



School accountability and standard-based education reform: The recall of social efficiency movement and scientific management



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ABSTRACT

This study examines issues of success/failure, performance, and effectiveness in the contemporary reform discourses of school accountability. It pays attention to a particular meaning of success/failure and its implications for current public school systems and education reform movements, not merely as a school accountability issue, but as an ontological one, which is inscribed in the politics of inclusion and exclusion. The mechanisms of standardization, classification, and normalization embedded in the practices of high-stakes testing are reconsidered through an analysis of the discussion of social efficiency in the early twentieth century. The study also examines its recall several decades later as part of the quality control and management of individuals, schools, and states. In exploring connectedness between the old and new levels of social efficiency, this study suggests that success/failure becomes reinscribed as a particular system of reasoning to normalize the subjectivity in discourses of the current American education reform and OECD's PISA. The study concludes by criticizing the rationale of recent educational reforms based on the search for past and present social efficiency movements in schools.

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, school accountability has been spotlighted as one of the key features in education reform. Although accountability in schooling is a broad and problematic term that could be addressed in many ways, it is widely recognized as the principle by which educational outcomes based on student performance can be admired and/or blamed, usually by way of standardized tests (Au, 2007; Carnoy et al., 2003; Figlio and Loeb, 2011). For example, Figlio and Loeb (2011) highlight school accountability as an important characteristic of educational reform in the 21st century, and describe it as “the process of evaluating school performance on the basis of student performance measures” and “administrative data-based mechanisms aimed at increasing student achievement” (p. 384). From the definition of school accountability, one might consider that recent educational reform movements seek to set standards that students are expected to achieve, assess their performance and learning outcomes in a scientific manner, and impose the responsibility of schooling for the result.

However, these characteristics of education reform in the era of school accountability emerging in recent years are not new or revolutionary. Approximately a hundred years ago, education in the United States was actively promoted to cope with a rapidly changing social environment and to pursue social stability and progress through

schooling. This attempt, known as the social efficiency movement in education, has similar aspects to the main characteristics of recent educational reforms in terms of the responsibilities and roles of schooling. Specifically, the social efficiency movement and the contemporary education reform resemble each other in their seeking of observable tasks/learning outcomes, measurable outputs/performances, and a managerial approach to laborers/students.

“Social efficiency” is a concept introduced by Kliebard (2004), one of the most influential scholars in education and curriculum history research, in his canonical book titled *The Struggle for the American Curriculum: 1893–1958*. As the title suggests, Kliebard traces the history of the American curriculum from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century, and he explains that the use of the term “struggle” to describe school curriculum in the US at that time reflected contemporary differences in interests and ideals. According to him, four interest groups—the humanists, the developmentalists, the social efficiency educators, and the social meliorists—alternated with and led mainstream education and school curriculum in the first few decades of the twentieth century; one was more influential on schooling than the other depending not only on its main ideas but also on socioeconomic background, as well as the local and national circumstances at the time. He asserted that these four interest groups or ideals were passed from one to another and the curriculum shifts were repeated like “wide

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pendulum swings” (Kliebard, 2004, p. 174).

What, then, are the main ideas that are driving current education and school curriculum? Based on Kliebard’s (2004) categorization, what is the most influential curriculum fashion in the light of the four interest groups? As noted earlier, this study assumes that the answer to this question is “social efficiency.” Based on the assumption of mutual chords, this study focuses on the identical principles embedded in the characteristics of schooling between the two different eras—at the turn of the twentieth, and of the twenty-first century—and explores the old social efficiency in the early twentieth century, which is appropriate to understand and review the characteristics of the new social efficiency over the last decade.

This study investigates the concept of social efficiency, which provided an important theoretical and practical foundation for education and curriculum in the early twentieth century, and also examines the rationale of the social efficiency movement behind the contemporary education reforms. The paper includes three sections. First, the paper examines the main characteristics of the old social efficiency movement and explores how it was implemented in schooling at the time. In the following section, the article analyzes how the social efficiency movement is being replicated in a series of educational discourses under the name of education reform, with cases of accountability-centered education reforms in the United States and global educational reforms driven by the comparative assessment of a supranational organization—OECD PISA. Finally, the paper criticizes recent educational reforms based on the search for past and present social efficiency movements.

2. The old social efficiency: Scientific management to control schooling and society

2.1. The emergence and development of the social efficiency movement

In the late nineteenth century, the United States entered a period of time that characterized it as a modern industrial country. The most notable characteristic of that period is that massive production had increased dramatically due to the emergence of a large-scale manufacturing industry and the expansion of transportation. The radical growth in manufacturing and transportation also affected population movements and changes. For instance, the enormous amount of labor, particularly the economic revival of the United States in the early 20th century, brought immigrants from Europe. They did not only contribute to the further expansion of the industrial economy, but also caused an explosion of the student population in schools (Tyack and Cuban, 1995).

The rapid social changes, which were accepted as being part of a national crisis (Kliebard, 2004; Tyack and Cuban, 1995), made the United States pay attention to “(in)efficiency,” which played a pivotal role in: a) improving production processes that operate in a traditional way despite the modernization of the industry, and b) managing and controlling the newly introduced population – labor force – in accordance with the modernization of industry and economy.

In the context of radical social changes, people who did not use English as their first language, such as immigrants, and those who belonged to the lower socioeconomic class were regarded as “threats” to social progress, thereby raising the need to control and manage them. The social efficiency movement emerged in response to such social fluctuation in the United States. For the social efficiency movement, a school was recognized as the most effective and important means for managing and controlling society (Kliebard, 1992, 2004; see also Bagley, 1910; Bobbitt, 1918).

The pursuit of social stability through control and management, which is the core of the social efficiency movement, has been further elaborated through Frederick Taylor’s theory of scientific management. Scientific management, also known as Taylorism, refers to management techniques aimed at maximizing productivity in the manufacturing

industry. Taylor (1911), in *The Principles of Scientific Management*, recognized that standardization of industrial work based on time and motion studies was the key to improve productivity. He provided the steps to be followed for all workers as follows:

- 1) Find, say, 10 or 15 different men (preferably in as many separate establishments and different parts of the country) who are especially skillful in doing the particular work to be analyzed.
- 2) Study the exact series of elementary operations or motions which each of these men uses in doing the work which is being investigated, as well as the implements each man uses.
- 3) Study with a stop-watch the time required to make each of these elementary movements and then select the quickest way of doing each element of the work.
- 4) Eliminate all false movements, slow movements, and useless movements.
- 5) After doing away with all unnecessary movements, collect into one series the quickest and best movements as well as the best implements (Taylor, 1911, pp. 117–118).

For Taylor, one of the most efficient ways standardizing labor and work was to analyze characteristics of skilled workers in a particular field and to set specific and detailed standards to be spread out. Therefore, it was the core of scientific management to find best practices and systematic planning for all workers to achieve them (Callahan, 1962). In particular, Taylor’s interest in the implementations of scientific management was to increase productivity and economic efficiency by reducing time and cost. Taylor asserted that efficiency of production could be measured and thereby managed strictly, since time and cost were quantifiable by their nature. Specifically, Taylor devised the concept of “task” to apply scientific management to industry. A task is a very detailed description of what a worker should know and be able to do when producing a product (Taylor, 1911). He describes the notion of task as following:

“Perhaps the most prominent single element in modern scientific management is the task idea. The work of every workman is *fully planned out by the management* at least one day in advance, and each man receives in most cases complete written instructions, *describing in detail* the task which he is to accomplish, as well as the means to be used in doing the work. ... This task specifies not only what is to be done but how it is to be done and the exact time allowed for doing it” (Taylor, 1911, p. 29, *Italics added*).

In short, scientific management comprised efforts to standardize workers’ performances, quantify the time and cost required to accomplish work, and thereby maximize efficiency of production. It was believed by most people to be “the promise of social stability in the face of ... massive social change” (Kliebard, 2004, p. 76) in the period of social turmoil.

2.2. The implementation of scientific management on education

The main ideas of social efficiency movement had a strong impact on American education in the early 20th century. Social efficiency educators including Franklin Bobbitt, David Snedden, and Ross Finney (among others) applied scientific management in education in order to prepare students as future citizens and thereby to create a stable and well-functioning society. Their vision on schooling and society was specified in the following ways.

First, as in the industrial sector, social efficiency educators sought to identify factors that hampered the efficiency of education at schools. Bobbitt (1912) in his article titled *The Elimination of Waste in Education* is the most representative of these attempts. At that time, American schools were experiencing administrative and financial difficulties due to the rapid growth of the city and student populations, and Bobbitt (1912, p. 260; see also Bobbitt, 1913) strongly advocated the need to

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