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978-0-521-64540-9 - Changing Classes: School Reform and the New Economy

Martin Packer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

The future of every society lies with its children. As each generation takes up tasks and responsibilities from the preceding one, its attitudes, expectations, and conduct shape the form society takes. Schools are, in the societies that have them, a central institution preparing young people for their future as workers and citizens. Schools, I would maintain, are more than places where young people are taught knowledge and skills; they are crucibles wherein children are transformed. In doing this schools give direction to our society – they can perpetuate the status quo or create a new future. And this means that those who can control our schools may exert a significant influence on the direction of social change.

This book is an account of struggles now taking place over public schools in the United States. It is the story of a single school district – the Willow Run Community Schools, in Michigan – but the lessons learned from this one case can, I believe, help us better understand what is happening all over the United States, and abroad as well.

At the same time the book is a reflection on the character of schooling. Schools are so familiar that we take them for granted, but the debates over schooling make it clear that there is much confusion about just how schools work. I believe we currently lack a clear understanding of the psychological and sociological character of schooling – of just how it is that attending school changes a young person's way of engaging the world, changes the kind of person they are. Here I offer the beginnings of such an account.

In the United States, public schools have become targets for increasingly strident attacks and demands for reform. In the early 1990s a striking and surprising bipartisan consensus developed that schools were failing, that

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 *Changing Classes*

as a consequence the national economy was at risk, and that a “bridge to the twenty-first century” was needed that could be erected only if schooling were reformed. In particular, public schools were accused of failing to keep pace with dramatic changes in the workplace, changes in the character of industrial production and business organization.

Over the past two decades the United States has indeed undertaken a dramatic social upheaval, as computerization, merger and divestiture, downsizing and outsourcing, globalization and the World Wide Web have brought a shift from the familiar Fordist economy – standardized, large-scale, assembly-line production with a rigid and complex top-down hierarchy – to a new post-Fordist production – flexible, small-batch manufacture with a malleable and lean horizontal team organization. The production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services have all been transformed, become global, as companies move plants in search of cheaper labor, as trade agreements ease the flow of goods across national borders, and as computerized banking and trading enable currency to circle the globe in a fraction of a second.

Today the result of these changes is generally seen as an unprecedented boom – uninterrupted years of growth, low inflation, low unemployment, and a heady rise in stock prices. It is difficult now to recall how differently our situation was viewed less than a decade ago, when Bill Clinton won the presidency in part by reminding himself, “It’s the economy, stupid.” But there remains today another, hidden face to “Workplace 2000” – the costs paid for the boom include an enormous dislocation in which some kinds of work, especially manufacturing, have been eliminated, and job security and benefits have been relinquished by many workers. Poverty is growing, people are working longer hours for the same pay, there is an increasing inequity of income and wealth and a hovering threat of global economic and political instability. These problems have affected not just individuals, but entire communities. Over the past decade many communities have felt the stunningly painful effects of economic transition, abandoned as industrial facilities that provided apparently well-paying and secure jobs were closed in the name of “rationalization.”

Willow Run is such a community. A small, poor, ethnically mixed school district in Michigan’s rust belt, near Detroit, Willow Run was the child of twentieth-century state-regulated industrial production, born of a union between the power of the federal government and the wartime demand for mass production of complex fighting machines. The community was created by and took shape around the needs of large-scale industry – industry whose needs are now dramatically different.

Cambridge University Press

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Martin Packer

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

I was fortunate enough to witness the efforts begun by teachers and administrators of the Willow Run schools to meet the challenges posed by the downsizing, southward migration, and reorganization of the auto industry. I began to visit the schools shortly after my arrival in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1991, having accepted a faculty position in the University of Michigan's School of Education. I found myself drawn into a tight-knit community with a dramatic history, a striking geography, and a wealth of good feeling.

In order both to understand the local reforms and try to facilitate them, I joined the committee that was working to foster change throughout the district. I attended the meetings of this committee, school board meetings, Town Hall meetings, traveled to the state Department of Education with other committee members, visited classrooms, attended school events, and spoke with teachers, students, parents, the superintendent, and other administrators.

So I was there when the Willow Run Community Schools found themselves caught up by not just one but two major initiatives for reform of the U.S. public schools. The first, legislation begun by Michigan's new Republican governor, John Engler, designed to bring market forces to bear on the schools and improve the "quality, performance, and accountability" of education, will be more familiar to most readers – it is a prime example of the "standards-based" movement that has swept through many U.S. states in the past decade.

But the second, though less well-known, is equally significant. It was a major program by the National Science Foundation (NSF), the "Statewide Systemic Initiative," intended to promote "systemic reform" of the public schools – a major effort that played out in 25 states and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, each of which received up to \$10 million over a five-year period.

In this book I trace the district's navigation through these reform initiatives and the changing economy, to provide an intimate look at the complexities and contradictions of public schooling, to shine a critical light on state and national initiatives for school reform, and to explore how a community like Willow Run turns to its schools in times of challenge and threat. I take the reader behind the scenes to hear teachers and administrators reflecting on the constraints and resources that influence what happens in the classroom. My story is of a community struggling to preserve its identity, of educators working to meet the needs of children in danger of being left behind by fast-paced economic change, and of the way personal change and history intertwine. The local reformers understood that if the community was to survive its children must change. The

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Martin Packer

Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *Changing Classes*

schools had to do more than teach new skills, they had to change children's attitudes toward learning, to prepare them for a new way of life as their old lifestyle vanished.

And as a reflection on the character of modern schooling this book is a study of children's development within a broad social context, a careful look at one of the social institutions that structures the development of children to adulthood. It is an interpretation of schooling not merely as cognitive change, but as transformation of the whole person.

My story begins where my visits did, at Kettering Elementary School. I describe the changes at Kettering as staff and administrators worked to explore the implications of their discovery that teaching could be "fun" for both their students and themselves. These teachers had a rich grasp of the concrete realities of classroom life and of the community the schools served. I interpret their efforts and their renunciation of many elements of the traditional classroom as an important experiment at making schooling freshly relevant to working-class kids, children whose attitudes and needs – skepticism about book learning, valuing practical labor – had their roots in the "manual/mental" division of mass production. But I also interpret these local reform efforts as grounded in practitioners' tacit appreciation of the ways teaching and learning are relational and cultural, how schooling is a matter of forging relations and building culture. The staff understood that school reform requires changes in the relationship between "teacher" and "student" and changes in the culture of the school and the classroom.

The new Willow Run Systemic Initiative committee, in its meetings and presentations, applied the "same belief system" to the learning of teachers. Again relationship and culture were central. The committee sought to foster professional development by creating a safe environment in which staff would be willing to take risks, drawing from an ethos of caring and sharing uniquely Willow Run's, eschewing "top-down" mandates – the committee insisted it wasn't imposing new solutions but was there to help teachers achieve their own goals.

And as I follow the children to Willow Run's middle school, the importance of attending to relationship and culture is further highlighted. The middle school had introduced curriculum changes but also established a climate where discipline, maintaining order, was seen as paramount. These efforts were well intentioned, but culture and curriculum clashed and students responded with growing opposition and resistance.

Introduction

5

The middle school teachers saw this misbehavior as a sign of “attitude,” and of course they were right. I want to promote the notion of *attitude* from folk term to theoretical concept and propose that schooling is *always* about children’s attitude as students. Striking an attitude is a way of dealing with the contradictions of classroom life, a way of answering the question “Who am I?” Attitude is the *manner* in which children inhabit the social world of the classroom, a stance toward teacher, other students, different ways of knowing, and to self, that shows itself in posture and demeanor as well as words, but typically remains invisible unless it becomes an alignment *against* the teacher.

The large-scale reform initiatives lacked the local reformers’ rich understanding of teaching and learning. Each was an attempt to rationalize schooling, in the terms of either a political or an economic logic. They reduced teaching to either a delivery system whose components require alignment or a production process whose efficiency needs improving. I describe how they clashed with one other, as well as with the local reforms. Despite its best intentions, NSF’s statewide systemic initiative became a “top-down” bureaucracy at odds with Willow Run’s egalitarian methods. And the governor’s new high-stakes standardized testing cut deeply to the heart of the teacher–student relationship, as it judged students “proficient,” “not yet proficient,” and “novice.” It also cut to the heart of the relationship among teachers, threatening to poison the culture of collaboration and equality the local reformers were striving to build.

A classroom’s culture amounts to a new moral topography within which academic practices, especially reading, writing, and math, bring “self” and “mind” into being. “Student” and “teacher” are new social positions, from which children and adult must forge a relationship. In the traditional classroom this relationship is given official form by a “single axis of achievement” along which students are sorted, and in terms of which the teacher recognizes them. In striking an attitude children accept or reject the terms of this recognition. Because schools can’t *determine* a child’s attitude, but can only seek to define the culture and relationships within which it is adopted, attitude can become a major issue in the classroom. The local reformers were rejecting the “axis of achievement” and seeking to change what it meant to be “teacher” and “student”; the governor’s reforms threatened to fragment their collective effort and to restore the traditional, unitary axis.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *Changing Classes*

I set these reforms against the backdrop of the unfolding “new economy,” using the General Motors corporation as a token for the larger economic shift taking place. The Jekyll and Hyde character of this shift became evident in the ups and downs of GM’s struggle for profitability and market share. The economic transition unfolded not with inevitability or determinism, but as a bare-knuckle fight to force concessions and compliance from workers.

Employers, it turns out, now judge “attitude” the most important factor when they consider hiring a new nonsupervisory or production worker, and the attitude now most valued is *flexibility* – a willingness to accept the terms of the new workplace and demand nothing better.

Despite the pronouncements of millennialist pundits who claim to know what the twenty-first century has in store and how we must prepare for it, and despite the pronouncements of developmentalists who claim to have identified universal stages, there exist different pathways into the future, different possibilities for the future of our society as well as the development of our children. Both human development and human history are made, not caused; neither is inevitable. As teachers, parents, administrators, and politicians both collaborate and struggle to redefine the character of the Willow Run Community Schools, they seek to create the possibility for the children who attend these schools to become new kinds of people, young adults who can transform both their own community and our larger society, or who can be a flexible workforce for business as usual.

Every researcher looks at the world through lenses that are the product of his or her professional development. I view development as a complex interplay between child and culture. My interpretive framework owes its character to the fact that I began studying psychology in Britain at a time when a “new look”¹ was being fashioned, with greater attention to the social worlds in which children live and to the role of adults who “act as mediators . . . of the wider social order” for the child.² The work of people like Martin Richards, Judy Dunn, David Ingleby, Elena Lieven, Jerome Bruner (then in England, at Oxford), Colwyn Trevarthen, John Shotter, and others broke with the neo-behaviorist socialization theories then current, without adopting a computer-obsessed cognitivism, and focused on social interaction and social context as keys to understanding learning and development.³

Exposure to this new paradigm motivated me to cast around for a way to systematically investigate social interaction, a logic of inquiry that would pay appropriate attention to both the semiotic organization

Introduction

7

and the pragmatic, performative character of people's everyday interaction. This in itself became a long exploration of interpretive methods, of a "hermeneutic phenomenology," that I tested and taught in a variety of circumstances.⁴ What became increasingly evident to me was the work of construction that is accomplished in social interaction, in everyday conversation, as entities are indexed, social worlds invoked, and people moved and changed. Studying this called for ways of fixing human action as a "text-analog," then carefully interpreting the language games being played.⁵

The United States imported some of the "social constructionist" paradigm⁶ from the United Kingdom, but it also has a homegrown brand, going by the names of sociocultural or cultural-historical theory, situated cognition, or simply cultural psychology. Here too the concern has been to understand the role of interpersonal interaction, social practices, and cultural artifacts in children's learning and development. The pioneers in this paradigm have taught us to view culture as a medium for human activity and growth (Michael Cole);⁷ in the "intentional worlds" people inhabit (Richard Shweder),⁸ they have highlighted the ways cultural artifacts – tools, signs, texts – are crucial "mediational means" that shape human action and transform human agency (James Wertsch),⁹ explored the notion that "children's cognitive development is an apprenticeship," occurring through "guided participation" that requires attention to "personal, interpersonal, and community processes" (Barbara Rogoff),¹⁰ and suggested that learning always takes place in a "community of practice" where the learner is a "legitimate peripheral participant" who changes in their identity (Jean Lave).¹¹ As Sylvia Scribner noted, it is necessary that "an analysis of changing social practices becomes integral to – rather than merely peripheral to – an inquiry into learning and development."¹² Overall, there is consensus about the importance of looking for learning in action rather than in reflection, in relations among people rather than in the individual, and in everyday social settings rather than in the laboratory.

School is clearly one place of learning, and so researchers working within this paradigm have investigated the "activity settings"¹³ of schools and their "institutional activities."¹⁴ The influence of sociocultural concepts will be apparent in this book, and these studies have been illuminating, but their focus has still been primarily the influence of schooling on cognitive skills like memory, logical problem solving, literacy, and "schooled" or "scientific" concepts, or sometimes a criticism of the "de-contextualized" knowledge taught in school.¹⁵ The broader question of how schools change the kind of person a child is has gone unasked.

Cambridge University Press

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Martin Packer

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *Changing Classes*

Looking at school not just as a place of cognitive change, but as a site of something broader and more profound – a site of what I’ve begun to call, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, the “production of persons” – requires attention to the societal context of schooling. Willow Run, a community facing historical changes, faced with the task of making history, so to speak, provided a unique opportunity to examine the social practices, cultural contexts, and interpersonal relations that together make up schooling. It offered an opportunity to contextualize children’s development thoroughly in both place and time, locale and history. An opportunity to study development as a culturally and historically situated process, that is, as a process that includes not just children becoming adults, but also the reproduction and transformation (both) of the culture of a community and the appropriation and relinquishment (both) of tradition and history. I have sought, then, to articulate the connections schooling makes among children’s development, political and economic systems, and historical change.

I’ve chosen to downplay theoretical discourse and adopt a narrative form in this book. Narrative suits both the logic of interpretive analysis and the aims of sociocultural inquiry. As Hans Joas notes:

The story-teller tells of the knowledge and the action of other actors and objectivates this knowledge and action in so far as he places it within a context resulting from his understanding of the frames of reference within which he interprets the actions of others. He does not become an uncomprehending observer, but an interpretative reconstructor of the subjectively intended and “objective” meaning of the actions of others.¹⁶

Narrative is uniquely suited to a particular kind of descriptive and explanatory account, one shaped by the benefits of hindsight but capturing events unfolding in time. There is a sense of the whole, informed by an understanding, achieved in retrospect, of the larger social and historical contexts in which people acted but knew little about. A narrator can rightly employ a certain omniscience in exposition, looking back. (Not complete omniscience, of course, especially when the narrator became swept up by the events narrated – but that is quite apt.)

But narrative can also reconstruct events unfolding in time, their twists and turns, people’s surprises and disappointments. Juxtaposing the partial viewpoint of the participant with larger forces not clearly visible at the time is narrative’s special potency. The same twofold approach – partial understanding of actor; larger social/historical system – that a sociocultural analysis of human development seeks.

Cambridge University Press

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Martin Packer

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

My choice of narrative is motivated too by a belief that the details are important; that while big generalizations may appear more powerful, details are more informative, especially in the long run. I've tried to convince by illustration rather than by assertion and argument. But narrative doesn't replace analysis; this narrative *is* my analysis, designed for performative effect rather than expository content. Put more simply, most academic texts gather dust on the library shelves; I hope this is more readable.

The choice of narrative has brought with it some difficult decisions, however. My understanding of the Willow Run ethos and of the effects of downsizing, for example, were augmented by personal experiences that I've felt obliged not to edit from the story nor to disguise by adopting a completely impersonal tone. I hope the reader will not judge these few passages self-indulgent.

1 The Class of 2001

June 9, 1994

We have seen that a community or social group sustains itself through continuous self-renewal, and that this renewal takes place by means of the educational growth of the immature members of the group. By various agencies, unintentional and designed, a society transforms uninitiated and seemingly alien beings into robust trustees of its own resources and ideals. Education is thus a fostering, a nurturing, a cultivating, process. All of these words mean that it implies attention to the conditions of growth.

John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*. New York: Free Press, 1916, p. 10

We live in a time when nearly all of our institutions, including American industry, labor unions, churches, and government, are struggling to adapt to the changes of the late twentieth century. Yet in the institution where progress is arguably most critical – education – it is most lacking. Where are our passion and commitment to our most precious asset, our children? Where are our collective will and determination to give our children what they deserve and need – high-quality education?

Louis V. Gerstner Jr., with D. P. Doyle and W. B. Johnston, *Reinventing Education: Entrepreneurship in America's Public Schools*. New York: Penguin, 1995, pp. x–xi

It is a rare, beautiful late-spring day in lower Michigan. It has been another hard winter, the coldest in memory, apparently the coldest on record, but spring has been kind, with sunny, dry days. The temperature today is in the low seventies, the humidity pleasant. Birds dart low across the road in front of my car, and strands of cirrus cloud line the horizon. At 9:50 I pull into the parking lot of Kettering Elementary School and join the adults carrying cakes and dress shirts past the new mural into the school. The lot is filling quickly, and people stream into the entrance of the long, single-story building.