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Review: Why It's So Darn Difficult to Reform Schooling in the United States

Reviewed Work(s): Inside the Black Box of Classroom Practice: Change Without Reform In American Education by Larry Cuban

Review by: Zane L. Berge

Source: *Educational Technology*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (July-August 2013), pp. 56-57

Published by: Educational Technology Publications, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44430172>

Accessed: 06-11-2019 15:15 UTC

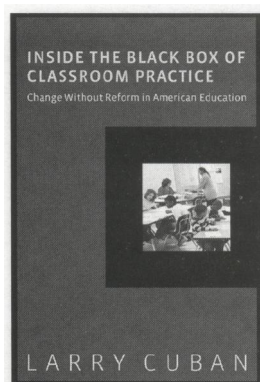
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Why It's So Darn Difficult to Reform Schooling in the United States

Book Review: Larry Cuban.
Inside the Black Box of Classroom Practice: Change Without Reform in American Education. Harvard Education Press; 256 pages; 2013; \$29.95 (hardcover, \$49.95).

Reviewed by Zane L. Berge

In this book, Larry Cuban, professor emeritus of education at Stanford University, former high-school teacher, former superintendent of schools, historian, and prolific author, explains why the complex enterprise called schooling has been largely impervious to reform in the United States. His goal is to help the reader to understand "the contradiction of enormous structural change in U.S. public schools amid stability in teaching practices" (p. x).

Challenging Reformers' Assumptions

The conventional assumptions used by school reformers over the past century go something like this: changing a particular school structure (e.g., governance, funding, curriculum, organization, technology) will cause change in teachers' classroom practices, which will cause the desired student outcomes. The desired student outcomes will bring about better graduates from those schools, who will contribute to growth in the economy, productivity, and innovation in society. Cuban challenges this logic used by school reformers. Essentially, he challenges the causal assumptions that link structures, teaching practices, and student outcomes—linkages that policymakers have not carefully considered or measured.

Cuban describes the changes in public schooling over the past two centuries that involve who has access to public schooling, the nature of school curriculum, and cultural norms. Yet while dramatic structural changes have occurred over the years, what has *not* changed is *how teachers teach*.

Cuban points out in Chapter 1 that such structural changes as deploying new technologies or major curriculum shifts are put into place with the hope that these top-down changes will

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alter teaching practices and thereby cause improved learning. Teachers use new science curriculum guides, laptop computers, even mobile devices in their classroom. While doing so may lead to incremental changes in the classroom, it does not cause the *fundamental changes* to teaching practices reformers hope for, such as teachers moving away from traditional teacher-centered instruction and toward creation of student-centered lessons. In other words, teachers use the new media, materials, and resources to teach in the same old ways.

Ambiguous Purposes and Powerful, Hidden Structure

Chapter 2 details the obstacles that reformers of science education in the schools have had during the past 50 years—often due to struggles over the purposes of science teaching and the best ways for youth to learn science. Cuban builds a case for the need to make explicit the *hidden scaffolding* in schools that he describes as:

the century-old structures of the age-graded school, timeless teacher-centered pedagogy, familiar assessments, and professional development. This scaffolding—basic structures that shape how teachers teach and students learn—determines whether the curriculum in elementary and secondary schools gets converted into lessons and students absorb the knowledge, perform the skills, and display the attitudes conveyed in those lessons. Those taken-for-granted structures seldom show up on the radar screens of those fervent about the reform potential of new science curricula. (p. 49)

A main point of the book is that changing a piece of schooling, such as introducing a brand-new science or math curriculum, does not change the multifaceted, interconnected structure of schools. Moreover, top-down changes to curriculum, even when used in the schools, may not matter, given an exceptional stability in teacher practices and tests, which makes changes to student learning practically non-existent.

Who's Responsible?

Chapter 3 points out the shift in responsibility for achievement from parents and individual students to the schools themselves. Essentially, policymakers and legislatures make the assumption that teachers and administrators must have incentives and penalties to use their skills and expertise in getting students to learn the standards-based curriculum. Additionally, the assumption is that money to the schools works as an incentive, and fear works as a penalty for educators to do their jobs. Cuban discusses both positive and negative consequences for test-based accountability. Changes to both organizational and individual behavior have been made in most schools to adapt to accountability legislation. The intensification of teacher-centered practices has thus far produced uncertainty and controversy surrounding the impact of accountability efforts on student achievement.

The Helping Professions

The two chapters in Part 2 of the book look at physicians' training to see if new structures aimed at influencing clinical practice have occurred. Medicine and education are two examples of helping professions, and comparisons are made to show that, in many ways, both have similar problems with reform efforts. While similarities exist, there are differences with the changes to clinical practice in health-care versus educa-

tion. For instance, healthcare has changed over the past 100 years to include more sharing of responsibility—moving between doctor-centered and patient-centered care. Why this has occurred in healthcare and not in education is not so clear. However, Cuban's point is that in both arenas, reform-driven policies dealing with structural changes to funding, technology use, or managerial control have encountered similar responses from both teachers and doctors.

Changing Classroom Practices

In the final chapter, Cuban reiterates his contentions about complex human systems and the problems with reform-driven policies in education, such as faulty causal assumptions, a lack of a strong research base, and a top-down approach that bypasses the teachers' perspectives.

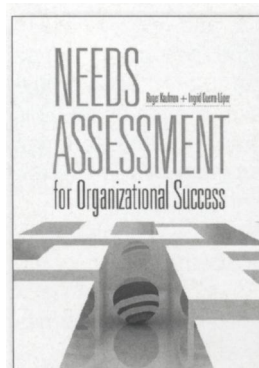
For teachers, new structures in [funding, technologies, and managerial control] have clearly influenced policy talk and action, but examining the impact of classroom implementation of these policies shows that, other than changes that intensified existing classroom practices, there have not yet been substantial shifts in how teachers teach. That is, accountability and testing have fortified, not altered, teacher-centered instruction. And even these changes cannot be causally linked to gains (or losses) in student achievement. (pp. 149–150)

He also indicates some ways to change classroom practices, largely promoting a bottom-up approach to charting different directions for school improvement across the country, and district- or school-based professional development. Cuban also discusses a major difference between healthcare and education in that, in medicine, true experimental research leads to evidence-based practice. He does mention that there are serious issues with experimental design of research in education (e.g., ethical considerations).

Summing Up

Cuban is extraordinarily good at explaining and describing the complexity of schooling in a well-sourced, readable book. He also points out the errors in assumptions that are made by many reformers and policymakers. It is important to realize that a steady drumbeat from all quarters is consistent in sounding out ideas about *the way* to improve outcomes: every student must have high test scores that match or exceed those of students in other nations; every student should attend college; every student should be prepared to join the knowledge economy; as a nation we must decrease economic inequalities, increase social justice, nurture the whole child, and use the current standards-based testing and accountability policies. Cuban's research and experience counters these mainstream ideas, pointing out that over many decades these and other notions and structural changes have largely failed to change teaching practices in any substantive way.

The point isn't that teachers don't matter, but rather that it is hard to make significant improvements to student learning through teaching until *teaching practices change*. Structural change by itself is not the way to cause improvements in learning. Contrary to the standards-based curriculum and high-stakes testing, it may be that trying a variety of different models, in different states, districts, schools, and classrooms, might be the best way (only way?) to begin improving student achievement in a complex system. Factors differ throughout schools and classrooms; one size does not fit all. □



Using Needs Assessment to Enhance Organizational Success

Book Review: Roger Kaufman and Ingrid Guerra-Lopez.
Needs Assessment for Organizational Success. ASTD Press; 184 pages; 2013; \$24.95 (Kindle edition, \$20.36).

Reviewed by Wallace Hannum

This comprehensive book contains 11 chapters that provide broad coverage of needs assessment with reference to improving an organization's success. The book is geared to performance improvement professionals with the intent of helping them create needs assessment frameworks appropriate for ensuring that their organizations focus in the right direction, align resources within the organizations, work to resolve real problems, use appropriate criteria for determining success, and adequately track organizational performance.

Book purpose. The book provides an overview of needs assessment at various levels within an organization, distinguishing among different types of needs assessment that are appropriate at various levels. While the essential concepts in this book, such as the discrepancy model of needs assessment, follow directly from Kaufman's prior publications on needs assessment, the focus in this book is on showing how an organization can carefully align its inputs, processes, products, outputs, and outcomes in order to be successful.

In this text, Kaufman and Guerra-Lopez describe different needs assessment approaches within the fundamental discrepancy model that can assist organizations in achieving this alignment, thereby increasing the likelihood of organizational success. It is this comprehensive view that is a major contribution of this book.

Wallace Hannum, a Contributing Editor, is retired from the instructional design and educational psychology faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Prior to that he was on the instructional design faculty at Florida State University, where he was one of the creators of the ADDIE model. He has directed national and international research projects involving educational technology and has worked on education and health projects in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. He has been a frequent consultant to corporations as well as most government agencies. Dr. Hannum is author of five books as well as numerous book chapters and articles on topics related to instructional design, technology, and online learning (e-mail: hannum@unc.edu).