

Complexities of School Reform

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Consider the following: as concerns about schooling move from the local to the national level, there is increasing demand for standardized definitions and measurements. Without such standards we cannot assess the comparative performance of children in, say, New York and Alabama. Yet there are costs to this meeting this demand. Let us assume, for example, that Johnny enters the first grade underweight and hungry, with poor eyesight, with no friends, with unemployed parents, and with reading scores considerably below grade level. Suppose at the end of the year, he has had a good school breakfast and lunch every day, has had his eyes checked in school and now wears corrective eye glasses, has made ten good friends, plays in an after school play group, and takes an important role in his class play. Yet assume that he still has unemployed parents and below grade level reading scores.

On a local level where neighbors and other teachers and parents know something about Johnny's situation, all of the improvements would count in assessing the success of Johnny's school. On the national level, however, these other matters are often washed out of the evaluation as too idiosyncratic. The school's success must be evaluated solely on terms of Johnny's reading scores. As this measure becomes more prominent, and begins to determine the flow of dollars to schools, the after school play group and the class play are cut out, and recess is shortened by ten minutes to provide more time for reading. Since drill seems to be the best method for increasing scores, the trip to the school library is cancelled and drill sessions put in its place.

Other ramifications of reform are not necessarily as visible. Because national issues require standardized measures (of educational success), some disciplinary models are favored over others. Economics, and psychometrics with their simple and clear measures of success and failure, will be preferred over more locally focused disciplines such as anthropology or ethnography. And this in turn reinforces the narrow definition of success as reading-output as the more contextual insights of other disciplines are muted.

The above is offered by way of illustrating the caution that Megan Jessiman tells us is needed when considering the merits of school reform. No matter what we think of the merits of contemporary schooling, or of specific proposals for reform, it is a caution that needs to be taken very seriously. Her essay reminds us that schooling is a complex practice, and that if we focus like a laser on one area of change, we may be in great danger of neglecting other areas that are important for schools to serve. As I read the essay it is not an anti-reform message. Rather it is an intelligent reform message.

In her essay Jessiman connects these cautionary concerns to the deeper ideas of Ernst Cassirer, whose work has dropped off of the intellectual horizon since the 1960s. She believes that if we apply his ideas to schooling, we will become sensitized

to the deeper dimensions of schools, dimensions that I would suggest are not easily measured by tests. She believes that this operates at a rather deep level where schooling serves as a symbolic form, akin to language, myth, religion, and science, and where it organizes experience in fundamental ways. I am not sure how far down this road I would want to travel with her but I do believe that there is something significant about schooling as a collective experience. In my mind, if it is effective, it provides a sense of mutual recognition even in light of very significant differences.

Jessiman's essay is a response to those who have observed, sometimes to defend schools against the impatience of the reformer with "a better idea," that schools have historically been slow to change. Jessiman seeks to go behind that historical generalization to suggest that there may be reasons beyond simple inertia for the pace of school change. Her project uses Cassirer to probe beyond the various historical and sociological generalizations about the slow pace of school reform, and to provide a framework for understanding and evaluating those generalizations.

Jessiman's message is not one of anti-reform, but it is a message of caution. We may continue to seek to reform schools, but we should do so without, as she puts it, pathologizing the long-standing practices that constitute "the inertia" of schooling. Following Cassirer she holds that human beings have primary ways of making sense of different features of their world and that they do so through cultural forms such as language, science, history, myth, religion, and art. These practices organize and objectify experience. These forms are necessary to our own self-consciousness. Jessiman believes that schooling serves as a prerequisite for organizing data about the social world, and thoughts about other cultures.

While I fully agree with the concerns underlying Jessiman's essay that we not move thoughtlessly ahead with school reform, I have some questions about her use of Cassirer and the idea that school is a cultural form akin to language. One question has to do with the way in which the concept of schooling as a symbolic form is related to certain stipulated meaning-producing activities. For example, if schooling organizes thought about other peoples and other cultures, as Jessiman says it does, is this something that schooling must do, as part of its essential character or, is it something that we think is good for schools to do? If it is the former, then what is to be said about the fact that not all schools do this or that some agencies sometimes do it more effectively than schooling. If it is the latter, then how is it to be seen as entailed by schooling as a symbolic form rather than just one of the things that schools do?

Consider, for example, the former Yugoslavia where schools had made great efforts to bring about inter ethnic group understanding yet where the old antagonisms between Croats and Serbs still smoldered well before the civil war. One likely explanation for the ease with which politicians fired up this hatred can be found in the counter messages provided by parents and grandparents as well as by local bartenders, barbers, and other unofficial agents of group identity and inter-group images. Given this experience it would seem as if Jessiman is making a normative statement when she says schools are the place that organizes the way we see other groups. Yet this seems somewhat removed from the meaning of symbolic form as Cassirer employs the idea.

While it is appropriate to ask just what a particular reform proposal is neglecting, and what are the costs of this neglect, as Jessiman wisely suggests, I wonder if we need to rest this reality check on something as fundamental as a symbolic form in Cassirer's (or Kant's) sense of the idea. And, even if we were to do so, the question remains: Just which part of schooling is to be understood in terms of a symbolic core, and what might be somewhat incidental? People once believed that saying a prayer to begin the school day was a part of the symbolic core, now many do not. Moreover, this scheme seems to leave a great deal as it is and may work against considered discussion of the appropriate aims of schooling.

Cassirer himself could be quite critical of a basic symbolic form, as his scathing criticism of Nazi mythology demonstrates. Sometimes, by appearing to make all symbolic forms equal, Jessiman leaves unanswered the question about where the locus for a critical response is to come from. One way to maintain a critical impulse while respecting the less obvious elements of school practice is to separate two functions of symbolic form. The first is that of symbolic form as organizing experience. I think the primary form here would be myth, which involves the projection of narratives that serve as rudimentary explanations organizing action. The other is objectification. If one begins to question the truth of myth, or its functionality, then one has objectified it and made it into an object for examination. Other symbolic forms such as history or science may both organize and objectify experience. In other words, they may undertake an examination of the way in which experience is organized in light of other possible alternatives, some of which may yet exist only in imagination.