities, and the primary mechanism is to bring a disparate group of individuals in the community together under one roof and expose them to a common curriculum and a common set of social experiences. These are among the few things that schools do well. The content of the course of study and the nature of the pedagogy is less important than the fact of commonality. But once the state is in motion and citizenship is no longer problematic, the ongoing contribution of schools to the goal of democratic equality is harder to establish, which makes this a weak rationale for the ongoing expansion of educationalization in developed societies.

Social Efficiency: In the discourse of educational policy, the goal of social efficiency is alive and well. It is one of the fundamental beliefs of contemporary economics, international development, and educational policy that education plays a central role in economic development as a valuable investment in human capital.[13] Whereas this may be the case at particular points of development (such as the start of industrialization) and for particular kinds of education (elementary schooling), the evidence is less convincing for this proposition at a general level. Other studies suggest a more complex story.[14] Maybe educational investment spurs economic growth, but maybe societies start investing more heavily in education as a result of economic growth — because they can afford to and because to do so is a sign of their emergence as modern nation-states. So it is unclear whether educationalization is having anything more than a sporadic impact on human capital development.

Social Mobility: In liberal democracies, the hope springs eternal that expanding educational opportunity will increase social mobility and reduce social inequality. This has been a key factor in the rhetoric of the American educational reform movements for desegregation, standards, and choice. But the evidence for this hope is simply missing. Education does provide opportunity for individuals to improve their social position, but this does not translate into change in the social structure. Rates of social mobility have not increased over time as educational

---

12. David Tyack, ''Forming the National Character,'' *Harvard Education Review* 36, no. 1 (1966): 29–41; John Meyer, David Tyack, Joanne Nagel, and Audri Gordon, ''Public Education as Nation-Building in America: Enrollments and Bureaucratization in the American States, 1870–1930,"*American Journal of Sociology* 85, no. 3 (1979): 591–613; Francisco O. Ramírez and John Boli, ''The Political Construction of Mass Schooling: European Origins and Worldwide Institutionalization,'' *Sociology of Education* 60, no. 1 (1987): 2–18; Francisco O. Ramírez, ''The Nation-State, Citizenship, and Educational Change: Institutionalization and Globalization,'' in *International Handbook of Education and Development: Preparing Schools, Students, and Nations for the Twenty-First Century*, eds. William Cummings and Noel McGinn (New York: Pergamon, 1997); and William Cummings, ''Patterns of Modern Education,'' in *International Handbook of Education and Development*, eds. Cummings and McGinn.

13. Theodore W. Schultz, ''Investment in Human Capital,'' in *The Structure of Schooling*, eds. Richard Arum and Irenee R. Beattie (Mountain View, California: Mayfield, 2000); Eric Hanushek and Dennis Kimko, ''Schooling, Labor Force Quality, and the Growth of Nations,'' *American Economic Review* 90, no. 5 (2000): 1184–1208.

14. Richard Rubinson and Irene Browne, ''Education and the Economy,'' in *The Handbook of Economic Sociology*, eds. Neil Smelser and Richard Swedborg (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996); and Francisco O. Ramírez, Xiaowei Luo, Evan Schofer, and John W. Meyer, ''Student Achievement and National Economic Growth,'' *American Journal of Education* 113, no. 1 (2006): 1–29.

opportunity has increased, and societies with more expansive educational systems do not have higher mobility rates. As Raymond Boudon and others have shown, the problem is that increases in access to education affect everyone, so that those who have more education continue to enjoy that advantage as educational attainment increases across the board.[15] The same lack of effect appears in relation to social equality as well, since the Gini index of inequality seems to be unrelated to degree of educational access, either across societies or within societies over time. The effort to educationalize the problem of social inequality, therefore, seems to be based more on delusion than reality.

These three goals, however, do gain expression in educational systems in at least two significant ways. First, they maintain a highly visible presence in the *rhetoric* of education, as the politics of education continuously pushes these goals onto the schools and the schools themselves actively express their allegiance to these same goals. Second, schools adopt the *form* of these goals into their structure and process. Democratic equality persists in the formalism of social studies classes, school assemblies, and an array of political symbols that cover the walls of schools. Social efficiency tends to persist in the formalism of vocational classes, career days, and standards-based testing. Social mobility tends to persist in the formalism of student hierarchies arranged according to their accumulations of grades, credits, and degrees.

Roots of the Failure of Educationalization to Resolve Social Problems

A primary reason for the failure of the educational system to realize the social goals expressed in it is that these goals reflect the core tensions within a liberal democracy, which push both school and society in conflicting directions. One of those tensions is between the demands of democratic politics and the demands of capitalist markets. A related issue is the requirement that society be able to meet its collective needs while simultaneously guaranteeing the liberty of individuals to pursue their own interests.

Democratic equality represents the political side of our liberal democratic values, focusing on the role of education in building a nation, forming a republican community, and providing citizens with the wide range of capabilities required for effective participation in democratic decision making. The other two goals represent the market side of liberal democracy. Social efficiency captures the perspective of employers and taxpayers, who are concerned about the role of education in producing the human capital that is required by the modern economy and that is essential for economic growth and general prosperity. From this perspective, education's primary function is to provide for the full range of productive skills and forms of knowledge required in the complex occupational structure of modern capitalism. Social mobility captures the perspective of educational consumers and prospective employees, who are concerned about the role of educational

---

15. Raymond Boudon, *Education, Opportunity, and Social Inequality: Changing Prospects in Western Society* (New York: Wiley, 1974); and Hans-Peter Blossfeld and Yossi Shavit, ''Persisting Barriers: Changes in Educational Opportunities,'' in *The Structure of Schooling*, eds. Arum and Beattie.

credentials in signaling to the market which individuals have the productive skills that qualify them for the jobs with the highest levels of power, money, and prestige.

The collectivist side of liberal democracy is expressed by a combination of democratic equality and social efficiency. Both aim at having education provide broad social benefits, with both conceiving of education as a public good. Investing in the political capital of the citizenry and the human capital of the workforce benefits everyone in society, including those families who do not have children in school. In contrast, the social mobility goal represents the individualist side of liberal democracy. From this perspective, education is a private good, whose benefits accrue only to the student who receives educational services and owns the resulting educational credentials, and its primary function is to provide educational consumers with privileged access to higher level jobs in a zero-sum competition with other prospective employees.

With this mix of goals imposed on it, education in liberal democracies has come to look like an institution at odds with itself. After all, it is being asked simultaneously to serve politics and markets, promote equality and inequality, construct itself as a public good and private good, serve collective interests and individual interests. Politically, its structure should be flat, its curriculum common, and enrollment universal; economically, its structure should be hierarchical, its curriculum stratified, and enrollment scaled by high rates of attrition. From the perspective of democratic equality and social efficiency, its aim is socialization, to provide knowledge that is usable for citizens and workers; from the perspective of social mobility, its aim is selection, to provide credentials that allow access to good jobs, independent of any learning that might have occurred in acquiring these credentials.

In this sense, then, these educational goals represent the contradictions embedded in any liberal democracy, contradictions that cannot be resolved without removing either the society's liberalism or its democracy. Therefore when we project our liberal democratic goals on schools, we want them to take each of these goals seriously but not to implement any one of them beyond modest limits, since to do so would be to put the other equally valued goals in significant jeopardy. This is what I meant when I said earlier that education accomplishes what we want rather than what we say. We ask it to promote social equality, but we want it to do so in a way that does not threaten individual liberty or private interests. We ask it to promote individual opportunity, but we want it to do so in a way that does not threaten the integrity of the nation or the efficiency of the economy. As a result, the educational system is an abject failure in its ability to achieve any one of its primary social goals. It is also a failure in its ability to solve the social problems assigned to it, since these problems cannot be solved in a manner that simultaneously satisfies all three goals. In particular, social problems rooted in the nature of the social structure simply cannot be resolved by deploying educational programs to change individuals. The apparently dysfunctional outcomes of the educational system, therefore, are not simply the result of bad planning, deception, or political

cynicism; they are an institutional expression of the contradictions in the liberal democratic mind.

But there is another layer of impediment that lies between social goals and their fulfillment through education, and that is the tension between education's institutionalized goals and its organizational practices. This is a story about cause and effect, and especially about the impact of the latter on the former. Schools gain their origins from social goals, which they dutifully express in an institutional form. This results in the development of school organization, curricula, pedagogies, professional roles, and a complex set of occupational and organizational interests. At this more advanced stage, schools and educators are no longer simply the object of social desire; they become major actors in the story. As such, they shape what happens in education in light of their own needs, interests, organizational patterns, professional norms, and pedagogical practices. And this then becomes a major issue in educational reform. Such reforms are what happens after schooling is already in motion organizationally, when society seeks to assign new ideals to education or revive old ones that seem to be in disuse, thus initiating an effort to transform the institution toward the pursuit of different ends. But now society is no longer able simply to project its values onto the institution it created to express these values; instead it must negotiate an interaction with an ongoing enterprise. As a result, reform has to change both the values embedded in education and the formal structure itself, which may well resist.

One organizational factor that makes schooling a difficult medium for solving social problems, especially in the United States, is the loose coupling of the educational system.[16] In American schools the parts of the system operate as semi-autonomous segments rather than integrated components of a single entity. The relative independence of states from the federal government, districts from the state government, schools from the district, classrooms from the principal, and students from the teacher provides a strong buffer against even the most earnest efforts from above to carry out social policy through the instruction of students.

A second organizational factor that undermines the effects of educationalizing social problems is that school administrators exert only weak control over classroom instruction.[17] The structure of teaching-as-work in the United States is such that school administrators have traditionally been lacking the basic levers of power that enable employers in most occupational settings to motivate employee compliance with their boss's wishes. Because of tenure rules, they cannot punish teachers who fail to follow policy directives; and because of union contracts and the absence of opportunities for promotion, they cannot reward teachers who bring instructional practice in line with policy.

16. Karl Weick, ''Educational Organizations as Loosely-Coupled Systems,''*Administrative Science Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (1976): 1–19; and Charles E. Bidwell, ''The School as a Formal Organization,'' in *Handbook of Organizations*, ed. James M. March (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965).

17. Dan C. Lortie, *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

A third organizational factor that interferes with the effectiveness of schools as agents of social policy is the peculiar nature of teaching as a mode of professional practice.[18] Teaching is an extraordinarily complex effort to change students in valued directions, which cannot be codified into a set of standard procedures with proven effectiveness. Teachers' success as professionals is entirely dependent on the cooperation of their students, who only learn if they choose to; and this need to gain cooperation is made more difficult because the student is a conscript. Finally, in order to motivate the active cooperation of conscripted clients, teachers need to develop a distinctive teaching persona that will allow them to develop an instructionally fruitful relationship with students. Once this persona is established, teachers are highly reluctant to change it in order to carry out the latest social mission that comes to them from above.[19]

WHY DO WE CONTINUE TO EDUCATIONALIZE SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN THE FACE OF FAILURE?

I have been arguing that when we educationalize social problems, we are expressing a willingness to accept the kinds of formal and symbolic outcomes that education can actually provide — things like instructional programs and educational credentials — in place of a concrete resolution to the problem itself. This is because, when we get right down to it, a liberal democracy is primarily interested in having the educational system embrace and institutionalize the central values of the culture in its language and in the system's formal structure. In line with institutional theory,[20] I am arguing that we hold schools responsible for expressing our values rather than for actually realizing them in practice, that schools are institutional expressions of cultural values whose persistence is less a result of their effectiveness in carrying out those goals in practice than of their ability to represent those goals in formal terms. They are expert at meeting our expectations of what school is rather than at implementing social goals.

To say that schools are ineffective in realizing social goals, however, is not to say that schools do not have an effect. In fact, they have been remarkably effective at reshaping society in their own image. By educationalizing social problems, we have educationalized society itself. One source of education's impact is *funding*. Governments spend an extraordinary portion of their annual budgets on the educational system, from preschool through the most advanced graduate programs at universities. Families and individuals invest an enormous amount of money in

---

18. David K. Cohen, ''Teaching Practice: *Plus Ça Change*,'' in *Contributing to Educational Change: Perspectives on Research and Practice*, ed. Philip W. Jackson (Berkeley, California: McCutchan, 1988).

19. For a more detailed analysis of the way schools as ongoing organizational enterprises redirect reform impulses and reconstruct social goals around their own needs and interests, see David F. Labaree, ''Limits on the Impact of Educational Reform: The Case of Progressivism and U.S. Schools, 1900–1950'' (paper presented at ''The Century of the School'' conference, Monte Verità, Ascona, Switzerland, September 2007).

20. John Meyer, ''The Effects of Education as an Institution,'' *American Journal of Sociology* 83, no. 1 (1977): 55–77; John W. Meyer and Brian Rowan, ''The Structure of Educational Organizations,'' in *Organizational Environments: Ritual and Rationality*, eds. John W. Meyer and William R. Scott (Beverly Hills, California: Sage, 1983); and John W. Meyer and Brian Rowan, ''Institutionalized Organizations,'' *American Journal of Sociology* 83, no. 2 (1997): 340–363.

direct costs for school supplies, tutoring, test preparation, uniforms, college coun-
seling, and especially for college tuition, fees, and loans. And then there is the
opportunity cost of what students could have been earning if they were not in
school. A second source of education's impact is *time*. Education devours some-
where between twelve and twenty-five years of a person's life just in attending
classes in a modern developed society. In addition, the institution absorbs the
efforts of the largest profession in modern societies — educators — plus a large
number of collateral personnel who support the educational enterprise. A third
source of education's impact is *process*. Education forces families and governments
and businesses to organize themselves around academic schedules, academic prior-
ities, academic activities, academic procedures, and academic credentials.

The grammar of schooling[21] is not just a structure that shapes education and
preserves its form over time; it is also a discursive and behavioral pattern that
shapes the way society functions. This process of educationalizing society is in
part an unintended consequence of the process of educational organization build-
ing, kicked off by our need to find institutional expression of our ideals and our
faith in the efficacy of individual solutions to social problems. But this process does
have its social uses, which help reinforce and preserve the expansion of education
once it is in motion. The educationalization of society integrates society around a
set of common experiences, processes, and curricular languages. It stabilizes and
legitimizes a social structure of inequality that otherwise may drive us into open
conflict. It stabilizes and legitimizes government by providing an institution that
can be assigned difficult social problems and that can be blamed when these prob-
lems are not solved. It provides orderly and credible processes for people to live
their lives, by giving employers grounds for selecting a workforce, workers a mech-
anism for pursuing jobs, and families a mechanism for passing on privilege and
seeking social opportunity, even if the rhetorical rationales for these processes
(human capital, individual merit) lack credibility. Most of all, it gives us a mecha-
nism for expressing serious concern about social problems without actually doing
anything effective to solve those problems. In this sense, then, the ability of
schools to formalize substance — to turn anything important into a school subject
or a school program or a school credential — is at the heart of their success in edu-
cationalizing society.

Therefore, the history of education is the history of formalism, as Émile
Durkheim noted toward the end of his review of ''the evolution of educational
thought'' across 1,000 years of European history:

> In this way we can explain a law to which I have frequently drawn attention and which, in fact,
> governs the whole of our academic evolution. This is the fact that from the eighth century
> onwards we have moved from one educational formalism to another educational formalism
> without ever managing to break the circle. In different periods this formalism has been succes-
> sively based on grammar, on logic or dialectic, then on literature; but in different forms it has
> always been formalism which has triumphed. By this I mean that throughout this whole
> period the aim of education has always been not to give the child positive knowledge, the best

---

21. David Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering Toward Utopia: Reflections on a Century of Public School
Reform* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995).

available conception of the way specific things really are, but to generate in him skills which
are wholly formalistic, whether these consist in the art of debate or the art of self-expression.[22]

Education transforms social goals into institutionalized expressions of those
goals. Even though it does not realize these goals, education does create a set of
educational forms — structures, processes, currencies, and languages — that play
useful roles for society. The grammar of schooling is not only an expression of the
organizational inertia of the educational system but also a mechanism by which it
shapes society. So in educationalizing social problems, we may not be doing much
to resolve these problems but we are doing a great deal to school ourselves.

---

22. Émile Durkheim, *The Evolution of Educational Thought: Lectures on the Formation and Development of Secondary Education in France*, trans. Peter Collins (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), 280.