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BOOK REVIEW

Larry Cuban. The Enduring Classroom: Teaching Then and Now

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Following the clarion call from Silicon Valley, flocks of watery-eyed students have migrated from teacher preparation to educational leadership and policy programs. A new generation of overeducated reformers believe new technological tools and future-oriented thinking can solve perennial problems of schooling and teaching. In a technopoly, solving problems of schooling and teaching is easy: Find and test what works, then implement what works best. In this vision, teachers become facilitators; students become learners. The messiness of education, then, is transformed into causal inputs and outputs that facilitators of learners can codify and quantify. No wonder enrollments for teacher education programs have dwindled, while teacher shortages abound. Why teach if you can transform the classroom from outside looking in?

But, as the eminent scholar of teaching and school reform Larry Cuban reminds us, changes to schooling and teaching practices are obstinate, unpredictable, and slow. *The Enduring Classroom: Teaching Then and Now* eschews plug-and-play solutions and normative declarations of "what works." Cuban, instead, provides detailed observations and historically informed analysis of how public schools have schooled and how teachers have taught from the late nineteenth century to the present in the United States. To that end, he asks six questions that evade the technocratic concerns of contemporary educational reformers: How have US public school teachers taught? Have public schools and teaching practices changed over time? Why have schooling and classroom practice been stable over time? How should teachers teach? How do teachers teach now? Why have changing and conserving been hallmarks of US public schooling and teaching practice?

In asking and answering these questions, Cuban argues that a dynamic conservatism—not technocratic interventionism—defines both schooling and teaching practices. In the long arc of modern school history in the US, changes to schooling and teaching have preserved stability. Teacher-centered instruction has absorbed student-centered pedagogies, while schooling has reacted to societal shifts, not merely reformist interventions. Rather than focus on what works, the book makes clear that any person interested in reforming schooling and teaching practices should account for and understand why dynamic conservatism endures in US schools and classrooms.

Cuban synthesizes historical and contemporary interpretation to define and outline two modes of classroom instruction: teacher-centered and student-centered. He argues that a hybridization between the two modes of instruction has become the dominant way of teaching. Despite the passionate rhetoric of New Educationalists and the professional embrace of progressive education, teacher-centered instruction has remained relatively stable. Nevertheless, the growth of small-group activities, the inclusion of new classroom furniture, and the adoption of high-tech tools have changed how teachers teach.

In step with societal trends, Cuban notes, schools have also changed. For example, racial desegregation and resegregation, shifts in state funding priorities, professionalization and feminization of teaching, informal customs and dress, stigmatization of corporal punishment, and new technology have influenced how the US student is educated. In response to these trends, schools have adopted new curricula, created smaller class sizes, structured class time, included support teachers, and added new technology including projectors and computers.

But the grammar of schooling remains fixed for both public and charter schools. Why? Tax-supported, age-graded schools were and are (somewhat) popular. Our collective experience with an age-graded system reinforces a commitment to the idea of a "real school." The institutional merit conveyed by the age-graded system trumps artificial aristocracy. The age-graded system and the traditional assessments that are integral to that system have withstood epidemics, pandemics, and hurricanes. Stability, therefore, stands as the marque institutional response to outside change.

While stability has tempered educational fads, the conservative nature of schooling has solidified a gap between how teachers should teach and how teachers do teach. Cuban examines this gap in the fourth and fifth chapters. The fourth chapter surveys the progressive, civil rights, and business-oriented reform movements in relation to their influence on teaching. The progressives receive the most attention. While practiced in education schools, student-centered progressive pedagogies are often abandoned when the trained teacher is alone with thirty children in a classroom. All three educational reform movements, despite their differences, focus too much on the normative aspects of teaching and overlook the remarkable stability of the age-graded system in the US. In this chapter (and others), Cuban includes detailed observational reports of teachers teaching. Each observational report reads as a narrative, detailing both change and continuity in teaching across time, place, and space.

In the fifth chapter, perhaps the most important contribution of the book, Cuban provides a contemporary analysis of how teachers teach in the twenty-first century. To understand how teachers taught during the COVID-19 pandemic, the book includes a series of firsthand accounts of how teachers approached remote learning and teaching during a medical emergency. In addition, Cuban reviews three major studies on teaching in the twenty-first century. In the face of a pandemic and the turn to remote learning, hybrid teaching and the age-graded system have withstood the storm.

The book ends with an exploration of dynamic conservatism in traditional public and charter schools. Cuban examines past teacher-inspired reforms and present experience in charter schools to show the durability of the grammar of schooling. He concludes by reminding reformers about the difference between policy talk, policy

adoption, and teacher action (94). If reformers do not appreciate the difference between talk, adoption, and action, any future tweak will be met with a stabilizing force.

Ultimately, Cuban blends historical and policy analysis to reinforce a distinct contribution made by educational historians: Education reform has failed to account for the stable and contradictory nature of schooling and teaching. Contemporary reformers should study the US educational past to develop a pragmatic understanding of constancy and change. With greater appreciation for the resiliency of schooling and the realities of teaching, reformers can approach perennial problems of schooling and teaching with a more mature, reasonable theory of change.

Yet, as public funds are usurped for private, charter, and micro schools and a global regime of "precision education governance" turns public schools into learning centers (where teachers and students interact with machines for corporate profit), how long will our classrooms endure?[1]

[1]Kristilina Brunila and Daniel Nehring, "Precision Education Governance and the High Risks of Fabrication of Future-Oriented Learning Human Kinds," *Research Papers in Education* 38, no. 5 (2023), 727–42.

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