Psychological Theory and Educational Reform
How School Remakes Mind and Society

For more than a century educational reformers have looked for a breakthrough in the sciences of psychology and pedagogy that would dramatically improve the effectiveness of schooling. This book shows why such an ambition is an illusion. Schools are institutions that attempt to balance the needs of a bureaucratic society that funds them with the personal goals, interests, hopes, and ambitions of the students who enroll in them. Reform efforts attempt to realign that balance without any clear conception of how the two are related. This book offers a theoretical account of the relation between the minds of learners and the institutional structure of the school that would account both for the ways that schooling remakes minds and societies and for the reasons such institutions are resistant to change.

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Psychological Theory and Educational Reform

*How School Remakes Mind and Society*

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For Jerry Bruner
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Preface

For some time I have been struck by the fact that whereas the psychological understanding of children's learning and development has made great strides, conspicuously through the pioneering work of Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and the Cognitive Revolution beginning in the 1960s, the impact on schooling as an institutional practice has been modest if not negligible. With most of my colleagues, I had assumed that if only we knew more about how the mind works, how the brain develops, how interests form, how people differ, and, most centrally, how people learn, educational practice would take a great leap forward. But while this knowledge has grown, schools have remained remarkably unaffected.

Thus, whereas the research assures us that what people learn depends upon what they already know, in school what they learn depends upon what the school mandates. Whereas the research suggests that people learn because they are intrinsically interested or because they love learning, in school they pursue knowledge because, as they say, they "need the credit." Whereas researchers insist that learning is inspired by the search for meaning and the growth in understanding, what, in fact, they learn depends upon what books, chapters, or pages they believe they are responsible for.¹ For the theorist, the growth of mind is spontaneous and continuous; for the school, it is a matter of obligation and duty.

¹ When the distinguished McGill psychologist John Macnamara was asked by his students prior to the final examination what they were responsible for, he replied, "You are responsible for the welfare of your immortal soul!" I am indebted to Michael Corballis for this anecdote.
This disparity between our knowledge of the mind and the practices of the school underlies many of the traditional criticisms of the school – its bookishness, its penchant for parceling knowledge into arbitrary packages called subjects, its remoteness from “felt needs” and direct experience of the learner, its impersonal forms of discourse, its objective standards, its extrinsic goals – and motivates many urgent calls for reform of the school to fit the advances in the learning sciences.

In fact, attempts to make schools more “child-centered” were common for much of the 20th century. But Ravitch’s (2000) review of the effects of these attempted “progressivist” reforms argued that not only did they fail to raise academic standards, if anything they lowered them, especially for the less gifted students. And now many accuse schools of presiding over falling standards, thereby placing “the nation at risk,” and call for more desperate measures ranging from radical changes in administration and ownership, such as charter schools, to increased surveillance of teachers and students through new regimens of testing. The provisional reports on the impact of these most recent reforms are at best mixed. Yet all the while conspicuous and soluble problems are ignored: School libraries wane, classroom resources are depleted, after-school programs are phased out, and discouraged and underpaid teachers leave the profession in droves, some 40% in the first 3 years, thereby limiting the opportunities for school improvement (Guardian Weekly, Aug. 30–Sept. 5, 2001, p. 8).  

The checkered history of deep reforms and urged reforms – what the economist A. Hirschman (2001) has called “reform mongering” – requires us to think again about schooling. The problem, I believe, is that the theories that gave us insight into children’s understanding, motivation, learning, and thinking have never come to terms with schooling as an institutional practice with its duties and responsibilities for basic skills, disciplinary knowledges, grades, standards, and credentials. As long as schools are seen only as environments for personal growth, the nature and effects of schooling as an institution will be overlooked. Conversely, as long as schools are seen as institutions for achieving social goals and standards, the nature of personal growth and understanding will be overlooked. Around such axes the rhetoric of educational reform revolves.

In some urban districts teachers are said to leave their systems on average after 3 years (Goertz, 2001, p. 54). They leave primarily because of job dissatisfaction and desire to pursue other careers (Ingersoll, 2001).
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What is required, then, is an advance in our understanding of schools as bureaucratic institutions that corresponds to the advances in our understanding of the development of the mind. What is required is a better understanding of the relation between psychological theory and educational reform. When achieved, many of the so-called failures of schooling may come to be seen rather as optimal solutions to deep-seated social problems and practices. The reliance on rules, the bookishness, the responsibilities assigned to students, the earning of credentials, and the traditional pedagogical methods may all emerge as solutions adopted for good reasons rather than as miseducative rituals. Seeking credits will be seen as just as valid a basis for study as is pursuing one’s interests. Indeed, “If you have an interest, pursue it in your own time” or “Keep it to yourself” as Gradgrind or the masters at Leamy’s National School might say (McCourt, 1996); we have more serious matters to attend to – such as earning a credential in maths. Duty and responsibility must find their place along with interest and understanding if we are to understand schooling.

If we are to understand schooling and its relation to mind and society, we must begin by formulating and then addressing a thorny theoretical puzzle: On the one hand are the child’s growing understanding, subjectivity, intentionality, and responsibility. On the other is the school’s responsibility for shaping persons to fill certain prespecified social roles in an increasingly bureaucratic society. A too sharp distinction between persons and institutions makes much good science irrelevant to the understanding of schooling, whereas conflating the two hides the effects of the schooling from our view, reducing it to just one more factor in personal and social development. As long as schools are charged with the responsibility for awarding the credentials that indicate one’s competencies to perform the society’s work – their historical and valued function – one can tune the system to make it more inclusive and effective but not markedly alter its structure. Only in the final two chapters of the book do I address how one may at least begin to do this tuning.

Only distinguishing persons as intentional beings from institutions as bureaucratic agents allows the universal institutional features of schooling to come into view. The most fundamental of these universal features is the reallocation of responsibility from a person to a public institution; the institution of the school assigns a new identity and determines who one will become. This realignment is achieved through other universal features of schooling, including classification, grading, curriculum,
surveillance, and credentialing. These institutional features, as I shall explain, are responsible for two truths that have remained largely unexplained, the facts that even radical school reforms tend to have limited if not negligible effects and, second, schooling as an institutional process itself has dramatic and irreversible cognitive and social effects. These effects are sufficiently important that schooling is widely viewed as essential to full participation in a modern society as well as a requisite ingredient of modernization. Once the institutional autonomy of the school is recognized, we will be able to see in a new way an array of traditional issues in the study of education, including the nature of abilities, of learning, of thinking, and, most important, of intentionality, responsibility, and accountability. I conclude by sketching a new framework for thinking about schooling that honors equally the subjectivity of the learner and the normative structures of a modern bureaucratic society.

In part my account is a product of a somewhat recent history of the field of educational studies. In response to the loss of faith in the educational establishment, and partly because of its isolation from the more basic disciplines, educational studies opened their arms to the specialist disciplines of history, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, and psychology. These disciplines provided a new seriousness to educational studies and led to an exhilarating burst of basic research of relevance to education “broadly conceived,” in the phrase of the Spencer Foundation, a major supporter of educational research including much of my own. My own career coincides with this transformation. Educational research had been largely an actuarial science of predicting achievement on the basis of a variety of factors such as intelligence quotient (IQ) and socioeconomic status (SES). In the 1960s the study of education began to be much more integrated into the basic disciplines of history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and the like. However, this infusion of more specialized disciplinary knowledge created an unanticipated problem, namely, that schooling as a largely autonomous institutional process was almost completely lost sight of. Rediscovering the fundamental nature of schooling in the midst of these specialist studies is one of the goals of this book.

This book, in one sense, is an extension of my work on literacy in that it is premised on the, to me, inescapable and overwhelming impact of writing on the formation of modern bureaucratic societies. Schooling in large part is an initiation into a written “documentary” tradition. Whereas in The World on Paper (1994) I focused on the evolution of writing systems and their impact on the thinking and consciousness of
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individual readers and writers as they learn to read, write, and interpret texts, in this book I examine the school as embedded in a bureaucratic social system in which writing and the documentary tradition are central organizing features. This requires a much clearer distinction between a literate person and a literate society. When I came to terms with societal literacy (with thanks to Georg Elwert, 2001, and to Dorothy Smith, 1990a), I realized that I was in a position finally to address the question of why the now abundant studies of individual learning and human development had made so little impact on the institutional practices of schooling. Further, I realized that I was not alone in having neglected the fact that school is not simply an environment for human development but an institution with its own entitlements and obligations. Few writers acknowledge that the school is an institution that imposes its own boundaries and forms on human development by specifying the criteria or norms against which development and achievement are to be judged.

I dedicate this book to Jerome Bruner, who not only has been a long-time mentor and friend but set the stage for the argument of this book both by showing the essential role that education plays in human development and by demonstrating how development could be addressed in an intentionalist, sociocultural frame of reference. My book could be read as an elaboration of chapter 3 of Bruner’s The Culture of Education (1996), in which he poses the antinomy between education as human development versus education as social reproduction. Whereas Bruner addressed this antinomy by urging schools to be more participatory, collaborative, and given over to constructing rather than receiving meanings, I address it by exploring the impact of the institutional dimensions of a bureaucratic society with its norms, rules, procedures, and laws on the organization of schooling and the formation of mind. Bruner was also the first reader of this book, and my indebtedness is transparent throughout these pages.

I must also express my gratitude to the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto and its Dean for the encouragement and support provided over many years. More specific gratitude is owed to the incomparable Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin and its directors, Wolf Lepenies, Jurgen Kocka, Joachim Nettelbeck, and Rinehart Meyer-Kalkus, for the year-long fellowship that made the drafting of this book possible. I would also like to express my thanks to the readers, informants, and critics who helped me shape my argument and my
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