

The Common School's Legacy: Legitimacy and Social Control

Right now is an exciting time to be alive. Our culture is beginning to challenge the homogeneity that has ruled it for so long; the voices of all genders, sexualities, races, religions, and backgrounds are beginning to receive attention. We are entering into a long-overdue dialogue about the question of social legitimacy and who deserves attention. That question, however, is only being asked on the surface of our schools (serving diverse students, bringing diversity into the curriculum). We are not yet challenging how schools themselves are granted legitimacy, and until we do, we will continue to harm and stifle our children by harnessing them to an antiquated notion of school value.

Our vision of what makes a legitimate school originated with the common schools of the nineteenth century when they created the “grammar of schooling.” What the common school movement did was profoundly important, and a great deal of their work was laudable, which is a significant portion of why they continue to be the yardstick by which school legitimacy is measured. One noble principle of the common school was exactly what the name implies—it was a universal, shared school experience that every citizen shared (Labaree 64). In order to make it a common experience, it had to emphasize on things that could be standardized and controlled, such as the structure of school. Ultimately, what resulted was a system that “placed a priority on the experience of schooling over the experience of learning” (Labaree 78). Because the focus was on providing “a shared experience of schooling” (Labaree 73), a great deal of the worth of school was invested in how it functioned, rather than what it taught or how much students learned. In addition, a great deal of the structure was put into place in response to the challenges of the market revolution and the resulting social upheaval (Labaree 58). The removal of socializing and disciplinary structures that had previously helped regulate society meant that their role needed to be filled by something else. The structure of the common school helped to instill discipline and social roles (Labaree 63), and because that was part of their purpose, the structures that achieved that became part of the grammar of “real” schools.

However, as a result of the emphasis placed on the structure of school, a number of damaging beliefs about what makes school legitimate have become deeply embedded in our culture. For example, despite calls for more engaging instruction, instructional methods have remained fairly stable (Cuban 8). We have internalized and accepted that drudgery and intellectual boredom are actually parts of the grammar of schooling. We have bought into the idea that schools are highly structured and instill discipline. The purpose of schooling was described by one advocate cited in *Tinkering Toward Utopia* as being “the imposition of tasks; if the pupil likes it, well; if not, the obligation is the same” (Cuban & Tyack 107). As a result, the more that schools align with these elements, the more legitimacy they are granted. Often times, when schools have tried to stray from this narrative, they have ended up struggling and meeting resistance, such as with Adams High School (Cuban & Tyack 105-106). The common school structural tradition remains strong. When we can't ascertain how else to measure school quality, we turn to assessing how well schools align to this grammar of schooling, which inadvertently results in an over-valuing of discipline, roles, and adherence to a specific, singular experience.

Therefore, when it comes to assessing school quality in struggling communities, the solution is often to bring in schools that carefully follow the roadmap of legitimate schooling. Thus, in communities that are often already marginalized—low-income, immigrant, people of color, etc—the solution is often more structure and more discipline. When the emphasis on school is on the experience of “doing school,” then students are going to be assessed on how well they follow rules and structures, rather than on how they learn. As a result, the emphasis of schooling in struggling communities often turns out to be discipline and control, rather than education. Students are rewarded and punished based on how well they subscribe to the system, not necessarily how well they are learning—we have conflated good discipline and bowing to the school's authority as being an indicator of learning. For struggling communities, ensuring that their schools are as “real” as can be is incredibly important

because it makes schools, and therefore students, legitimate, so this over-valuing of school structures is particularly prevalent. For those who are already deemed legitimate by our society—rich, white, etc—it is much easier to metaphorically “color outside the lines” of schooling because their social capital is already secure. They do not need to be legitimized. For those on the edge, though, schooling is an essential step on the road to social legitimacy, so it is of great importance that their schools be as legitimate as possible.

The common school movement did valuable and noble work for America, and the roll out of universal educational access is not to be looked down upon. However, in the last two centuries, our society has undergone profound changes—changes that are not reflected in our beliefs about schools as founded by the common school movement. While discipline, assimilation, and socialization were what was called for during the market revolution, the standardized experience of “doing school” and adhering to rigorous structures is no longer what our students need. However, in struggling communities, we continue to disproportionately emphasize these antiquated notions with the idea that we are providing the most legitimate possible education the more that schools cleave to the “real school” structures. Inadvertently, schools remain vehicles of social control and oppression because they promise to legitimize marginalized communities, but that legitimacy comes at the cost of schooling over education, tradition over creativity, and docility over assertiveness. In our broader culture, marginalized communities are finally starting to be seen as legitimate, but the struggle is far from over. As long as we continue to sell legitimacy through schooling and schools continue to smother young people, the struggle in our society will remain.