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The Educational System and Resistance to Reform: The Limits of Policy

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Abstract: I suggest some reasons why education has proved so resistant to reform. That the educational system is a system is, in some respects, more significant to this question than the fact that it deals with education; that it is a system militates against certain sorts of reforms being successfully adopted. I will also argue that policymakers' efforts to reform education are made more difficult because of lack of clarity of purpose. Though all agree that "excellence" is the goal to be pursued, there is little attention to the meaning of excellence, nor how we would recognize it if we saw it. Often, "excellence" is used synonymously with "competitiveness." I explore the limits of policy, and suggest that these limits are inescapable. Recognition of these limits may allow us to attend to those policy areas where success may be more likely.

I will argue here two propositions regarding public policy: (1) as an instrument for attaining systemic educational excellence, it is a poor tool; (2) "educational excellence," while universally desired, is a vague and ambiguous concept, and to the extent that it has a commonly understood meaning, that meaning has little to do with real excellence. In short, I will argue that there are some things that educational policy can do quite well, and some that it can do quite poorly, and that we should think carefully about which category any proposed policy falls into ([Note One](#)).

I do not offer solutions to the difficulties of pursuing excellence at the systemic level. It seems to be the case that the only way to eliminate these difficulties would be to cease treating the educational system as a system, which would then create a new set of problems. The difficulties of systemic reform are embedded in the needs and nature of the system itself. This paper is nothing so sophisticated as a formal systems analysis. It is merely an attempt to make sense of some readily observable facts about the operation of the educational system, as a system.

It sometimes seems that educational reform, the effort to eliminate defects systemically, is a perpetual quest of policy makers. There is always the sense that there was some golden age during which education was better than it is now in specific ways. This feeds a sense that things can be better -- the way they were -- if we only make the right systemic adjustments. Systemic flaws, on this view, are the result of bad policies and incompetent and self-serving people. It is on this premise that the energy of many bright and dedicated people has gone into seeking those policies that will produce an excellent educational system. These efforts are not devoted to individual schools, but to schools in general, to the system. The failure of decades of previous reform has not dissuaded policy makers from creating new tests, curricula, and other policy initiatives designed to guarantee systemic excellence.

Recently there has been an increase of people who have abandoned the efforts at systemic reform, convinced that it was impossible. Their response has been to abandon the idea of systemic excellence and commit to the notion that each person should make a commitment to the excellence of only a single school, allowing others to do the same (Chubb and Moe). Those in the lifeboats do not need to be concerned with the sinking ship.

This paper is an effort to explore some reasons we have been unable to achieve what we seek as excellence despite our efforts to do so, but offers no comfort for those who would abandon education as a public enterprise. There are things that systemic policy cannot accomplish. There are even noble and worthwhile things that systemic policy cannot accomplish. That is different from saying that public policy cannot accomplish anything.

The thesis of this paper is that understanding the nature of the educational system qua system may help explain why it is so resistant to change, and why systemic excellence does not result from policies intended to foster it. The basic thesis is that mediocrity is systemic; excellence cannot be. On this view, policy operates at high levels of aggregation while excellence is the result of individual pursuit and achievement. While policies intended to avoid systemic failure may indeed be successful, policies intended to produce systemic excellence rarely will be. This has to do with the nature of the system, but more fundamentally with the nature of excellence itself.

It is commonplace to the point of banality to say that education seems remarkably resistant to reform. This is not to say that education does not change; it does. The claim is simply put: reforms that increase the efficiency with which schools do the same things they have always done are more likely to be implemented successfully than reforms that attempt to change what schools do. The purpose of this paper will be to attempt to gain some understanding of why this is so by examining the implication of the fact that education takes place within a system.

I am taking it as uncontroversial that schools are resistant to reform, at least those of a certain type. Those reforms most consistent with efficient management of the system are those most likely to be accepted quickly; those reforms that make education more individualized, and therefore more difficult to manage, are most likely to be systemically ineffective. Put simply, reforms that make education more efficient are more likely to be effective than those that make education more personalized.

When I talk about resistance, I do not mean to suggest that such reforms are actively opposed. They rarely are. Quite the contrary, they are often enthusiastically embraced by teachers and administrators alike. For this reason, the ability of the system to resist efforts to change it is an interesting phenomenon. As such reforms diffuse through the system they tend to become less reforms as they are modified to conform to the systemic demands for efficiency.

On the other hand, we should not allow recognition of this problem to cause us to give up on educational policy as a means to improve education. While policies intended to manage the details of educational practice have been conspicuously unsuccessful in changing the nature of our schools, the same cannot be said of efforts to change the conditions of schooling. Policy can be spectacularly successful in this area. Schools in the South are more integrated (and were so in

the North as well, before integration was abandoned as a public policy goal); poor children are fed; Head Start provides educational experiences in comfortable surroundings to many children lacking both at home; and children with special needs now have special attention. None of these successes guarantees that the quality of education is any closer to excellent, but each makes this outcome more likely by removing barriers to excellence.

Using the description of the educational system developed by Green (1980), I will attempt to explore the logic of the system that helps us understand why pedagogical change seems to founder in predictable ways.

The Nature of the Educational System

Green suggested that to understand the problems one encounters in reforming the educational system, one must attend to its general character as a system apart from its educational purposes. Among the things that mark it as a system, he pointed to three "primary elements" that help define it as a system, having nothing to do with the educational purposes to which it is dedicated.

He identified the three primary elements of the educational system as (1) schools, (2) a medium of exchange between schools, and (3) sequence. That there are schools simply points to the fact that education takes place within individual institutions. A "medium of exchange" is the system of credits and units that allows students to move from one school to another without having to begin over again or be randomly placed. Transcripts indicate what work the student has done in a way that allows the receiving school to place the student. Finally, the existence of "sequence" means both that the system is graded, and that the work done is sequenced by difficulty. These two sequences are related to each other. That is, the more difficult work is presumed to be done in the higher grades.

It is important to remember that these have nothing to do with the type or quality of education that goes on in the schools. This is a description of the educational SYSTEM, not the EDUCATIONAL system. In any system, a primary need is for efficient management. No complex, multifaceted, multi-sited and scattered enterprise can persist without good management. As a system, then, the educational system requires efficient management more than it requires good education. The claim is not that the system is inimical to good education; simply that, as a system, it is indifferent to the quality of education. Though it is also true that the operation of the system can make good education either more or less likely by placing more or fewer obstacles in the way of its attainment.

What, then, can we identify as the elements of the system that result in such persistence of practices that are consciously defended by so few educators? I will suggest that it is not the existence of schools themselves, but their internal organization and the relationship between them that offers some clues to the puzzle.

What I am suggesting is that to some degree and in some sense, the system is distinct from the people within it; the educational system so structures the environment of the individuals working in it that the consequences of actions within the system are often, and in fundamental ways, affected by the logic of the system more than by their own conscious intentions and beliefs. The purpose of this paper, then, is to see the ways in which the structure of the educational system militates against reforms that would favor improvement of educational practice, but favors those that increase efficiency.

In all of what follows, it will be well to remember that a premise of this analysis is that excellence is an individual accomplishment, not a systemic one. Systemic policies might just possibly be formulated that will allow excellence to emerge and survive, but it cannot be mandated or ensured.

Management of the System

What does efficient management mean in an educational context? What, in other words, does it mean to have the efficient management of education as a policy objective? (Though it may be more accurate to say that something else is the policy objective, and management of education is seen to be a necessary means to that end.) This question should seem strange. One cannot manage another's education. Nevertheless, "management" is the task that appears to lie behind many reform initiatives. Perhaps it is not so strange after all; since education is, after all, what is supposed to go on in schools, efficient management of the system includes, or possibly even should be defined by, management of education. What then is it that is being managed, and what should this sort of management look like?

First, education must be defined as something manageable. Since education certainly has something to do with knowledge, the knowledge must be conceived of and constructed as manageable. This is little more than tautological, but it is an instructive tautology, for it lifts one corner of the tent and allows a peek at the circus inside.

Curriculum documents, scope and sequence charts, specific objectives, and lesson plans are examples of tools that manage instruction, and imply the operation of the principal of sequence referred to above. If the education system is to serve children over a long span of years, there must be something to follow introductory courses. Content can be sequenced in at least two ways: what might be called "natural" and "artificial" sequencing. This is not the structural sequence of the system (grade levels), but of the subject matter content being managed within the system.

The Workings of Sequence

Natural sequencing is that sequencing required by the material itself. For example, we cannot give an independent reading assignment to children who have not learned to read, nor can we ask children who have learned neither counting nor number facts to solve addition problems. This is because learning some X's, or, alternately, learning to do some X's, requires that the learner already have mastered some prior Y's.

On the other hand, artificial sequencing assigns order on some discretionary (though not unreasonable) criteria. For example, high schools commonly teach European History before American History. There is no compelling reason to do so; it is just the way things are done. In elementary schools, mathematical operations are usually taught in the sequence: addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. It is sometimes argued that this is a sequence of increasing difficulty, though it is not obvious that addition and subtraction are necessarily sequenced, and, in fact, some texts use the sequence: addition, multiplication (repeated addition), subtraction, and division (repeated subtraction) as proper and natural. In any event, it is not impossible to conceive of teaching multiplication first -- there is no logical necessity that children master addition and subtraction before learning multiplication. The sequences in these cases are not unreasonable, but they are discretionary: they could be otherwise, which is not so when the sequencing is natural.

Intersecting with this is structural sequencing: schools are divided into grade levels, and the expectation is that a child in level L this year will go on to level L+1 next year, L+2 the following year, and so on until she or he has left the system, either by graduation from the highest level or withdrawal. Efficient management of all this is a basic need of the system as a system.

With a sequence of knowledge and skills for children to master and for teachers to teach, there exists a precondition for managing instruction, often confused with managing learning. Teachers can be directed to teach specific material to children at level L. Some of this sequencing is natural, but probably more is artificial. Note also the means by which the material for level L is

defined: what is taught at L is defined by the needs prerequisite to the content of L+1. The content for each L can be defined by reference to the needs of the next L, all of which is driven, ultimately, by the definitions of what children are expected to have mastered by graduation -- "outcomes" -- which, in turn, are defined by the requirements for entry into college and/or the work place.

There are at least two ways to decide what ought to be taught at L: (1) content at L can be specified by what is sequentially prior to, or simplified versions of, material that will be taught at L+1, or (2) content at L can be specified by the developmental characteristics of children at L. If the child at L is no more than a simplified version of the child at L+1, these two methods of sequencing curriculum content coincide, and there is no problem. However, Kohlberg (1984), Piaget (1929, 1952, 1965), Elkind (1987), and the growing body of Whole Language research suggest that this is not so, that children's development is discontinuous and that children at L are other than smaller versions of their later selves. And if this view is right, there is a fundamental difference between "system centered" curriculum and "child centered" curriculum.

How does this aspect of the system work? Children enter and begin to move through the scope and sequence of the curriculum. Each year the teachers evaluate the children to decide whether they know enough of the content of L to move on to L+1. If not, they repeat L. Note that what we teach is not controlled by what we know about children at level L, but by what the child will need to know at L+1. This is a fundamental feature of the current system.

System Integrity

This describes something of the operation of sequence within a school, but the import of an educational system is that no school exists in isolation. Because we have a system, individuals can move from one school to another, and can pick up at the same level. Curriculums are standard enough so that a child at L in New York can move to California and still be in L. This is remarkable when one considers that schools in the United States are units within approximately 15,000 school districts, independent from each other with respect to governance. The only supervision over these districts is the usually rather loose supervision done by each state. In short, there are 15,000 independent school districts supervised by 50 independent state governments doing essentially the same thing.

There seems to exist something like a national curriculum, which serves as a baseline for content at any L. Where did this come from? In order for education to be effectively managed, there must be a scope and sequence prescribed. Further, a corollary of this aspect of management is the need to assess -- to make sure that what is supposed to be taught is being taught. Direct supervision would require too many supervisors, so assessment of teachers is done by testing children. This helps explain the existence of a national curriculum despite the multiplicity and theoretical independence of school districts. What I am suggesting is that the national curriculum has been shaped by the testing programs that serve the management needs of the system. These tests are an alphabet soup of norm referenced "instruments": SAT (both the Scholastic Aptitude Test and the Stanford Achievement Test), ITBS (Iowa Test of Basic Skills), CAT (both the Cognitive Abilities Test and the California Achievement Test), and the ACT (American College Testing program) among many others. These have had a strong influence on the content of textbooks and the subject matter taught in schools (Smith 1991).

The other force that has contributed to this national curriculum is the textbook industry. Textbooks are often the basis of instruction, and so the national textbook market is a force for standardization. Further, textbook publishers are often the publishers of the standardized achievement tests. Districts will often base their math and reading textbook selection decisions on the achievement tests given in the district. The feeling is that using a text and a test from the same publisher will give the students an edge.

Consideration of these factors suggests that the degree of curriculum standardization is due partly to the text and test publishers apparently external to the system. However, it would be a mistake to see this as some sort of conspiracy or disservice. Rather, such curricular consistency is in fact a necessary feature of any educational system, for it is this consistency that allows students to transfer from one school to another, which makes obvious that individual schools are indeed part of the same system.

Thus one of the definitional features of the system also makes it so resistant to change. Note that an individual school could drastically change the nature of the education it provides, but that would hamper transfer. As long as we use nationally normed tests and nationally distributed texts to manage education, and as long as teachers are evaluated by the performance of their students on these tests, and as long as students are expected to be in grade L at X years of age, there will be a tendency for education to be based in scope and sequence charts rather than interaction between children and their teachers. On the other hand, without some force leading toward such standardization, the system would dissolve into individual units, disconnected from each other.

Excellence or Competition: The Nature of Systemic Goals

One consequence of the way the system runs is that being "competitive" seems to be mistaken for "excellence." It seems to be the case that we have failed to maintain the distinction between these two quite different things. Excellence has become synonymous with increased test scores, preferably higher than those of our rivals. This is precisely to miss the point; it is excellence, not dominance, for which educators and students should strive.

Further, "excellence" has come to be seen as functional, not worth while in itself. Educational excellence is pursued not for the value we place on either excellence or education, but with the supposed competitive advantage we will have once we are excellent in education -- which comes to mean "first on test scores." There is no independent definition of what is meant by "educational excellence"; it is merely being "Number One" on whatever measure we are using to keep score in the contest. It seems likely that to fail to distinguish between being excellent and being first will ensure that we are neither. While a society might indeed gain a competitive edge by having more well-trained mathematicians, that provides no child with a reason to do well in math.

Further, though elevated test scores may be a good indicator that excellence exists -- even an inevitable result of attaining excellence -- nobody should mistake that for a definition of excellence. The fact that children with an excellent education often do well on certain tests does not mean that if we teach all students how to do well on those same tests that this will constitute anything resembling educational excellence. To think otherwise is to reverse cause and effect quite precisely.

What then should count as evidence of excellence? That is a difficult question to answer, but not because excellence is difficult to recognize when encountered. Indeed, it is probably easy to recognize excellence ([Note Two](#)), but difficult to establish in advance what separates the excellent from the merely competent. Given a stack of excellent student essays, one will likely be able to recognize that fact. However, when one tries to specify what makes the essays excellent, one is struck by the fact that the merely competent essays have as much in common with the excellent ones as the excellent ones have with each other -- except for their excellence! Certainly the excellent essays are better than the competent ones, but that is merely a tautology. "Excellence" is less what is now being called an "outcome" as it is a quality of that outcome. It is something recognized in its instantiation, but not definable in advance.

So an obstacle to school reform is imbedded in the nature of excellence: (1) the fact of excellence is easily confused with one of its outcomes -- high test scores, and (2) it is easy to

recognize excellence in education, but difficult -- perhaps impossible -- to define and quantify it. Nevertheless, a well- managed educational system needs to identify desirable outcomes and measure their attainment.

This partly explains the "minimum competency" movement: unlike excellence, competence is possible to define and measure. And if failure to achieve minimum competence is the definition of systemic failure, then the system that achieves widespread competence, that is, a system in which very few students fail to perform below minimally acceptable levels, can be defined as a well-managed system. Further, this sounds like a rational goal for a system to pursue. So systemic policy properly comes to be about competence and minimums. It can never address excellence in any meaningful way, and the first concern, systemically, is to avoid failure.

So while it may be the case that excellence cannot be standardized or defined in advance, it can still be recognized in its instantiation. If children are to aspire to excellence, not just compete, they need a variety of examples to emulate. They must also develop a desire to excel, if they lack this desire. As policy, this is far too vague to be useful in the pursuit of systemic excellence. But it may be the sort of sensibility that will allow excellence to be pursued locally, which may be the best that policy can do in this regard.

It might be argued this is just what current reform efforts are trying to do. The point of creating academically demanding curriculums is to provide standards to which the student will aspire. This is why students are required to demonstrate minimum competency at certain grades to be promoted; it is the motivation behind the increasingly academic nature of primary schools, including kindergarten. In short, the pursuit of excellence is the very reason for the sorts of policies I am criticizing.

In this respect my point is that children should aspire to high standards of excellence, not high test scores. But that is just the goal that policy has no way to effect. High test scores are a by-product -- perhaps an inevitable one, but still only a by-product, and no goal. Tests are ways of keeping score; they are not standards of excellence, but they have the advantage of being clearly articulated as policy goals. The sad fact is that there are too few classrooms in which an observer (or student) would be led to believe that excellence is the goal. Getting the work done is the clear agenda in most classrooms; minimally competent is acceptable.

This is not to deny that there are teachers who do demand excellence, or that there are students who aspire to it. The point is that the pursuit of excellence is neither the policy goal nor the norm within the system. Further, I wish to suggest that it cannot be, not in any meaningful way. Minimally competent is the standard to which teachers hold students, and to which students are taught to aspire, if "aspire" is the correct word. The alternative standard presented by the system is a competitive one. That is to say, those students who show academic promise and ability are not encouraged to excel; they are encouraged to compete. Again, the point is missed. A desire to be excellent is the desire to be the best one can be, not the best in the class.

Real Reform: The Exception?

Anyone with even a passing familiarity with schools can disprove my thesis by pointing to the teachers who, despite the pressures to conform, create learning environments with their children at the center, who respond to the needs of the children in those classes, who pursue and insist on standards of genuine excellence, and who manage to placate, if not exactly conform to, the demands of the system they are within, if not exactly part of. But it does not seem that such practices spread so that they become typical of the system as a whole. This is true even when the value of the reform is widely recognized. Most elementary educators recognize that children learn best when they do, rather than when they are done to or told. The value of reading, rather than doing work book pages, the value of writing rather than doing grammar exercises, the value of doing hands-on science instead of reading out of text or listening to lectures -- these are all

acclaimed with near unanimity to be improved methods of teaching children. Generations of teachers have been taught this in classrooms, workshops, and inservice training courses, and they recognize the truth of it from their own experiences with children. Generations of teachers have made commitments to do this kind of teaching in their classrooms, and very few would deny that it is superior. All the above notwithstanding, the standard in our classes today is, as it was fifty years ago, chalk and talk. There are certainly exceptions, but that is the point; such teachers and such practices have always been the exception, and remain so ([Note Three](#)). In other words, the system cannot completely negate the efforts of those exceptional individuals and groups who make their classrooms or schools places where the needs of the children take priority over those of the system, but those pockets of true reform remain just that -- pockets. The demands of the system are more powerful than the needs of the children more often than not.

More than that, this is predictable from the fact it is a system; systemic policies, as pointed out above, deal in competence and minima, not excellence. The best that policy makers may be able to do is be aware of the requirements of excellence and make policies that make its attainment no more difficult than necessary.

Perhaps the point of this essay is best expressed as a caution that the process of making educational policy ought to not exceed the proper domains of what policy can do. While it is certainly the case that there are times when a person's reach should exceed his or her grasp, there is also a danger in articulating poorly conceived goals as ends to be seriously sought.

Before publicly announcing that a new policy initiative will make schools excellent, perhaps we need to examine more closely the meaning of excellence, and the role of the public in its attainment in any school. Certainly public policy can address some obstacles to excellence, but that is not at all the same thing as promising that any new policy initiative will result in excellent schools.

Notes

Note One: I would like to express my deep appreciation to Tom Green for his inspiration and guidance in the thinking that led to this paper.

Note Two: This seems a controversial claim, and it is one I will not take the time here to defend. However, the outline of the argument is this: When Michael Apple and William Bennett disagree about what an excellent education looks like, it is not the definition of excellence about which they are disagreeing, but the definition of education. We can, in short, recognize that someone is doing an excellent job of educating, even if the sort of education is judged to be bad or wrong.

Note Three: My thesis would be that, if there were a way to study the number of teachers and/or schools engaged in truly child-centered education for the last fifty years, we would discover that the number, as a proportion of the whole, has been remarkably constant.

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