The Rhetoric of Educational Reform in American Public Education: 
A criticism of corporate reform attitudes

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Abstract

The primary purpose of this dissertation is to describe the ways in which the corporate reform movement has altered the rhetoric around our public education system. The primary argument I make is that the language of corporate reform has the propensity to create the reality that validates it. This dissertation will review how a long history of educational reform has enabled corporate reformers and their rhetoric to become easily and quickly accepted by the American public.

Using David Labaree’s definition of school syndrome, the historical and philosophical writings of Diane Ravitch, John Dewy and other philosophers and historians of education, this dissertation argues that our current debates around public education are directly linked to the history of educational reform in this country. By considering the relative importance of three key historical movements, it is easier to understand the impact of today’s educational reform initiatives upon public education. Ultimately this dissertation does not seek to define and analyze actual policy changes, but to more fully understand how conversations can have an equally, if not more, meaningful impact on the educational aims assigned to American public education.
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**Introduction**

In her book *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America’s Public Schools*, Diane Ravitch writes a condemning response to critics of the American public education system. She argues:

In the early years of the twenty-first century, a bipartisan consensus arose about educational policy in the United States. Right and left, Democrats and Republicans, the leading members of our political class and our media elite seemed to agree: Public education is broken. (Ravitch, 2013, p. 3)

In one sweeping statement, Ravitch makes the claim that the central problem with public education today is the fact that those in power, those that are critical of the education system, who are capable of making broad changes believe (without a doubt) that the system is broken. She continues, describing what she sees as a problematic way of thinking:

Our students are not learning enough. Public schools are bad and getting worse. We are being beaten by other nations with higher test scores. Our abysmal public school threatens not only the performance of our economy but our national security, our very survival as a nation. This crisis is so profound that half measures and tweaks will not suffice. Schools must be closed and large numbers
of teachers fired. Anyone who doubts this is unaware of the dimensions of the crisis or has a vested interest in defending the status quo. (Ravitch, p. 3)

Ravitch argues that this line of thinking about public education has the tendency to do more harm than good, that it provides “easy villains and ready-made solutions” (p. 4). She ultimately believes that public education is only broken to the degree that the rhetoric around it claims. What is fascinating about Ravitch is that she has not always been so critical of using corporate reform practices to improve public education. In 1991, she was appointed as assistant secretary and counselor to the U.S. Department of Education under Education Secretary Lamar Alexander. During her time in this position, she was supportive of charter schools, accountability, and the overhaul of managerial structures, as key to success for public education in America.

For a portion of her career Ravitch favored, what she later describes as corporate reform attitudes, as the best method for improving the public school system. She was initially supportive of initiatives like No Child Left Behind because she, like others, believed that measures (e.g. accountability, vouchers, etc.) could improve the public education system. So when Ravitch changed her mind it caught many who followed her work off-guard. Yet, it wasn’t that Ravitch changed her mind about the aims of education, so much as the methods for meeting those aims. Ravitch herself clarifies her position writing:

For me, the goal of education was never about getting higher test scores, but about getting a good education, developing one’s mind to deal with future issues
in one’s life, and becoming a contributing citizen to our evolving society.

(Personal communication, November 3, 2015)

It is evident from the quote above that Ravitch clearly misunderstood the goals of NCLB reformers, and others like them who were active proponents of using testing to ensure that students were educated. This is what she changed her mind about.

So why did Ravitch change her mind? With the release of her book *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, Ravitch recognized that the beliefs she had clung to for more than a decade were becoming problematic: “Where once I had been hopeful, even enthusiastic, about the potential benefits of testing, accountability, choice and markets, I now found myself experiencing profound doubts about these same ideas” (Ravitch, 2010 p. 1). Ravitch recognized the importance of public education and legitimately believed that something should be done to ensure the best education for all students. Many would consider her to be an expert, and she was just as misled by the rhetoric of educational reform, and corporate reform in particular. This really goes to show how powerful rhetoric can be.

The clues to Ravitch’s concerns about the changing rhetoric of education may come from a robust evaluation of the history of public education in America. Who should be educated? What should they learn? How should they learn it and why? These questions (or some version of them) have been debated extensively and coincide with the development of the American public education system. As a nation of diverse individuals, finding a method of common education has not been an easy task. According to David Tyack, “Achieving civic unity by educating republican citizens was a
daunting task. American society was socially diverse, scattered across a continent, politically contentious, religiously splintered, and adverse to government” (Tyack, 2003, p. 9). These, among others, are reasons why public education could have been doomed to fail in its relatively short history within the United States. Yet, it hasn’t failed, at least not completely. Public education still exists today and, despite the conflicts over its aims and goals, still has supporters.

Americans have traditionally accepted public education, in part, as a pragmatic response to both shifts within society and the need to nurture future democratic citizens. This is evidenced in the common school movement, which grew out of a response to the vast and far-reaching changes that were occurring at the time (industrialization and immigration for example). Since the common school was developed and defended based on its value as a response to societal changes, it can be best understood as a reform initiative.

Given that the common school is often viewed as the precursor to today’s public education system, it can be argued that public education has been in a perpetual state of reform since its inception. Yet, if common schools, or public schools, find themselves in a constant state of change, what does this say about the ideas and conversations shared amongst reformers and the public? John Dewey addresses this concern in *Experience in Education*, writing:

Those who are looking ahead to a new movement in education, adapted to the existing need for a new social order, should think in terms of Education itself rather than in terms of some ‘ism about education—even such an ‘ism as
‘progressivism.’ For in spite of itself any movement that thinks and acts in terms of an ‘ism becomes so involved in reaction against other ‘isms that it is unwittingly controlled by them. (Dewey, 1938, p. 6)

Dewey understood the reactionary nature of reform—educational reform in particular. He documented what educational reformers are often unable to see. Making change, for the sake of change, while ignoring the potential for unintended consequences is always problematic, and Dewey recognized this. It is his assessment of the reactionary nature of change that leads to the central question of this dissertation: what significant impact (if any) does the history of educational reform have upon current educational policy debates?

It is no secret that Americans have always been concerned with practical or worldly aims when it comes to the kind of opportunity we want our education to provide for individuals. Horace Mann argues:

Now, surely, nothing but Universal Education can counter-work this tendency to the domination of capital and the servility of labor. If one class possesses all the wealth and the education, while the residue of society is ignorant and poor, it matters not by what name the relation between them may be called; the latter, in fact, and in truth, will be the servile dependents and subjects of the former. But if education be equably diffused, it will draw property after it, by the strongest of all attractions; for such a thing never did happen, and never can happen, as that an intelligent and practical body of men should be permanently poor. (Johnson and Reed, 2012, p. 92)
From Mann’s viewpoint, education served a multitude of practical purposes. Arguably, for Mann, the most important purpose was to ensure that access to education was made available to all. Mann did not see how leaving a significant portion of the population ignorant would be useful to the country. This was, in many ways, the primary reason that he became a proponent of a common system of education.

So what has changed? Do reformers today still share the vision that Mann had for public education, and if not, why? Ravitch believes that schools have lost their sense of purpose. She suggests:

> Without firm adherence to the goal of intellectual development, the schools lost their sense of purpose. By succumbing to the demands for industrial education in the early years of the century, they subjugated their programs to the needs of the industry. In their attempt to be ‘socially efficient,’ educational leaders told themselves that they were responsible for guiding social change, forgetting that they were responsible for improving the lives of many children, each of whom was precious to someone. (Ravitch, 2000, p. 460)

While Ravitch may have been referring to earlier educational reform movements, it is evident that she believes that public schools are increasingly finding themselves beholden to outside forces such as industry and political interests. But is Ravitch the only philosopher or historian of education to talk about the problems facing public education today? In his book *Someone has to Fail: The Zero-Sum Game of Public Schooling*, author David Labree states:
In short, the American system of education is highly accessible, radically unequal, organizationally fragmented, and instructionally mediocre. In combination, these characteristics have provided a strong and continuing incentive for school reformers to try and change the system, by launching reform movements that would seek to broaden access, reduce inequality, transform governance, and improve learning. (Labaree, 2010, p. 11)

Labaree ultimately argues that schools (and public schools specifically) suffer from what he calls ‘school syndrome.’ School syndrome refers to the belief that schools can both amend the disadvantage for some while preserving the advantage of others. Labaree argues (and I agree) that this syndrome began long before the current reform efforts facing public education. Others, like Ravitch, suggest that the conflicting aims of education, as defined by Labaree’s school syndrome, have only grown worse as the corporate reform movement has gained support. Keeping in mind the broad question of the impact of the history of educational reform on current educational policy debates, the central aim of this dissertation is to shed light on the ways in which the corporate reform dialogue has come to dominate how the goals and aims for public education are understood. Using David Labaree’s definition of school syndrome, the historical and philosophical writings of Diane Ravitch, John Dewey, and other philosophers and historians of education, this dissertation argues that our current state of public education is directly linked to the history of educational reform and cannot be understood (or perhaps dealt with) without a greater understanding of three key movements. The three movements I identify serve as the primary topics for each of the following chapters; the
common school movement, the progressive education movement, and the school choice movement. First is a discussion of the key ideals which guided the era. Second, are the ways in which these ideals were ‘hijacked.’ Outlining each chapter in this manner better establishes how these initiatives have led to the acceptance of the corporate reform movement of today.

Chapter two seeks to identify whether or not public education today is being guided by corporate rhetoric. This chapter argues that conversations around how to reform education have taken a decidedly unique turn. The current administration under President Barack Obama has made it a priority that schools become more competitive through the use of assessments for both students and teachers. The administration argues that “To create an economy built to last, we need to provide every child with a complete and competitive education that will enable them to succeed in a global economy based on knowledge and innovation.”\(^1\) Given that the leader of the free world is pushing this very specific agenda, which takes its lead from the corporate (business) world, it is understandable how Ravitch might be critical of it. But is Ravitch the only educational historian to have noticed these changes, or are there other historians/philosophers who are talking about this as well? If Ravitch is correct, then it is also useful to determine the degree to which this even presents a problem. Or is it a change that the public can live with?

\(^1\)K-12 Education, paragraph 2, Last retrieved April 30, 2015 from https://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/education/k-12
Another intellectual who has noticed the changes that Ravitch describes is Michael J. Sandel. In his book *What Money Can’t Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*, Sandel focuses primarily on the ways in which our faith in the market is impacting culture and society, and while his focus is not necessarily on public education, it has important implications nonetheless. Sandel writes: “Market values are coming to play a greater and greater role in social life” (Sandel, 2012, p. 6). He suggests that markets infringe in areas where they do not belong. Sandel continues, “The reach of markets, and market-oriented thinking, into aspects of life traditionally governed by nonmarket norms is one of the most significant developments of our time” (Sandel, p. 7). Both Sandel and Ravitch identify the market as an influencing factor, but if this has become the norm in educational reform today, how did this occur? Chapter two delves into this question.

Chapter three attempts to begin to understand how and why the corporate reform movement has come to dominate educational reform discourse by looking specifically at the development of the common school movement. Robert Church writes: “The rhetoric, efforts, and the accomplishments of the common school movement set terms for educational debate and established patterns of professional aspiration and control that have persisted almost without challenge until the present day” (Church, 1976, p. 59). Historians typically view and describe the common school movement as a defining movement in our democratic society. Up until the 1960’s, common school reformers were typically understood and written about (by historians of education) as heroes who promoted a free education for all, despite the circumstances of their birth. Despite the good intentions of the common school reformers, the questions that arose from putting a
common system of education in place would ultimately play a role in developing the arguments of corporate reformers. In particular, the common school movement would utilize the preferences of an American public that had a tendency towards supporting pragmatic ideas. The common school debate over utility versus knowledge exemplified this.

The conflict of the common school, between the goals of educating for knowledge versus utility, established a pattern for disconnecting ideas from the practice of education that would become the hallmark of progressive education. What is often misunderstood about the progressive education movement, is how it was a complex movement with varying beliefs about the purposes of education. This misunderstanding of the ideas, coupled with poorly implemented practice, would continue to misdirect educational reform rhetoric. Chapter four attempts to deal with these issues. This dissertation will focus on what Diane Ravitch calls the ‘fork in the road.’

While there were many intellectuals associated with the progressive movement, there are two individuals I will focus on that best represent the conflicting ideas I have identified. On the one hand were individuals like John Dewey, who saw education as an opportunity for social change and individual growth (of a certain type). On the other hand were people like Edward L. Thorndike, whose research lead to student tracking, a differentiated curriculum, and an emphasis on placing students into careers that were predetermined based upon their socio-economic status. Perhaps even more important than the ideas themselves were the

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2 A Fork in the Road is a term coined in Chapter Two of “Left Back: A century of battles over school reform”
problems generated with their implementation. The ideas of Dewey, Thorndike, and other progressives did not always translate well into actual educational practice. As a result, it has grown acceptable for reformers (especially those corporate reformers of today) eventually to put ill-conceived ideas into practice.

Chapter five analyzes the development of corporate reform rhetoric through the lens of school choice and the desire to privatize the public education system. Choice can be defined in numerous ways, but in this dissertation choice refers to two things: 1) the act of picking which school to attend and 2) the process of making that choice. While the proponents of school choice are many and diverse, I do not have enough time or space to address them all. Therefore, for this dissertation, I will summarize/generalize the main beliefs that proponents of choice typically argue for. Having a general sense for school choice rhetoric will suffice for the purposes of my argument. An exhaustive review is not necessary for the point that I am trying to make. Ultimately these beliefs will be framed within the larger context of what I believe the school choice movement represents.

I am interested in how school choice has been used to further what Labaree calls the ‘educational marketplace.’ The educational marketplace is a means of addressing the needs and concerns of consumers (typically parents) who want to see their child earn a diploma so that they can ‘get ahead’ by pursuing a career that is socio-economically advantageous. Labaree describes this perfectly: “In contrast, consumers take a less ideological and more pragmatic approach to schooling. What is most salient about schooling for them is not its value (what usable knowledge it provides) but its exchange value (what doors it will open)” (Labaree, 2010, p. 237). In the eyes of Labaree, public
education is valued for the opportunity it provides to the student. While the educational marketplace concerns itself with the consumer, it also addresses the concerns of politicians and corporations through the creation of a workforce. All of this is in an attempt to keep America competitive in the new global economy.

Collectively, school choice and the corporate reform movement have created a conflict that has led to what I define as the ‘myth of choice.’ The myth of choice addresses the complexity of school choice initiatives, in ways that proponents traditionally have not. It acknowledges that not all individuals will experience choice in the same way, thereby making it a myth that choice will solve all social problems and be useful to the individual at the same time.

Discussions around school choice naturally lead to debates about the meaning and value of a private-versus-public education. School choice advertises itself, not just as an alternative to public education, but a superior one. Typically, the arguments against school choice are focused on the fact that vouchers and charter schools can be exclusionary. While they (charter schools) are funded through tax dollars (as public education is) they are often managed by a private company (or individual) and set their own standards for admission.

The public education system has been forced to respond to societal changes in ways that accept a corporatized rhetoric of educational reform. For example, as funding has decreased for public schools, they have been forced to find alternative means of making up those dollars. One solution that schools have found is to turn to corporations and advertisers for additional funding. Eric Schlosser, in his 2001 book *Fast Food*
Nation, addresses one example of corporate sponsorship of schools. In his non-fiction work, Schlosser writes:

In 1993 District 11 in Colorado Springs started a nationwide trend, becoming the first public school district in the United States to place ads for Burger King in its hallways and on the sides of school buses. Like other school systems in Colorado, District 11 faced revenue shortfalls, thanks to growing enrollments, and voter hostility to tax increases for education. (Schlosser, p. 51)

In reflecting upon the decision to sell advertising space in a public school, one has to ask how advertising and corporate money change educational reform rhetoric. The case could be made that the conversation has shifted away from democratic aims and towards more corporate ones.

Labaree argues this when he writes:

We Americans have long pinned our hopes on education. It’s the main way we try to express our ideals and solve our problems. We want our schools to provide us with good citizens and productive workers; to give us opportunity, and reduce inequality; to improve our health, reduce crime, and protect the environment. So we assign these social missions to schools, and educators gamely agree to carry them out. When the school system inevitably fails to produce the desired results, we ask reformers to fix it. (Labaree, 2010, p. 1)

The final chapter of this dissertation utilizes Dewey’s ideas regarding experience, growth, the development of a democratic community, and his concept of intelligence, to analyze and assess the merits of the corporate reform movement and its rhetoric. This chapter in
particular looks at how the ideas for this dissertation were developed and how one might utilize philosophy, particularly John Dewey’s philosophy, to evaluate educational reforms.

My project will attempt to pick up where others, primarily Ravitch and Labaree, leave off. While both have contributed significantly towards a greater understanding of current reform initiatives, neither have focused on the influence of educational reform rhetoric. Ultimately, in order for educational reformers to move forward, they need an understanding of where things have been. This dissertation hopes to achieve some of that understanding.
Chapter Two:

Noise Pollution: Conversations in corporate reform

Educational reform is not a new concept. Arguably, schools have been in a state of reform since they were conceived. As this dissertation will demonstrate, there is something uniquely different about educational reform initiatives of today. This chapter in particular will deal with the ways that the rhetoric of educational reform has shifted in favor of business interests. This shift is exemplified through the language and writings of both academics and the general public, or popular culture. The mere fact that the conversations are not limited just to the university indicates the degree to which educational reform has become important to the larger understanding of the purposes and aims of public education.

The growing importance of educational reform in guiding the purposes of public education was made evident with the production of a documentary that brought the reform conversation to the general public. In 2010, David Guggenheim released his film Waiting for Superman, a documentary focused on what he perceived as the failing of American public education to provide students with equal educational opportunity. In the opening scene of the film, Guggenheim (2010) narrates for the audience:

And then reality set in. My feelings about public education didn’t matter as much as my fear of sending them to a failing school. So every morning, betraying the
ideals I thought I lived by, I drive past three public schools as I take my kids to a private school. But I’m lucky, I have a choice.

The primary finding of the film is that public schools are failing to meet the needs of their students and families. Guggenheim demonstrates this by following several families who, concerned with their local neighborhood schools (public schools), participate in a lottery as a last ditch effort to improve educational opportunities for their children. The lottery system is a common form for determining admission to charter schools, who have a limited numbers of students which they can accept. The lottery is meant to be a ‘fair’ means of selecting those students. The parents in the film have a shared fear that their children will not be successful in life if the only schools available to them are ‘dropout factories,’ or failing elementary and middle schools that lead to poorly performing high schools where 40% of students drop-out. Nakia, the mother of Bianca, a student featured in the film, and one pursuing an alternative education, states “You go to college, you learn, you get your education, and you don’t get a job you get a career. And there’s a difference.”3 For these families in particular, education is directly connected to future success in life. Therefore, the importance of where the students go to school and the kind of education they receive is seen as vital to their future accomplishments (or failures).

*Waiting for Superman* was a documentary that garnered a great deal of attention because it voiced outright the belief that public education is failing an ever increasing number of students and that this in turn is having a negative impact upon the community.

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3 Nakia is one of the parents interviewed in the documentary film “Waiting for Superman.” She, like the other parents, were seeking out alternative means of educating their children because their local public school was considered failing.
This film received widespread attention because it reinforced a growing consensus that the American public school was failing. American public education in the twenty-first century is primarily described in one of two ways: first are those who see it as failing (where failing is typically described as the inability to produce a replacement workforce that will keep America globally competitive). Second are the staunch supporters of the status quo who, due to their unfailing support, are ill-equipped to reflect mindfully on any of the problems facing public education today. While understanding the motivations of both groups is important, this chapter will focus solely on the first group, the group that Ravitch will come to define as ‘corporate reformers.’ Both Ravitch and Labaree (to a lesser extent) understand this particular group of reformers as being proponents for applying corporate practices (e.g. testing, accountability) to public education. In fact Ravitch defines the corporate reformer as:

They pursue these universally admired goals by privatizing education, lowering the qualifications for future teachers, replacing teachers with technology, increasing class sizes, endorsing for-profit organizations to manage schools, using carrots and sticks to motivate teachers, and elevating standardized test scores as the ultimate measure of education quality. (Ravitch, 2013, p. 19)

For Ravitch, and as I will adopt for this dissertation, corporate reform is an attitude about the best practices, or measures needed to ‘fix’ the public education system. It does not necessarily describe any one individual or initiative (although Ravitch uses examples like Race to the Top, Michelle Rhee, etc.), but encompasses a general approach to educational reform that utilizes the methods of corporations and applies them to education. The
language used to express these ideas has begun to dictate the aims and purposes of public education. By focusing on this particular reform attitude, identifying and understanding changes to educational reform rhetoric is much easier.

The more public education is described as failing, the more corporate reformers are likely invited to step in and offer their solutions to the failing public school problem. The primary means for fixing and preventing future failure often relies on methods undertaken by corporations (e.g. assessment, and accountability measures). Ravitch identifies a change in the conversation around public education. As evidenced in the quote above, she finds these reformers to be exceptionally challenging because of their application of business principles to education. She continues:

They assert that the best way to save education is to hand it over to private management and let the market sort out the winner and losers. They wish to substitute private choices for the public’s responsibility to provide good schools for all children. They lack any understanding of the crucial role of public schools in a democracy. (Ravitch, p. 36)

Ultimately, Ravitch finds this group of corporate reformers problematic because of the ways in which they attempt to re-define the primary aims of education by altering the educational discourse. Ravitch explains, “‘Reform’ is really a misnomer, because the advocates for this cause seek not to reform public education but to transform it into an entrepreneurial sector of the economy” (ibid). Ravitch clearly believes that educational reformers today aren’t so much interested in transforming public education in an effort to benefit individuals, so much as they are interested in molding public education to fit the
needs of the corporate world. By focusing educational reform debate on the role that public schools play in providing ‘goods’ (in the form of workers) to corporations and private businesses, it shifts discussions away from any alternative (perhaps more meaningful) uses for public education.

Reformers have partially turned to corporate practices in an effort to meet the needs of both the individual and the community. Labaree coined a term called ‘school syndrome,’ defining it this way, “What makes schooling a syndrome instead of a strategy for Americans is the sheer compulsiveness of the way we keep turning to school for the answer to every social and individual problem” (Labaree, 2010, p. 222). Key to Labaree’s argument is his understanding of educational reform rhetoric today. Labaree created this term (school syndrome) as a means of conceptualizing how educational reform is used to address or fix a myriad of social problems. A key component of school syndrome that Labaree identifies is the competing social goals that are put before the public education system-wanting to generate more equality while preserving the privilege of a few. Labaree identifies three primary goals of public education that have come to dominate the discourse:

One goal is democratic equality, which sees education as a mechanism for producing capable citizens. Another is social efficiency, which sees education as a mechanism for developing productive workers. A third is social mobility, which sees education as a way for individuals to reinforce or improve their social position. (Labaree, p. 16)
While Labaree defines three goals for public education, he argues that it is the social mobility goal that has started to dominate the rest. For Labaree, focusing primarily on social mobility is detrimental to society and education. Focusing solely on the needs of the individual would not have the most benefit to the larger society, according to Labaree. Both Labaree and Ravitch identify interesting elements of the current reform rhetoric. Labaree’s identification of social mobility as a goal for educational reformers and Ravitch’s definition of corporate reformers are vital to understanding and conceptualizing the ways in which public education has become increasingly influenced by corporate efforts and the problems that this presents.

Evolving Towards Corporate Reform

In order to evaluate Labaree’s school syndrome concept and to comprehend more fully Ravitch’s disdain for corporate reformers, a more robust understanding of current reform rhetoric is in order. The rhetoric around public education typically falls into two camps of thought. The first idea that has gained the most momentum deals with the implementation of testing as a method for increasing the accountability of educators, which in turn would, presumably, improve upon the public education system. On the other hand are individuals who believe that a deep, unquestioning faith in testing and accountability are misguided, and they continue to hold the public education system in high regard. For this subset of individuals, the accountability and testing movement are more harmful than beneficial to American democracy and public education. Yet, the problems aren’t as simple as either group would claim them to be, and having a more complete understanding of the role that corporate reform plays in altering educational
reform rhetoric is beneficial to better understanding the myriad of issues facing public education.

Ravitch identifies the 1983 publication of ‘A Nation at Risk’ as a turning point in educational reform. The shift that she identifies is in respect to the purpose or mission that educational reformers see public education as having. A report compiled by President Reagan’s National Commission on Education, it generated the push for reform on the local, state, and national levels. The National Commission on Excellence in Education identified a concern for what they perceived as an increase in mediocrity. What did the commission mean by mediocrity? The Commission was looking at the performance of students on international tests. They believed that non-competitive scores on international exams (in comparison to other nations) would have negative consequences for the American economy. The commission ultimately called for a more impressive system of education, with changes to the curriculum, graduation requirements, improved teacher training, and higher teacher pay, to name just a few of the ideas put forth. The collective force of these changes were thought to improve the public education system. The 1983 report indicated:

Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. This report is concerned with only one of the many causes and dimensions of the problem, but it is the one that undergirds American prosperity, security, and civility. We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically
accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur - others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments. 4

Prior educational reform movements were typically driven by questions about who and what should be taught in American public schools. By connecting the strength of the economy and the country to public education, fear of losing our place as a dominant nation grew, and rhetoric about the economy replaced rhetoric about how we might best educate our citizens. As this fear grew, it made the rhetoric of ‘failing’ public schools both common and acceptable.

Eighteen years later, in 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was signed into law by President George W. Bush. It was a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and it required states to develop assessments for key grade levels if they wished to continue receiving federal funding. NCLB required all states to test every child between grades 3-8 in reading and mathematics. Scores were then required to be reported by race, ethnicity, low-income status, disability status, and limited English proficiency. The idea was that if students were tested at certain times (grade level dependent) and in specific subjects, then there were assurances that the scores that students were receiving were an accurate reflection of the kind of education to which they

had access. The interesting part was that if students were failing, the responsibility was placed solely on the teachers and the schools themselves, not the students or parents.

Amidst all of the required testing, there was the additional requirement that teachers, administrators and public schools were responsible for guaranteeing that their students would be 100% proficient in each of the tested subjects by 2014. Yet, 100% proficiency was a tall (if not impossible) goal to place on educators. What really happened was that year after year, students continued not to make sufficient progress towards 100% proficiency. The result was that teachers and schools were seen as failing. In response to the fear of failure, reformers shifted their focus on what the purpose of schools should be. In holding schools and teachers accountable, the state could send in a team of professionals to ‘overhaul’ the school, if there was no improvement in student performance. NCLB encouraged the growth of the charter school movement by ‘repurposing’ failing public schools as charter schools. By focusing on testing and accountability, teachers were unable to focus on the curriculum and what they were teaching students. Instead, teachers were forced to care about teaching to the test to ensure that their students passed.

Despite the fact that NCLB was clearly not producing the results that it claimed it could and would (100% proficiency in math and reading by 2014), the accountability and testing movement have continued to gain momentum. On July 24, 2009, President Barack Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced the new Race to the Top (RTTT) competition. President Obama claims:
America will not succeed in the 21st century unless we do a far better job of educating our sons and daughters… and the race starts today. I am issuing a challenge to our nation’s governors and school boards, principals and teachers, businesses and non-profits, parents and students: if you set and enforce rigorous and challenging standards and assessments; if you put outstanding teachers at the front of the classroom; if you turn around failing schools – your state can win a Race to the Top grant that will not only help students outcompete workers around the world, but let them fulfill their God-given potential. (President Barack Obama, 2009)

Race to the Top was a competition amongst states for additional federal grant money that they could apply directly to their schools. The funds came from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, and amounted to more than four billion dollars to be distributed amongst states that applied and ‘won’ the competition. State applicants had to demonstrate how they would be innovative in addressing educational improvements. While RTTT seemingly emphasized educational innovation, this was not a true departure from NCLB and was a continuation of the conversation of the ability of testing and accountability to improve failing public schools. Ravitch reinforces this, writing:

Among the premises of Race to the Top was that charter schools and school choice were necessary reforms; that standardized testing was the best way to measure the progress of students and the quality of their teachers, principals, and schools; and that competition among schools would improve them. (Ravitch, 2013, p. 15)
According to Ravitch, RTTT did little more than play upon the fears that were created with a “A Nation and Risk” and NCLB. Race to the Top wasn’t particularly innovative as it merely continued the ideas and beliefs that fueled NCLB and “A Nation at Risk.” Ravitch continues, “The debates about the role of schooling in a democratic society, the lives of children and families, and the relationship between schools and society were relegated to the margins as no longer relevant to the business plan to reinvent American education” (Ravitch, p. 18). As the conversation around education shifted towards focusing on corporate strategies, alternative aims, like education in a democratic society, were no longer relevant or important enough to be discussed.

**How Consumerism Reinforces the Beliefs of Corporate Reformers**

Previously in this chapter, I discussed how Ravitch identifies the way in which corporate reformers have changed the dialogue around public education today. But despite the changes she identifies with corporate reformers, Ravitch does not directly assess the role of the consumer. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines consumerism as follows: “the theory that an increasing consumption of goods is economically desirable; a preoccupation with an inclination towards the buying of consumer goods.” If we accept the dictionary definition, the question is, how does consuming goods work in conjunction with corporate practice to influence the way educational reform ideas are communicated?

David Labaree makes an interesting conjecture that addresses the above question. He argues that it isn’t so much reformers as it is consumers who have directed educational reform. Labaree articulates this idea, indicating:

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Another thing we have found about the American school system is that reformers have had more modest impact on it than consumers [have]. Reformers tried hard to change the system in order to change society, but ever since the common school men, their impact has been quite limited. Educational consumers, on the other hand, have had a significant impact on both, and they weren’t even trying. Their aim wasn’t to change school or society but simply to use education as a way to get ahead. (Labaree, 2010, p. 224)

Labaree’s analysis is an interesting one because it accounts for the role that the consumer has played in directing educational reform. He argues that school provides the credential which aids the student (or consumer) with getting ahead. Due to their “preoccupation with an inclination towards the buying of consumer goods,” the consumer often views school as a method for getting ahead. The connection that Labaree does not make is that the role of the consumer has only expanded as the relative importance of the act of consuming has grown.

Acting or behaving in the role of consumer has become increasingly ubiquitous in American life. In 2013, the Huffington Post published a blog by Matt Walsh titled “If You Shop on Thanksgiving: You are part of the problem.” The article addresses the increasing acceptance on the part of the general public, to begin holiday shopping on Thanksgiving Day. Walsh writes:

I am not, however, a consumerist. I like the freedom and innovation of capitalism; I loathe the materialism of consumerism. There’s a popular misconception that

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capitalism and consumerism are inextricably linked; but that one naturally involves the other. But this is a fallacy. Certainly the ‘stimulus’ programs a few years ago ought to have dispelled this notion entirely. The government perverted the free market and elected to hand free money to millions of people, hoping that they’d go out and buy a bunch of stuff with it. This was consumerism as the expense of capitalism, and it revealed our priorities. (Walsh, 2013, p.1)

Walsh’s post is important because it demonstrates how the growing concern over the consumer mindset has expanded to include publications within popular culture. This is a relevant and real example of how an attitude of continual consumption has become increasingly mainstream, and, at least in Walsh’s view, problematic. Underlying Walsh’s criticism is a concern of the ways in which consumerism seems to infringe upon too many facets of American society. The question? What happens when consumerism becomes typical within American society? In the case of this dissertation, how does the rhetoric of consumerism impact our public education system?

Where did the attitude that Walsh describes come from? In 2008, a documentary titled Consuming Kids: The Commercialization of Childhood, was released that begins to address the question posed above. The focus of this documentary was the evolution of the marketing industry and how the focus has shifted towards the marketing of products to children. The film pinpoints the deregulation of the advertising industry in the early 1980’s as the major turning point in the acceptance of marketing to children. The film argues that advertisers, eager to capture the attention of children from an early age, are primarily concerned with developing the lifelong customer. Enola Aird, one of the
experts interviewed for the film, states “life is about buying, life is about getting,” when referring to the goals of advertisers in creating their lifelong relationship with the customer. No longer was it enough to simply sway the patron to purchase a particular product; advertisers wanted individuals to identify with what they were selling. This is further described by Schlosser, where he writes:

The growth in children’s advertising has been driven by efforts to increase not just current, but also future consumption. Hoping that nostalgic childhood memories of a brand will lead to a lifetime of purchases, companies now plan ‘cradle-to-grave’ advertising strategies. (Schlosser, 2001, p. 43)

Connecting the act of consuming with a changing attitude towards public education is a fairly easy leap to make. This is a leap that students, parents, and reformers have been willing to make. As students grow up being valued for their role as consumer, it is understandable how this mindset would begin to permeate their thinking about education. This is especially true as advertising began to penetrate the school walls. Schlosser goes on to describe an environment where schools, teachers, and administrators are forced to respond to the needs of their customers. To do so, however, requires money and resources that many schools are lacking. Faced with funding shortages, schools turn to corporations to make up the difference. Schlosser adds:

The proponents of advertising in the schools argue that it is necessary to prevent further cutbacks; opponents contend that school children are becoming captive audience for marketers, compelled by law to attend school and then forced to look at ads as a means for paying for their education. (Schlosser, p. 52)
Whatever moral compunctions schools might display about product advertising and consumerism disappear in the face of losing valuable revenue. If advertising for Coca-Cola means money for textbooks, athletics, or financing school functions, school districts often make choices to engage in corporate partnerships. The line between the outside world of marketing and advertising blends with the world of education and schools. Boyles describes it best, “One consequence of this is that education and training are confused as being synonymous. Such confusion sets the tone for ‘education’ discourse” (Boyles, 1998, pp. 4-5). As indicated in the Introduction, educational reform rhetoric has the tendency to create the reality that validates it. In the case of public education the more students are exposed to advertising and marketing, the more likely it is to become a part of their everyday language, and connected to education. The result is a well-developed consumer who dictates, or at the very least heavily influences, corporate educational reform as Labaree suggests. It is for this reason, that the role of corporate sponsorship is so complicated and the rhetoric so damaging. Boyles continues, “To say on the one hand that the goal is ‘education’ but then engage in training is to differ, fundamentally, over what schools should be doing” (Boyles, p. 11). I suggest, throughout this dissertation, that corporate sponsorship (whether Coca-Cola, McDonalds, etc.), and the resulting corporate reform rhetoric, hold a level of authority that impacts teachers and students alike, in ways that do not suit education for a democracy.

Ultimately, applying market principles to public education has become problematic. These principles are problematic because they change the ways that the students and families relate to their education, and it reinforces the motives of corporate
reformers to fix ‘failing schools.’ Whether at the hands of consumers or reformers, the conversation around public education is changing. The Roosevelt Institute, a non-profit organization that seeks to promote progressive ideas, hosts a blog entitled “The Next New Deal.” Author Elizabeth Stokes contributed with a post titled “How Turning the Public School System into a Market Undermines Democracy.” In that post, Stokes reasons:

Market-based school reform is focused on the idea that by structuring schools like business enterprises, we can inject them with stereotypical private sector virtues like innovation and efficiency. According to this view, this is sorely needed because “traditional” public schools are supposedly ineffective. By removing barriers to entry for different types of educational organizations, market-based reformers believe we can incorporate some healthy competition into the state-run system and overcome drawbacks allegedly caused by the state’s monopoly control. This approach positions parents and students as consumers of education, free to choose which types of schools best meet their individual needs and preferences. The rhetoric of “choice” implies that marketization will enhance liberty as well as efficiency. (Stokes, 2012, p. 1)

What is vital to Stokes’ argument is her description of the assumptions that corporate or market-based reformers make about the benefits of private sector virtues (like innovation and efficiency). There is an automatic faith on the part of these reformers that business principles will improve the public education system. Whether or not this is actually the case is what this dissertation seeks to discover.
Conversations that Corporate Reform Silences

Stoke’s position reinforces the one that Ravitch and Labaree have taken – that the problems inherent in corporate reform practice have the tendency to limit or prevent the development of other ideas in education from gaining support. As Ravitch and Labaree have indicated, the voices and perspectives of corporate reformers and consumers are continuing to gain momentum. Yet, there are ways in which this is limiting. Because the consumer and corporate reformer pursue education from a very specific mindset, it leaves little room for any alternative ideas about the aims and purposes of education. John Dewey writes at great length about education being indicative of our experiences. In Dewey’s writings, he is adamant that there are experiences which are beneficial and those that are not. Certain experiences are not conducive to the intellectual development of the individual. In his book *Experience and Education*, Dewey reasons that focusing too much on the future has the potential to limit individual growth. Dewey argues:

The ideal of using the present simply to get ready for the future contradicts itself. It omits, and even shuts out, the very conditions by which a person can be prepared for his future. We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same in the future. This is the only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything. (Dewey, p. 49)

It is evident that, for Dewey, focusing on an education that enables students to operate within the world in which they live is more effective than focusing on an unknowable future. So often, educational reformers are so concerned with the future that they ignore
the needs of the present. In Dewey’s eyes, educational reform without purpose is meaningless. Dewey continues:

But from the standpoint of growth as education and education as growth the question is whether growth in this direction promotes or retards growth in general. Does this form of growth create conditions for further growth, or does it set up conditions that shut off the person who has grown in this particular direction from the occasions, stimuli, and opportunities for continuing growth in new directions? (Dewey, 1938, p. 36)

Dewey is concerned with the growth of the individual, and he argues that there are experiences, which would limit that growth. While Dewey does not directly address the impact of consumerism on public education, his ideas are applicable to the debate nonetheless. It is likely that a Deweyan would see the emphasis on consumerism and ‘market virtues’ as detrimental to the growth of the individual because these virtues are limited to the act of consumerism. Dewey expected public education to be concerned with the development of the individual, and the tendency of corporate reform is to focus on issues of accountability and efficiency, neither of which is necessarily well equipped to develop the individual student.

Dewey’s approach to education was conducive to producing both critical consumers and active participants in a democracy. In her book, Not for Profit, Martha Nussbaum furthers Dewey’s ideas by stating:

Thirsty for national profit, nations and their systems of education are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend
continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significances of another person’s suffering and achievements. The future of the world’s democracies hang in the balance.

(Nussbaum, 2010, p. 15)

For Nussbaum, consumerism is merely a symptom of a problem she describes as ‘cancerous.’ It is an issue that is largely going unnoticed and is going to silently destroy any need for a democratic system of education (according to Nussbaum). Unfortunately, it is a problem that not all of us are consciously deciding to take part in, or are even aware of, but one that is being contributed to (by the general public) nonetheless.

Nussbaum describes such aims of education as lacking ‘soul.’ I believe that she uses the term specifically because it evokes a religious sense of purpose in the ways in which we approach schooling. Using the term ‘soul’ conjures, or arouses, a sense of something deep and meaningful, something powerful. Nussbaum says “(soul) is the faculties of thought and imagination that make us human and make our relationships rich human relationships, rather than relationships of mere use and manipulation” (Nussbaum, p. 18). For Nussbaum, education is something profoundly human and social (just as it was for Dewey). Education has the ability to change the way individuals relate to one another.

What Dewey, Ravitch, Nussbaum, Labaree, and others, what they are complaining about is a system of public education that increasingly finds itself subjected to the whims of consumerism rather than our democracy. Each of them is concerned with the direction
that educational reform rhetoric has taken. Educational philosopher Theodore Sizer contributes to these ideas in his book *Horace’s School*. Sizer writes, “Many are lively, well-intentioned, and adept at cranking out acceptable test scores, but they are without habits of serious thought, respectful skepticism, and curiosity about much of what lies beyond their immediate lives” (Sizer, 1992, p. 9). Sizer identifies the outcomes of these corporate reform conversations, students who view school as meeting a basic necessity, rather than valuing it for the more robust role it can fulfill as an instrument that supports a democratic nation. For Sizer, students think public education provides a means to college and then a career, one that provides socio-economic stability. This concern over competition and treating schools as a consumable product is something that is felt by the students themselves. Sizer describes a set of students who are increasingly apathetic. He believes that they don’t see themselves as capable or curious human beings, therefore the ways in which they interact with their education do not enable them to become deep, critical thinkers. Labaree supports this argument, writing, “In contrast, consumers take a less ideological and more pragmatic approach to schooling. What is most salient about schooling for them is not its use value (what usable knowledge it provides) but its exchange value (what doors it will open)” (Labaree, 2010, p. 237). Both Sizer and Labaree identify the fact that students are seeing not only themselves, but their education, as a component of their ability to consume.

This confusion over the dialogue surrounding public education is best understood, perhaps, by students themselves. This concern is reaffirmed with the valedictorian speech of Erica Goldson. In June of 2010, Goldson graduated from Coxsackie-Athens High...
School, and as the valedictorian, she gave a rousing speech about the anti-intellectualism found in the education she received at her public high school. Goldson states:

But I contest that I am a human being, a thinker, an adventurer- not a worker. A worker is someone who is trapped within repetition-a slave to the system set up before him. But now, I have successfully shown that I was the best slave. I did what I was told to the extreme. While others sat in class and doodled to later become great artists, I sat in class to take notes and become a great test-taker. While others would come to class without their homework done because they were reading about an interest of theirs, I never missed an assignment. (Goldson, 2010, p.1)

Erica’s speech is vital because it affirms, from the students’ point of view, the ideas that Sizer addresses in his book, of students who are “lively, well-intentioned, and adept at cranking out acceptable test scores, but they are without habits of serious thought, respectful skepticism, and curiosity about much of what lies beyond their immediate lives” (Sizer, 1992, pg. 9). Her acknowledgement of the role she played in contributing to the problem is disconcerting for the reader (as it should be). At the heart of Erica’s speech was her own personal disdain for the role she played in reinforcing the conversation about public education as a product to be consumed. Despite the success that she herself was able to find, Erica is quick to point out that the system, as it currently stands, does not have the best interests of its students at heart.

Tom Falk identifies a much more grim realization of this disconnect between the everyday lives of the consumer and corporate reformers. In a paper titled “Progressivism
and Consumer Democracy” presented at the annual conference for the Society for the Philosophical Study of Education, Falk wrote “Intellectually our culture seems to confuse the act of consumption with participation in a democratic society” (Falk, 2011, p. 4). Falk argues that the reality (experienced) by the majority of the American public is an inability to identify what it means to be an active, engaged participant in a democratic society. As schools become increasingly beholden to corporate reformers and consumers, the more likely it is that the role of public education will be limited. Students will find their purpose as consumer, not as democratic citizens. Falk continues:

   Shopping, binge-eating, and light drug habits make our enslavement more tolerable; but for most of us, if we had the choice, would seek to escape enslavement altogether so that we might re-assume possession of our lives. Thus we hope someday to own our own business, win the lottery, or achieve full professorship at a university that affords us intellectual autonomy. Many, but not all, desire the independence to manage their own life, complete with all its creative, imaginative, and productive potential. However, the aperture for this sort of opportunity seems to be closing. As more folks than ever strive to make it out, the rat race quickens. (Falk, p. 6)

Falk, Sizer, and Goldson describe a darker side when the conversation around public education is limited. All of them outright define consumerism and corporate reform as problematic to developing and sustaining democratic citizens. This pessimistic view is shared by famed comedian George Carlin (2005), who paints a foreboding picture of
what happens when education is valued for something other than sustaining our democracy:

But I’ll tell you what they don’t want. They don’t want a population of citizens capable of critical thinking. They don’t want well-informed, well-educated people capable of critical thinking. They’re not interested in that! That doesn’t help them. That’s against their interests. That’s right! You know something? They don’t want people who are smart enough to sit around the kitchen table and figure out how badly they’re getting fucked by a system that threw them overboard thirty fucking years ago. They don’t want that! You know what they want? They want Obedient Workers- Obedient Workers!

While Carlin’s comedy sketch might have only been intended to garner laughs, it is not without certain truths. Public education in the hands of a few (politicians, business leaders, reformers) that have no obligation or reason to want a thinking, critical public, is detrimental, not just to the individual, but to democratic society as a whole. These individuals are dangerous, not just for the ways in which they implement change, but for the discourse that they reinforce with each other and the public.

Lest we trick ourselves into believing that there is no immediate cause for concern, or that this is just pop culture ‘talking,’ all one needs to do is review the platform of the 2012 Republican Party of Texas. It contains a section regarding education and what the party hopes schools will (or will not) achieve:

Knowledge-Based-Education- We oppose the teaching of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)(values clarification), critical thinking skills and similar programs
that are simply a relabeling of Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) (Mastery learning) which focus on behavior modification and have the purpose of challenging the students’ fixed beliefs and undermining parental authority.  

The question is, why would the Texas Republican Party be against higher order thinking skills? Is it as Carlin suggests? Are they only interested in generating a workforce? While this particular example from the platform does not directly address market principles, it does implicate the ways in which the corporate reform mindset (that admires testing, accountability and efficiency) have moved beyond discussions within academia and professionals in education to politicians and their party platforms. A society that fears critical thinking skills does not an educated consumer make.

The question is, how did educational reform rhetoric come this far? As much as many would like to believe these are new ideas, they are often merely old ideas relabeled. The remaining chapters will argue that, in order to appreciate the ways in which the corporate reform movement has influenced public education today, a thorough understanding of the history of public education, beginning with the common school movement, is necessary. Each of the following chapters identifies key ideals that were espoused by reforms within a particular movement. I argue that it is these ideals that would be ‘hijacked’ by corporate, or business interests, and contribute to the educational reform rhetoric that is so common today.

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Chapter Three

The Common School Movement, the conflict between utility and knowledge

The United States public education system is one of the country’s greatest success stories—it has been one of the most important and revolutionary ideas we have had as Americans. As the primary educational institution of our society, public school has evolved over time to meet the needs of the diverse citizenry it supports. Remarkably, the public education system has endured as a single comprehensive system from the 19th century until today, though not without question or debate along the way as to its shortcomings. It is the conversation around its shortcomings that has influenced the corporate reform movement and education reform rhetoric today. The primary shortcomings that reformers have identified involve its supposed conflicting aims: education for utility or education for knowledge.

One of the outcomes of this conflict has been an assumption that, at some point, the common school ‘worked.’ In other words, both aims (utility and knowledge) were met. Ravitch provides a partial answer to this question of the success of the common school, writing:

Each generation supposes that its complaints are unprecedented. Critics of the schools in the 1980’s looked back to the 1950’s as a halcyon era; critics in the 1950’s looked back on their own Depression-era schooling as a high-water mark.
But those who seek the ‘gold old days’ will be disappointed, for in fact there never was a Golden Age. It is impossible to find a period in the twentieth century in which education reformers, parents, and the citizenry were satisfied with the schools. (Ravitch, 2000, p. 13)

As Ravitch suggests, despite providing a free, universal, and non-sectarian education for the majority of our country’s students, public schools have rarely met the high expectations placed before them. Ravitch identifies that each generation has ‘complained’ about its public education system. Ravitch calls attention to the fact that citizens have never been completely satisfied with the public education system, in order to make the case for a deeper understanding of why educational reform rhetoric has trended in the negative.

If we take Ravitch’s claim seriously, one way to gain a greater understanding of the role that educational reform history has played in determining reform rhetoric is to start with analyzing the common school movement. Despite his having written forty years ago, Church is still correct, writing, “The rhetoric, efforts, and accomplishments of the common school movement set terms for education debate and established patterns of professional aspiration and control that have persisted almost without challenge until present day” (Church, 1976, p. 58). Church recognizes the significance of the common school movement in setting the standard for how educational reform continues to be debated. Church argues that while public education may have evolved physically, the way it is discussed, including the rhetoric of reform, has remained unchanged.
As stated, one of the more prominent outcomes of the common school movement was a conflict between the utility of schooling versus the knowledge provided by public education. Since the 1960’s, educational historians and philosophers have taken very different views on the contributions of the common school. While there is no doubt that public education through the invention of the common school was a major achievement in the history of the democratic republic, there are those reformers and historians who have increasingly taken a more critical view of the common school movement. Prior to 1960, educational historians lauded the common school as the epitome of democratic achievement. More recently, however, historians have taken a critical view, questioning whether or not common school reformers truly had the interests of American democracy at heart. Educational philosopher Boyles exemplifies this, writing:

It seems odd to me, therefore, to reinforce the mythology that common schools were really public or democratic and that they served a public good above and beyond the vexing issues of immigration, assimilation, citizenship, ‘rugged individualism,’ religion and so on. As an institutionalizing force or practice, common schools were neither public nor democratic in anything other than a cursory or symbolic way. They were, instead, a functional market representation of the colonizing forces of a middle-class, Anglo-Saxon, protestant, male hierarchy imbued with the specific capitalist economic system it promoted.

(Boyles, 2011, p. 436)

Boyles represents a not uncommon understanding of the reasons behind the creation of the common school or public education. Historians like Boyles question whether schools
were designed for individual educational growth and community development or in an effort to support economic growth.

The common school movement provides historical context for a much better understanding of the current discussion involving public education today. It illustrates how even a momentous idea like free, universal education is not without potential for broad ideological debates. The conflict of the common school was that it provided both opportunity and a means for social control: it was created to serve two masters.

The Context for Educational Reform

Reform movements rarely come out of nowhere or lack some sort of social incentive. The common school movement was certainly no exception. Prior to its inception, there was little support for the development of a common system of education in America. However, this would change after the American Revolutionary War. With other major revolutions (e.g. The French Revolution), the re-education of the public had been of primary concern, but the American Revolution was different. There wasn’t the same need to re-educate the masses as there had been with previous revolutions. Church states, “The issue was not one of changing the people, but of keeping them from being changed” (Church, 1976, p. 4). In the case of the American Revolution, there wasn’t the same kind of battle with the wealthy elite as there had been with the French Revolution (for example). So there was little consensus on the need for an education for all, least of all for the masses. Most of the public was content to leave things as they were, with families either hiring a private tutor, educating a student at home, or leaving it up to small district schools within the community.
Thomas Jefferson would be the first to implicate the need for a common system of education. Educational historians Gordon and Lee wrote extensively about the role that Jefferson played in education in their book *Crusade Against Ignorance: Jefferson on Education*: “Few men in any time, and none in the United States, have so consistently or so fruitfully championed the life of the mind and the relation of that life to the good of society” (Gordon & Lee, 1961, p. 1). Key to Jefferson’s philosophies was the belief that the Republic would not succeed if the public was not educated. Gordon and Lee continue, “And liberty without enlightenment seemed to Jefferson a contradiction in concepts, an anomaly” (Gordon & Lee, p. 3). Gordon and Lee describe how Jefferson believed in the importance of a system of education that would support the freedom and liberty of individuals. Gordon and Lee understood the important role that Jefferson played in building momentum for the common school movement. They argued that influential educational policies typically have a political basis, but in turn, debates about education have informed politics. In their minds, Jefferson was representative of this symbiotic relationship between education and politics.

In 1779, Jefferson proposed “A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge.” At the core of his proposition was a basic education for the general populous. He suggested dividing each county into wards called “little republics;” in each republic, the authorities would establish elementary schools where "all the free children, male and female," would be admitted without charge. The purpose of these elementary schools was to equip all citizens with the basic literacy and mathematical skills they would need to manage their own affairs, as well as develop a greater understanding of the
moral and civic duties necessary for living in a democracy. The management of the schools, in Jefferson’s opinion, would best be handled by those with vested interests in seeing schools succeed: the students’ parents.

Jefferson’s ideas did not quickly gain ground as they were considered to be far too radical. It was not just his wealthy, land owning peers he couldn’t convince, but the general public as well. Neither group could see the benefits to having a common education system that was available to all. The wealthy wished only to continue as they were, hiring tutors or sending their children to private schools and reaping the benefits that greater knowledge could provide.

On the other hand, the working class couldn’t envision what use they might have for a more robust education. The public, unaware of the possibilities and opportunities that education could provide, were content to accept a more patchwork approach, to public education which included home schooling, apprenticeships and, for some, the local district school. The local district school is typically described as a rural, one room schoolhouse that was part of a village or neighborhood. It was often limited in size by the distance that children had to walk to school and was managed by a local political entity (Church, 1976, p.9). Since district schools were operated and directed on a local basis, funds were raised through the collection of taxes from community members. The community was also the one to elect a local resident to act as the school master. All decisions on how the school was to operate were determined by the community. At this point in time, there were no federal or state regulations when it came to schools; they
were ‘owned and operated’ by the members of local communities. In other words, the district school was an extreme example of local control.

Yet, why bother with a common system of education at all? Educational historian Frederick M. Binder describes conditions during the beginning of the common school era that led to support for public education. In *The Age of the Common School 1830-1865*, Binder argues that:

> In America, during the period under consideration, such change occurred in transportation, communications, settlement of the land, manufacturing, modes of power, and in man’s very conception of himself in relation to his fellow men, his creator, and the universe. (Binder, 1974, p. 4)

Binder is quick to point out that while (the reader) may be used to innovations in technology and changes within society, the amount and extent to which American society was changing at this time was extensive and fast occurring. The people at the time would have been unused to such change and would have, in many ways, feared it. Binder continues: “The growth of cities brought to the nation the first symptoms of the urban malaise we know so well today: substandard housing, congestion, disease and inadequate sanitation and transportation facilities” (Binder, p. 8). What Binder is describing is the importance and relevance of the changes that were occurring within the country. The fear was that change would take place too rapidly, and there weren’t measures in place to prevent the ‘malaise’ that Binder describes. He goes on:

> To counter such dangers the reformers placed great faith in a system of schooling in which children from all classes from all walks of life, together, and in common
would be exposed to the rudiments of learning and the virtues of patriotism and morality. (pp. 10-11)

As Binder describes it, one of the primary aims of these reformers (who were mainly comprised of individuals from the upper middle class) was to solve the problems associated with industrialization and urbanization.

It was within this context that the common school gained momentum and leadership from reformers such as Horace Mann. At the core of the belief in a common education was the sense that our ‘American experiment’ would not survive if the masses were left uneducated. In his collection of Mann’s works, Louis Filler says of Mann: “He believed that a democracy required democratic education. A person who could vote and not think was a danger to society” (Filler, 1965, pg. ix). Fuller suggests that Mann believed that an uneducated public would be a threat to our fledgling democratic nation. It was necessary to provide a common education system if the country (and its democracy) were to succeed. While there are many educational historians who have taken a critical view of Horace Mann, this quote suggests (and I believe) that a more nuanced understanding of Mann and other common school reformers is key to analyzing the long term influence of common school reform rhetoric.

**Horace Mann and the ideals of utility and knowledge**

Horace Mann was born in the town of Franklin in Norfolk Massachusetts on May 4, 1876. Educational opportunities were limited in Franklin, yet Mann was able to receive an education at a small local, one room schoolhouse. This, combined with a local library (donated by Benjamin Franklin) and regular church attendance, rounded out Horace
Mann’s education. Mann’s penchant for hard work and discipline came from the farming and religious influences in his life.

Mann attended Brown University, which was known as a less prestigious option than Harvard or Yale, and attracted a significant number of lower middle-class families due to the lower tuition costs. Immediately upon graduating, Mann would pursue the study of law under Judge James Gould, who would establish the first American law school in Litchfield, Connecticut. He excelled as a law student and was considered by many of his peers to be one of the best scholars in the school. Despite some attempts at practicing law, it wouldn’t be until he moved to Boston in 1833 that Mann would find some amount of success.

Yet, it wasn’t the practice of law where Horace Mann ultimately found success, it was in the field of education. When Horace Mann took over as Secretary of Massachusetts public schools, he encountered poorly trained teachers and inadequate facilities. Overall (by his estimation) the schools appeared to be lacking robust resources. As a result of this, Mann became interested in improving the common school immediately.

How would Mann go about trying to improve schools? Robert Downs (1974) identified several key ways that Mann would set about working on improving and developing the educational system. One of the primary ways Mann hoped to achieve this was through teacher training. Downs (1974) describes five areas where Mann thought teachers could improve:
1) A knowledge of common school subjects- teachers should be able to teach subjects, these subjects should be engrained like the alphabet.

2) The art of teaching—this the ability to acquire, but also to impart.

3) Management, government, and discipline of a school—this is the ability to organize and manage a school. The ability to pay attention to all the pupils in the school and ensure their progress and success.

4) Good behavior—it was up to the teachers to instill good behaviors in their pupils.

5) Morals—moral character was of vital importance to being a good teacher.

All of this was in an effort to prepare and ensure higher qualifications for educators. Teachers not only bestowed knowledge but also acted as a moral compass for students. Downs writes:

Concerning the purpose of education, Mann viewed education as a broad functional process, bringing about a harmonious relation of body, intellect, and spirit. He favored, accordingly, an education that would develop the individual in as many functional ways as possible. (Downs, 1974, p. 45)

What this quote from Downs demonstrates is, in many ways, a pragmatic approach on the part of Horace Mann. The approach was pragmatic in that he saw and understood education as serving multiple reasonable purposes for the individual and society. This quote provides evidence that Mann did not see (or believe) there was a conflict between education for utility versus education for knowledge.
Because of Mann’s passionate faith in public education, he was keenly aware of the importance of getting ‘buy in’ from the vast majority of the public. On the one hand, Mann grew frustrated with the number of absences occurring as the result of poorer families keeping their children from school. In the eyes of these parents, their children were needed to work in factories to support the income of the family. On the other hand were the wealthy elite and businessmen who would did not see the relative importance of having all children attend school. Downs believes that Mann knew this and created a strategy to deal with these differing groups. “He recognized that it was well to appeal to self-interest and he was therefore constantly endeavoring to prove that educated labor was far more productive and profitable than illiterate labor” (Downs, p. 110). In other words, Mann knew that in order to make his agenda happen, he needed to gain mass support, and the way to do that was to appeal to the individual’s self-interest. Downs continues:

Without universal education, as Mann saw it, there would be revolution and a devastating breakdown of society. If the lower classes were allowed to suffer in ignorance, poverty and misery, society as a whole would be imperiled by crime and violence. (p. 150)

Whether he realized it or not, Mann’s actions demonstrate that (for him), education was a panacea. A common education would aid in solving a myriad of social problems that Mann feared would negatively impact society.

Revisionist historians of the 1960’s viewed Horace Mann and other reformers like him as naïve in their efforts to create a common education system. Part of their criticism
stems from the purpose that they see attributed to the development of the common school. The process of formalizing education also meant professionalizing the teaching profession and attempting to have all white children attend school. Church reinforces this, writing:

Too often historians of education in the United States have viewed the creation of the free school as the reformers supreme goal. It is better understood as a means of raising attendance at the elementary schools so that those common schools could achieve their major goals of teaching common values to all children.

(Church, 1976, p. 60)

Ultimately Church and other reformers remain unsympathetic to the idea that Horace Mann and others like him were truly interested in supporting a democracy with their common school.

Yet, this understanding of Mann and common school reformers, held by Church and revisionist historians, is not especially nuanced. It assumes that due to their interest in increasing school attendance and formalizing the system, that common school reformers were primarily interested in controlling society. Out of fear for the ongoing changes in immigration, urbanization and industrialization, the common school was meant to protect against these changes. In other words, despite Mann’s faith in the marriage of utility and knowledge, revisionist historians argued that he cared more for utility. Church’s understanding of Mann and other reformers like him was very cynical, yet the emphasis on practicality is not necessarily incorrect. Mann’s emphasis on the utility, or practicality of the common education system, can be easily understood by the educational consumer
today. As mentioned in Chapter Two, educational consumers often appreciate public education for the practical purpose it serves. I argue that this belief is not necessarily a recent development but that it comes out of the tension between utility and knowledge that was emphasized in the common school movement. The conflict between utility and knowledge ultimately comes down to the relative importance of individual needs versus societal needs/concerns. It is a tension that is not always easily recognizable and one that Mann himself fell prey to. Boyles writes:

But the point here is to clarify that Mann’s position does not ultimately represent consumer materialism, even though it supports it, for while it narrows the focus of schooling and reinforces student roles as passive and teacher roles as transmission-oriented, it does not (perhaps because of its religious overtones) privilege the tangibility that characterizes consumer materialism. (Boyles, 1998, p. 8)

Boyles makes an important distinction here; while Mann’s faith in utility certainly speaks to the consumer, this was not the position that Mann was trying to support. This is where revisionist historians don’t dig deeply enough into understanding the nuance between educating for knowledge and utility. However, while Mann may have believed that both could be achieved (perhaps simultaneously), he perhaps lacked foresight when it came to the tension between utility and knowledge as aims of education.

**The Debate Between Two Ideals: Utility vs. Knowledge**

Ravitch argues that the purpose of the common school was to create social equality through an education that was available to all: “In America it was believed that
the public school could enable any youngster to rise above the most humble origins and make good on the nation’s promise of equal opportunity for all” (Ravitch, 2000, p. 19). She clearly argues that the common school was established with the desire to aid all individuals in their attempts at creating a ‘better life’ for themselves. She continues:

This was the American dream, the promise of the public school to open wide the doors of opportunity to all who were willing to learn and study. The schools would work their democratic magic by disseminating knowledge to all who sought it.” (Ravitch, p. 20)

The belief was (and is) that the common school system had a place in American society by promoting democracy through the education of its citizens. As the common school continued to gain support, there were few who questioned that it could serve an important function within society. Yet, the common school movement was primarily focused on the development and establishment of the elementary school; there was still no ‘system’ of education that went from the primary grades through college. In order to have the greatest impact, it became necessary for reformers to consider the establishment and development of the high school. A common education for democracy would be limited if there wasn’t a pipeline between elementary school and the university. And while many students were still not attending colleges or universities, there was the belief that some sort of education was needed for students past the elementary age.

The debate over the relative importance of educating for utility vs. knowledge grew more extensive with the development of the public high school. Ravitch argues:
It was an era of wrenching social and economic change, of rapid industrialization, high immigration, and increasing urbanization. It was a period in which social reformers sought strategies to combat the ill effects of these changes, especially in the cities, where living conditions for the poor were abysmal. Among intellectual leaders, Charles Darwin’s theories of evolution challenged established truths in virtually every field of thought. Political and social reformers were convinced that the old order was dying and a new, dynamic, progressive order was being born. (p.26)

As the common school was in development and reformers continued to debate and think about the role and purpose of this new public education, it was evident that there were two camps of thought when it came to the purpose of education. There were those who favored utility versus those that favored knowledge as the central purpose of public education. This really became a forced distinction amongst these particular educational goals. It can be argued that Mann, in many ways an advocate of both, would not have understood the degree to which these two ideals would become two very distinct educational aims for different groups of educational reformers.

Ravitch describes two primary contenders in the debate of utility vs. knowledge; they were Herbert Spencer and Lester Frank Ward. Spencer was on the side of utility, arguing that in order for an individual to achieve ‘complete living’ they needed access to an education that would enable that. In other words, for philosophers like Spencer, “In education, utility was the measure of all things” (p. 27). In other words, Spencer was a firm believer that classical, or traditional, education had no real intrinsic value because it
did not prepare the individual for the future that they would face. Spencer would come to be identified as a ‘social Darwinist’ by many historians (e.g. Lawrence Cremin). Spencer wrote “To prepare us for complete living, is the function which education has to discharge; and the only rationale mode of judging of any educational course is, to judge, in what degree it discharges such function” (Cremin, 1961, pp. 91-92). It wasn’t merely that education ought to be utilitarian, but Spencer wasn’t an advocate for traditional education as it was understood in the mid to late 1800’s.

On the other side of the debate was Lester Frank Ward, who vehemently believed that the American government should take an active role in the social welfare of its citizens. For Ward, the most effective way of doing this was by ensuring that students became knowledgeable as a direct result of the education they received.

The main purpose of education, Ward argued, was to equalize society by diffusing knowledge and what he called ‘directive intelligence’ to all. He literally believed that knowledge was power. He considered education ‘the great panacea’ and insisted that access to knowledge was the key to social progress. (Ravitch, 2000, p. 29)

Ward genuinely believed that it was the knowledge that students gained which would solve social problems within society. Without a focus on ‘diffusing knowledge,’ there could be no hope for dealing with the massive changes that were occurring at the time.

The conversation around the importance of utility versus knowledge continued with Charles W. Eliot and William T. Harris. Both were firmly of the belief that a liberal based education was important and necessary for all students. Ravitch writes:
As vigorous proponents of liberal education, they believed that the primary purpose of education was to improve society by improving the intelligence of individuals. They insisted that schools in a democratic society should aim to develop the intelligence of children fully, regardless of their parents’ social status or their probable occupation. Both asserted that the same quality of education should be available to all children. (Ravitch, p. 30)

Despite the changes to the economy (industrialization and urbanization), there was faith (on the part of some reformers) that instituting a system of liberal education would be of benefit to all students, the community, and more importantly, the country at large. Both of these men, Eliot and Harris, believed that it was the responsibility of the government to make sure that all students had access to an academic curriculum. Their argument was based on the belief in mental training. Eliot and Harris felt that if the individual would train his or her mind through rigorous study, then the student would develop the necessary tools for dealing with the practical concerns of everyday life. In other words, for these men, a differentiated curriculum, determined by social class, was considered undemocratic; and they believed that the American public would agree. Ravitch reasons:

He (Harris) believed that the American public would reject a school system that provided one kind of education for the children of laboring people and a different kind for the children of the rich and powerful. Such inequality, he held, would be completely unacceptable in the United States. (p. 19)

Harris believed that a common system of education would have to be achievable for all students, regardless of their socio-economic status. The American public wouldn’t accept
anything less than equality of access. Charles Eliot claims: “The individual child in a
democratic society had a right to do his own prophesying about his own career, guided by
his own ambitions and his own capacities” (p. 47). Harris and Eliot firmly believed that
the educated individual was an asset to the community and that an education should be
provided to all.

Reformers like Harris and Eliot were examples of a commonly held belief that
school had the power to change individual’s lives. Ravitch concedes:

As the century opened, American education seemed to be firmly committed to the
ideas of liberal education. There seemed to be a broad consensus among
educators and parents that the purpose of schooling was to improve a younger’s
ability to think and reason well through studying certain essential subjects.

Behind this consensus was an implicit understanding that access to education was
a democratic right and that the role of the school in a democratic society was to
provide not just the three R’s, but access to the knowledge and thinking power
necessary for every citizen. (pp. 49-50)

Education, and schools in particular, had the potential to lift the individual up. Whether
this meant bringing them out of poverty or providing them with knowledge and a love of
learning, reformers saw a great deal of benefit to ensuring that the masses were given
educational opportunity.

But a firm belief in the ability of education to lift individuals out of poverty was
not enough to answer all the logistical questions that arose from the common school
movement. As more and more students enrolled in the school system, it became
increasingly necessary to develop a more predictable curriculum. In order to address these concerns, the National Education Association established a commission called the Committee of Ten. On July 9, 1892 the committee released its findings. The Committee of Ten was in support of an academic or liberal based education system for all students. The committee posed that the American public high school should work to make sure that all students in our democratic society had access to a high quality academic curriculum. The committee argued that not only should students be able to pursue an academic curriculum for as long as they wanted, but that doing so was of benefit to them. Therefore, if children from the laboring classes wished to take Latin and Greek, they should be allowed to do so and should be given every opportunity to continue these studies. Ultimately, the Committee agreed with Eliot, Harris, and others that a well-trained mind would be prepared for any path in life. The question is whether or not this would last or if conflict was brewing. Labaree addresses this question writing:

If necessity is the mother of invention, then crisis is the mother of reform. Crisis conditions in a society create a powerful demand for possible solutions, which in turn encourages social entrepreneurs to develop innovative reform measures and test them out in practice. (Labaree, 2010, p. 58)

Is it ignorant to believe that, despite the best of intentions of the common school movement as a reform initiative, it was anything more than just a reaction to the issues that society was facing at the time? Church further describes how the common school appeared to be little more than a reform initiative responding to the problems of the time. Church writes:
Educators and educational historians have long comforted themselves with a belief that the common school movement resulted from the democratic sentiments of educators responding to the needs of the working classes who sought improved educational facilities in order to better their lot and take their rightful place in the political and economic life of the nation…But, however much common school reform may have benefited the common man, he was not a leader in its development; and the ideology of common school reform was much closer to Whiggery than to Jacksonianism. (Church, 1976, p. 62)

Church implies that it is naïve to assume that reformers truly had the best of intentions when it came to the aims of the common school movement. As evidenced earlier in the chapter, he is not the only one to make this argument. The question is, “why would historians of education argue that common school reformers did not have the best of intentions?”

**How the Common School Ideals were “Hijacked”**

One of the main concerns that reformers had with the common school movement was how to increase the level of attendance, especially by students from poor families. In fact, this was of such grave concern that many of the initial common school reformers pushed for mandatory schooling (which was an entirely new concept). Church indicates:

They were committed to free schools less as a democratic principle than as a means of getting the poor into schools. The concern for enrolling the poor that underlay most of the important reforms advocated by the common school reformers grew out of the realization that schools could not be used for social
manipulation, for social control, until the vast majority of poor children, who needed the control the most, were in attendance. (Church, p. 61)

Compulsory schooling was high on the agenda of many of these reformers, and they often saw poor parents as the main enemies of the mission. In the eyes of reformers, parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds were not quick to realize the value and/or importance of an education for their children. Because of this, poorer parents were also seen as the enemies; not sending their kids to school demonstrated a lack of interest in a cohesive society. However, what reformers seemed unable to understand was that these parents may have held off sending their kids to school for other (in their eyes legitimate) reasons. Initially, these new schools were not free; a tuition was charged in order for students to attend. There were a significant number of families who could not afford any amount just to send their children to school. By the same token, many of these families also needed their children to stay home and go to work in order to contribute to the family income. Some were able to receive a free education, but at the cost of being labeled a charity case. This combination of reasons led to many families not sending their children to school.

One of the primary reasons that reformers were adamant about all children attending school and having a mandatory attendance was to prevent the deterioration of society. Church writes, “Indeed they thought that they had ample evidence—that economic change without the reinforcement of social control over the industrial population would spell the doom of the American experiment” (p. 70). By educating everyone, including the poor, reformers could guarantee that workers were not only efficient, but that they did
not lose their morals as the nation became increasingly industrialized. Schooling would not only teach protestant morals but it would instill a respect for hard work, property, and an appreciation for order and punctuality. More than reading, writing, and arithmetic, factory managers wanted workers that they could trust to work hard, show discipline, and still maintain the morals and values of the local community. They did not want immigrants and the poor to fall into patterns of drunkenness, laziness, or other behaviors that were not representative of protestant values. Again, Church reinforces this notion that the common school movement was created in reaction to changes occurring within society at the time. He argues:

The goal of common school reform, then, could be summarized as the effort to find an effective substitute for the mechanisms of social control and socialization that had characterized preurban and preindustrial small stable community. The common school was common because it taught the common subjects and common values and it was common because it was to enroll every single child in the United States in order to socialize them. (p. 81)

The common school was an effort to maintain the kind of social control that existed before industrialization. Whether education passed along knowledge or not, its utilitarian purposes were equally important.

Labaree writes, “Whiggism broadly conceived was a particular stance toward progress that cut across party lines, if not across class lines. At its heart was a desire to reconcile the market economy with the republic, to develop an approach that would accommodate the one without destroying the other” (Labaree, 2010, p. 59). Ultimately it
was the common school reformers that solidified the dichotomy that we still experience within our educational system today. Labaree continues:

At a deeper level, they wanted to resolve the core problem at the heart of the liberal republican compromise: how to create a moral and politically stable community that was made up of self-interested individuals; how to accommodate the republic with the market. The grandest of issues was at stake here: Could we maintain social order, the accumulation of wealth, individual liberty, and republican community—all in the same society? (Labaree, p. 60)

Labaree points to how the conversation around the aims of public education were, in his view, from the common school forward, concerned with the questions over which was more valuable, utility or knowledge? This is still a significant part of the conversation around public education today, and for the corporate reformer and consumer, utility is winning.

What came out of the common school reform was a rhetoric that placed utility and knowledge in conflict with one another. The risk of such a conflict was an education system that could not reconcile the needs of individual consumers (utility) versus those of society (knowledge). As evidenced earlier in the chapter, this was not an easy debate to have. As Labaree writes, “the grandest of issues was at stake here…” What historians and future reformers take away from the common school, was the inability to reconcile educating the individual in favor of utility versus knowledge. As Ravitch writes:

The aim of the common school was clear: to promote sufficient learning and self-discipline so that people in a democratic society could be good citizens, read the
newspapers, get a job, make their way in an individualistic and competitive society, and contribute to the community’s well-being. Educational reformers hoped that schools would be all things to all people, whether this meant that the poor could achieve economic freedom, or for politicians and reformers to ensure that the masses would share their morals and beliefs. (Ravitch, 2000, p. 25)

Ultimately both of these aims were achieved with the development of the common school. But it would be the ways in which they came into conflict with one another that would be problematic.

Reformers would take advantage of a utilitarian purpose of education out of fear that social changes, like immigration and industrialization, would have a long lasting negative impact upon America. In his book *America’s Public Schools: From the Common School to ‘No Child Left Behind*, William J. Reese makes it clear that reformers were expecting grand things from their schools. He writes, “Reforming society by reforming the schools had increasingly become a northern, Yankee ideal, supported by those who welcomed economic growth and expansion yet worried about the fate of morals and tradition in a divisive age” (Reese, 2011, p.32). These reformers were primarily out of the Whig party, and while they welcomed economic growth, they were concerned about the moral decay of society. Reformers saw that opportunity existed with the growth of the economy, but worried about what would happen to the individual as a result. This concern was never held for the wealthy and elite but for the poor and working class.
Reese continues: “America’s ambivalent attitude towards the life of the mind and scholarship thus found expression in the nation’s emerging school system, where character development and moral uplift took precedence even as lifeless instruction in academic subjects predominated” (Reese, p. 24). A concern for morals and character development trumped scholarship and intellectualism. As evidenced above, it was easy to resort to reform out of fear of the enormity of changes that were occurring in society. Schools and their curriculum were more easily controlled than other areas of society (e.g. industrialization). Apprenticeships were slowly becoming non-existent, which in turn meant that individuals were struggling with access to independence. Wage workers feared becoming wage slaves, so educational reform and schools became a means of potentially solving this problem by enabling the individual a certain amount of self-determination so that they were not slaves to menial jobs and had the hope of ‘bettering’ themselves.

Defining the aims and purposes of the common school movement is not a particularly easy task. On the one hand, reformers created a system that was free and open to all, yet their motivation for doing so was out of fear of a changing society that they felt they couldn’t control. Reese writes: “Most conclude that they were largely middle class, native born, and Protestant, fearful of the consequences of social change but otherwise convinced of the fundamental goodness of an expanding market” (p. 27). There was a constant fear that commerce was going to corrupt the individual, and so much of what the common school reformers pushed for was a system of education that would address these concerns with a solid education in morals and values. Right from
the beginning, school was a tool for both student and reformer - each were able to get out of education what would be of the most benefit to them.

The trouble is that these reformers chose never to evaluate the very system of commerce that they feared was corrupting individuals. If they had perhaps chosen to do that, they might not have implemented a system of education that would only exacerbate the problems that they were beginning to face. Reflecting on the methods of commerce, or the market society, might have prompted these reformers to recognize that the system of education they were helping to implement could easily become corrupted by the market. “Schools would uplift the poor, protect the property and wealth of the successful, and obliterate ‘factitious distinctions’ in society” (p. 39). But how would schools be able to do both to the degree that would satisfy the public? How could schools uplift the poor without taking away the wealth of others? If we want to uplift the individual, we have to assume that there would be a shift in the distribution of wealth, for we can’t maintain the wealth of some and provide more for others. This is exactly what Labaree was describing when he said that school was a syndrome trying to serve two conflicting masters. If schools were going to change society, then society itself needed to be re-evaluated, and that is something that reformers were (and still are) unwilling to consider. “Focusing on the faults, shortcomings, and ignorance of the individual, rather than on the inequalities in the social system, these activists were reformers, not revolutionaries” (p. 30). Education was really about a specific kind of socialization. The trouble was, was it a society worth being socialized into? The common school was at odds with itself. On the one hand,
schools were striving to create opportunity, and on the other they were trying to preserve certain norms.

The common school established a pattern for seeing education, and schools in particular, as a method for getting ahead. For a society of people enamored with self-reliance and practicality, the common school made a great deal of sense. The individual could use school to pursue a better life (or preserve the one they had), corporations could use school as a method to generate more bodies for the workforce, politicians could use schools as a system for socializing the masses, and reformers could use schools in their quest to solve all social problems. In this way, schools were quite literally, capable of doing and being anything. Labaree writes:

In short, the American system of education is highly accessible, radically unequal, organizationally fragmented, and instructionally mediocre. In combination, these characteristics have provided a strong and continuing incentive for school reformers to change the system, by launching reform movements that would seek to broaden access, reduce inequality, transform governance, and improve learning. But at the same time that these traits have spurred reform efforts, they have also kept reformers from accomplishing their aims. (Labaree, 2010, p. 11)

Labaree is specifically addressing some of the problems facing public education today; however, this connection was instigated by the conversations developed during the common school movement. For as much good as one could argue that the common school did, it also established patterns for understanding the purposes of education that we continue to use to this day (again, the debate between utility vs. knowledge).
Ultimately, whatever positive outcomes that were intended with the common school would be overshadowed by the negative conversations that it started. As will be demonstrated in the next chapter, progressive education would attempt to reconcile the conflicting aims of utility and knowledge to direct the educational reform rhetoric of today.
Chapter Four

Progressive Education: The disconnect between ideas and the practice of education

The common school movement is most notable for producing a formalized system of public education designed to meet the needs of a young and still developing country. While supporters of the movement were able to reach agreement in the need for a public education, the aims and goals of that education were left loosely defined and provisional. Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of the common school movement was the debate it sparked over the aims of education, and whether reformers should focus on the utility or knowledge that public education could provide. Some, like Horace Mann, believed that education could achieve both utility and knowledge in equal measure. Despite whatever intentions Mann might have had with promoting the common school ideal, what began to occur towards the end of the common school era was an emphasis upon the utility of education over the knowledge it could provide. This shift in the rhetoric that began with the common school would ultimately carry over into the progressive education movement.

Beginning in the late 1800’s, the progressive education movement is often described as a response to what was then called ‘traditional education.’ However, in truth, it was much more than a mere reaction to a previous educational reform movement. Just prior to the beginning of the progressive movement, the United States found itself amidst the turmoil of the Civil War. Louis Menand writes in *The Metaphysical Club*, “For the
generation that lived through it, the Civil War was a terrible and traumatic experience. It tore a hole in their lives. To some of them, the war seemed not just a failure of democracy, but a failure of culture, a failure of ideas” (Menand, 2001, p. x). The progressive education movement came at the cost of an incredibly traumatic experience for most Americans. Menand continues, “It took nearly half a century for the United States to develop a culture to replace it, to find a set of ideas, and a way of thinking, that would help people cope with the conditions of modern life” (Menand, p. x). Americans were trying to deal with the aftermath of the Civil War, and out of this the progressive education movement was born.

Collectively, progressive reformers distanced themselves from the more rigid traditional approach to schooling of previous years and promoted ideas that they felt would make public education of greater use to American society. Some historians of education have looked back on this era and have assumed all progressive educators were one and the same. This is a mistake and a naïve approach to gaining greater understanding for the role that progressive education played in contributing to the corporate reform rhetoric today.

Philip L. Smith, in his book *Sources of Progressive Thought in American Education*, states:

In education, economic conditions and political pressures will almost always have a bearing. Differences in experience, knowledge and intelligence of those involved in the translation process will also have some effect. Given such diversity of conditions, it would be disastrous to equate progressive educational
thought with its practice, or, for that matter, to believe there was some simple
correlation. (Smith, 1980, p. 2)

Smith observes that outside forces must certainly have had an influence upon reformers,
but to generalize the entire movement as nothing but a response to changes within society
is a mistake. Smith goes a step further and argues that the progressive education
movement cannot be directly correlated with the educational practice that was created in
its name. However, this is exactly what happened. As is often the case, the rhetoric
espoused by reformers has a tendency towards creating the reality that validates it. As
this dissertation will continue to demonstrate, the rhetoric around educational reform
presents its own unique issues beyond the policies themselves. Richard Rorty further
emphasizes this concept in his book *Philosophy and Social Hope*, by reminding us “Ideas
do, indeed, have consequences” (Rorty, 1999, p. 19). Ideas do not exist in a vacuum.
While reformers may not be at fault for the creation of certain practices, it is certainly
relevant, to understand how (or how not) their ideas may have influenced their
development. Ravitch writes:

> If there is a lesson to be learned from the river of ink that was spilled in the
> education disputes of the twentieth century, it is that anything in education that is
> labeled a ‘movement’ should be avoided like the plague. (Ravitch, 2000, p. 453)

Ravitch’s criticism is harsh, certainly, but it is not without certain truths. The trend, one
could argue, is for reform to do more harm than good. In this particular case avoiding
‘movements’ implies avoiding the negative consequences that Ravitch believed were
inescapable. But what was it that Ravitch was asking her reader to avoid? As
demonstrated with the common school movement, the ideas of reformers are often altered in practice. The progressive education movement was certainly no exception.

**The Ideals of Progressive Educators**

What began with the common school as a conflict of ideals continued during the progressive education movement as two different tracks that the common school, or public education, could take. Ravitch called these two tracks ‘the fork in the road.’ Ravitch writes:

> At the turn of the century, there were two paths American education could take. One was the Committee of Ten’s common academic curriculum that would have all high school students—not just the college bound few—study history and literature, science and mathematics, language and the arts. The other was the differentiated curriculum, which divided students according to their likely future occupations, offering practical studies for the vast majority and an academic curriculum only for a small minority. (Ravitch, p. 51)

As indicated previously, the rhetoric around the common school was beginning to change. Whatever the intentions of those who established it, there were many who felt that its utilitarian purposes were much more valuable than the knowledge it gave. Ravitch describes how education could either trend towards an emphasis on liberal arts based studies, or lean towards a kind of vocational training that was determined by the individual’s future career path. Reformers at the time did not believe that all students would attend college and, therefore, they would not all need the kind of education that the
liberal arts typically provided. But who were these progressives and what were their beliefs about education?

The list of ideas that educational progressives agreed upon was significantly smaller than that on which they disagreed. There was a seeming general consensus to move away from the traditional education of rote memorization to a system that focused on the needs of the individual child, but this is where the similarities ended. A common misconception is that all progressive educators can be assumed to hold the same beliefs about education, and this is simply not the case.

Progressive educators can be distinguished into two groups. David Labaree provides a clear definition of these two different sects of progressive education. He distinguishes them as 1) child-centered and 2) administrative. Defined this way, child-centered progressives saw learning as a “natural process that would occur best if artificial mechanisms like schools and curricula would just get out of the way of children’s natural urge to learn” (Labaree, 2010, p. 92). On the other hand, administrative progressives approached education from a more utilitarian standpoint: “they tended to focus on school governance, professional administration, and scientifically designed formal curriculum. The two main principles of administrative progressive reformers were social efficiency and differentiation” (ibid). While both groups heartily disagreed with the existing traditional education system, it is clear that they held strikingly different beliefs about the role of schools and education within society. While it can be said that both wanted to address the social issues of the time, the two groups were approaching their intended solutions very differently. Labaree argues that progressive education really resulted from
“the emergence of the corporate industrial economy at the end of the nineteenth century” (Labaree, p. 87). Labaree identifies changes to the economy as the primary driving force behind progressive education. His identification of the economy is where the two sects of progressive education were derived from.

**How Progressive Education was “Hijacked”**

It should be unsurprising that administrative progressive ideals were able to gain momentum as a corporate economy began to generate more support and find its footing in American capitalism. Philosophers and reformers at this time would have experienced Reconstruction, read Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, and they would have been looking for ways to manage the drastic changes that they felt might negatively impact the fledgling country. With all of these changes, along with the pain of the Civil War, progressive reformers believed that education was a tool to rebuild and redefine their society. One idea that many administrative progressives would latch onto were managerial techniques. In 1911, Frederick Taylor published his work *The Principles of Scientific Management*, which would establish and reinforce the value of managerial techniques. Taylor writes:

> To prove that the best management is a true science, resting upon clearly defined laws, rules and principles, as a foundation. And further to show that the fundamental principles of scientific management are applicable to all kinds of human activities from our simplest individual acts to the work of our great corporation, which call for the most elaborate cooperation. And briefly, through a
series of illustrations, to convince the reader that whenever these principles are correctly applied, results must follow which are truly astounding. (Taylor. p. 7)

Taylor would go on to have a significant impact on the establishment of scientific management principles that are still valued and referred to today. Taylor’s ideas went hand in hand with the administrative progressives’ beliefs in a more utilitarian approach to education. This professionalization of education and schooling would ultimately be the most widely recognized facet of progressive education.

Ravitch comments on the general attitude of progressives, writing: “The goal of many educational reformers was not to make the academic curriculum accessible to more students but to devise a practical curriculum for those who soon be in the workforce, especially students who were poor, foreign-born, and nonwhite” (Ravitch, 2000, p. 55). Americans began to accept the common school because they admired its functionality, a fact that progressive educators were quick to take advantage of. The fact that it was designed with practicality in mind is what helped the movement gain support from the public and would come to dominate the arguments of progressive educators. In fact, Church (1976) describes how Progressive Education had multiple defined aims:

1) To make the schools more practical and realistic
2) To introduce humane methods of teaching
3) To create a system that recognized different learning abilities
4) An education that was interested in the health of children
5) Wanted to ensure that education was treated as a profession
At face values, none of these items appear to be negative or destructive goals for public education. Yet, Smith indicates in the previous quotation, the ideas held by progressives were ultimately very different from the practices that were put into place. As Smith indicated, there are many outside influences that would alter the ideas as they were implemented. Increased industrialization, high immigration rates, and the rise of major urban centers—these factors would drive progressives towards building a system of education that was only needed for the practical purposes which it served. While progressives were typically proponents of progress, they feared their inability to control the impact this would have on education. Church continues:

They did hope, however, that they might retain control over society’s future and its political health by controlling education—which even in a democracy could be reserved for the elite who were expert in matters of culture and intelligence. By controlling the institutions which were to mold future generations, the elite hoped to halt the social deterioration which they saw resulting from their loss of political power. (Church, 1976, p. 282)

One of the first things that administrative progressives did was fixate on the aims of public education. In so doing, administrative progressives could redefine the conversation about public education. The common school conflict between utility and knowledge made it significantly easier for administrative progressives to steer the conversation in an alternate direction. Up until this point, proponents of an academic curriculum had connected the curriculum to the mental discipline of the individual. In order to
demonstrate the need for a differentiated curriculum, administrative progressives had to separate academic from mental discipline.

While the administrative progressive sect cannot be attributed to a single reformer alone, there is one individual that can be deemed as having a significant influence upon the movement. Edward L. Thorndike, often considered the founder of the field of educational psychology, conducted multiple experiments trying to connect how training the mind in one area might increase the ability of the mind in other areas. Beyond just breaking the link between the academic curriculum and mental discipline, Thorndike would establish that there was a ‘science to education,’ which would become one of the primary goals of progressive educators. It was his faith in science and measurement that would enable Thorndike to create intelligence tests, aptitude tests, and any other kind of mental test that he deemed worthy. This emphasis on testing is what the progressive educators would hold onto as they pushed the education system in new directions.

Thorndike’s research was a significant contribution to the progressive movement, and he paved the way for other reformers, like David Snedden, to influence educational reform rhetoric. Snedden was one progressive who saw the primary purpose of education as a method for social control. He ultimately believed that the needs of society trumped those of the individual, and so society should dictate what it was that students were learning. Ravitch indicates:

By 1910, educators were busily engaged in creating courses differentiated by the future occupation of each child; the school curriculum would vary, depending on whether the child was likely to become a farmer, housewife, clerk, factory
worker, salesman, or mechanic. The social efficiency movement took hold at the very time that record numbers of high school students were enrolling in Latin and other academic subjects. (Ravitch, 2000, p. 81)

Ironically, just as more and more students were attending high school and selecting more academically oriented courses, reformers were pushing for curriculum changes that would force students to study subjects that were based upon their (presumed) future occupation. Snedden advocated several ideas that would prove to be detrimental to education:

1. The individual’s future occupation should dictate the curriculum that was made available to them in school.
2. Most students between the ages of 12 and no later than 14 should be directed to a specific vocation.
3. Academic study was not only useless, but elitist and undemocratic.

Snedden believed that these views were supported by modern scientific thinking. (Ravitch, p. 82). The establishment of the field of educational psychology gave momentum to the progressive education movement. Many educational psychologists saw the public school as a way to control and regulate the masses. The best way they saw to do this was through a differentiated curriculum. The development of educational psychology, then, provided momentum to the reform rhetoric of administrative progressives. Ravitch argues:

The differentiated curriculum was supposed to give each group of students the program they needed. Only a small number of students would continue to get an
academic education, not because it had any inherent value but because it was necessary for admission. The other students—the vast majority—were to be sorted into programs to prepare for their likely future in the workforce or the home. Using intelligence tests, school officials would predict which students should enroll in college preparatory courses and make sure that the majority were directed to vocational programs that ‘met their needs.’ (p. 89)

Administrative progressives increasingly developed means of determining who would get an academic education and who wouldn’t. What was once the potential of public education to provide opportunity became a justification for racism and class warfare. These reformers tended to share three main characteristics:

1) They were interested in discrediting the ideal of the educational ladder and the idea that all children should have access to a liberal education.

2) A shift in educational authority from parents, teachers, and school leaders to scientific experts out of the new schools of education.

3) A democratic education now became synonymous with a differentiated curriculum.

It became clear that reformers saw an opportunity to use education to generate a trained workforce. Church continues, “Instead, they wanted schools to instill in children a selfless desire to contribute to community progress” (Church, 1976, p. 251). These experts paved the way for some of the worst anti-intellectualism that has come out of educational reform. Their beliefs about the purposes of education set a precedent that still exists today within educational reform rhetoric; that is, education, and schools in
particular, should have purely practical purposes. What was considered (and still is)
practical was a curriculum designed around a student’s future occupation. Unfortunately,
the students didn’t have a say in what that occupation was, it was primarily determined
by their social class, immigration status, and/or gender. What they wanted to do was
create a system of education that shifted emphasis away from individual intellectualism
to individual social contribution (ibid). What is most concerning about this new attack
on intellectualism was the negative impact this could have on our democracy. If
everyone were only prepared for his or her eventual career (a career determined by
questionable criteria), what would that look like? What would that mean for the future of
our country?

Ravitch answers this question by arguing:

The future professional would prepare for college; the future farmer would study
agriculture; the future housewife would study household management; the future
clerk would study commercial subjects; the future industrial worker would study
metal working and woodworking; and so on. (Ravitch, 2000, p. 95)

As we can see from the quote above, school became the arena to manage the future of
students through tracking. A liberal based education, once thought of as the door that
opened up possibility, or provided opportunity, was replaced by a strictly vocational
curriculum that was determined by one’s future occupation or career path. Women were
only to be educated as potential housewives, clerks would study commercial subjects, and
only those who would attend college would actually be exposed to an academic
curriculum. Requiring everyone to take a college preparatory track was considered elitist
and undemocratic. To expect anything different of school was also considered undemocratic.

What progressives had in their favor was the support of business professionals and leaders within the community. Many of these leaders held positions on local school boards. Church describes it as such:

Businessmen and elite reformers wanted the schools to foster social order—to make the city streets safe to walk—and to build a sable and industrious population. They wanted schools to impose uniform values of honesty, respect for authority, thrift, and Americanism. (Church, 1976, p. 282)

Part of the reformers’ goals stemmed from a need to establish social efficiency. Business leaders saw education and public schools as an opportunity to make sure that their future human capital remained hardworking and virtuous.

Interestingly enough, and much to the dismay of progressive reformers, students were still enrolling in an academically based curriculum. Ravitch writes:

Yet to the chagrin of educationists, the traditional academic curriculum was scarcely disturbed. Even the widespread adoption of mental testing left much of the status quo intact. Students were still enrolling in Latin, history, and algebra, even some who didn’t expect to go to college. Progressive reformers who wanted to transform the role of the school from academic to social were deeply frustrated by the schools’ resistance to change. (Ravitch, 2000, p. 162)

It is interesting to consider why families and teachers were resistant to the changes that progressives were advocating. When the common school movement first began, it wasn’t
long before people began to pick up on the fact that school was a means of ensuring a better future for themselves (understood financially). Typically, this better future came in the form of a better career or job as the result of attending school. This is one reason why students and their families were resistant to being tracked. They still saw the value in attending a school that promoted an academic curriculum for all, rather than utilizing tracking. Who could blame them? Poor immigrant families wanted as much of an opportunity to pursue the kind of education that they saw middle class white families partaking in. These families knew that having access to this kind of education (academic curriculum) meant they might have an opportunity for a better future (again financially). Having access to a traditional academic curriculum meant college was a possibility (even if they couldn’t afford to send their child). At the very least, they were able to study the same subjects as those who were being prepared for the college or university. Yet many of the educational reformers were vehemently against enabling families and schools to continue to pursue an academic curriculum for all children. While progressives could generally agree that an academic curriculum was not the best choice for the vast majority, they had a more difficult time being able to agree on what the alternative would be.

There were those, in the Progressive era, that were talking more and more about taking a more scientific approach to education and the curriculum in particular. “The scientific curriculum maker could determine with precision what each social class would need to know for success in its future work, health, recreation, family, religious, and other social activities” (Ravitch, p. 165). Schools were seen as a means of social progress, but not the kind of progress that would enable all students to progress in ways that they
determined for themselves. Rather, these students would be subjected to the kind of
education that was predetermined by these curriculum experts. Schools increasingly
began to justify themselves through their ability to be socially efficient and not on the
grounds of intellectual or cultural developments. Educators, students, and parents were
constantly reminded that an academic curriculum was a thing of the past and that it was
modern and scientific for the curriculum to be designed around the future occupation of
its students—an undemocratic approach at best!

While administrative progressives were quickly gaining ground and getting
support from business leaders, there was one progressive who really saw schools and
education as a vehicle for social change. Dewey saw an opportunity to educate citizens
who themselves would enable social reform by acting as democratic citizens. To Dewey,
this was more than simply being able to read, write, and vote. He envisioned students,
once they completed their education, behaving as responsible and committed members of
society, working to make changes in the world around them in ways that were compatible
with democracy. Church quotes Dewey:

What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community
want for all its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely;
acted upon, it destroys our democracy. All that society has accomplished for itself
is put, through the agency of the school, as the disposal of its future members. All
its better thoughts of itself it hopes to realize through the new possibilities thus
opened to its future self. Here individualism and socialism are at one. Only by
being true to the full growth of all the individuals who make it up, can society by any chance be true to itself. (Church, 1976, p. 261)

Dewey’s vision for education and schools was much more about investing in the individual, who would in turn be able to act intelligently within society. He was a firm believer in the power and importance of experience when it came to education. Dewey saw experience as vital to the growth of the individual. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey argues:

> Since growth is the characteristic of life, education is all one with growing; it has no end beyond itself. The criterion of the value of school education is the extent in which it creates a desire for continued growth and supplies means for making the desire effective in fact. (Dewey, 1916, p. 53)

Dewey stressed the need for education to be connected to the growth of the individual. The key word he uses is ‘value,’ which signifies his belief that education and growth could not operate independently of one another.

Educational reformers often champion Dewey, identifying themselves as deweyans without really comprehending what he actually was advocating. It is easy to understand why he might be misunderstood (and perhaps easy to understand why some consider Dewey’s beliefs about education to be rather naïve). As a philosopher of education, he wrote more than 300 books and articles throughout his lifetime. In his effort to demonstrate the importance of learning that occurred through experience, Dewey would use every day experiences, like cooking or carpentry, to enhance more traditional subject matter like chemistry. Yet, this is not how Dewey’s ideas would be interpreted.
Dewey’s theories in using life experiences to guide education would become misused and the justification for Vocational Training. Ravitch writes:

Dewey wanted the schools not to make students into cooks, seamstresses, or carpenters but to use the occupations to provide insight into how society evolved and how it functioned. In the public schools however, many of those who promulgated the ‘new education’ simply wanted the schools to train better cooks, seamstresses, and carpenters. (Ravitch, 2000, p. 61)

What Dewey could not have predicted is the ways in which his ideas would become grossly misunderstood and miscommunicated. Worse, he could not have foreseen how the misinterpretation of his ideas would come to represent the very beliefs he was against.

So what kind of education was Dewey advocating for? Dewey was a prolific writer, whose ideas were constantly evolving. Conscientious in his efforts to provide clarity to his writing, he even followed one of his key works Democracy in Education with a book whose sole purpose was to provide additional clarity. Church writes “He wanted the school itself to be a community that would reflect the shape and values of the larger community surrounding it” (Church, 1976, p. 263). Dewey was a firm believer that experience is a vital factor in educating our children. But part of that experience he so valued was connected to the world that students were experiencing every day. This is part of the reason why he was not a proponent of traditional education; he did not believe that it represented the world in which students lived and operated.

However, Dewey’s concept of experience has been one of the most misunderstood and misinterpreted over the years. In his chapter “Vocational Education
Then and Now: So What’s the Difference,” Phil Smith writes “Practical education helps give liberal learning existential validity. But correspondingly, liberal learning helps assure that practical education will have the right purpose and outcome” (P. L. Smith, personal communication, February 17, 2012). Smith’s point, like Dewey’s, is that education didn’t need to be treated in an either-or manner. Letting go of rote memorization did not inherently mean also letting go of liberal studies. While Dewey may have been a proponent of using concepts from actual occupations (sewing, baking, etc.), he was not dismissive of the importance and value of traditional school subject matter. What Dewey was against was the rote memorization that had typically come with learning traditional subject matter. He was emphatic that education was an entirely a social experience and not simply an imposition from above. That is, it was the responsibility of both teacher and student to direct the course of education cooperatively. The student would express his or her interest, and teachers could guide the student in his or her exploration. Dewey did not put much stock in curriculum debates because he thought that teacher and student could determine the curriculum together. As long as students were pursuing what was interesting to them under the guidance of a teacher, then concerning themselves over what should be taught was a ‘non-issue.’ Students should be able to pursue any kind of education that they desired as long as it provided both meaningful growth and experience.

Dewey was quick to note, however, that not all experiences were valuable in the education they provided to the student, he writes “The belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are equally
educative” (Dewey, 1938, p. 25). Learning depends upon the quality of the experience. Some experiences can be mis-educative if they inhibit the growth and ability to have future educational experiences for the individual. Which is what education for purely ‘practical’ purposes would become. It is easy to understand how Dewey’s belief in practical experiences could be interpreted to mean that he believed in the kind of vocational education that would lead to tracking and differentiated curriculum. Dewey’s’ strong belief in the educative value of experience has been perceived by many reformers and educational historians as the foundation for a differentiated curriculum. Regrettably for such proponents, a differentiated curriculum inherently runs the risk of being mis-educative because of the limitations it places on the individual. Dewey valued real world experiences as part of the educational experience, but he did not believe that such experiences should be limited to specific students based on the circumstances of their birth.

It really was the perfect storm of ideas and opportunity. The progressive education movement had two different paths it could take. On one side of the debate were supporters who viewed public education as a means of improving individual intellect and, in turn, society; on the other side were reformers who considered education as a means for improving society by amassing a trained workforce. While neither Thorndike nor Dewey were alone in these debates, their voices offered a significant contribution that has continued to influence educational reform rhetoric to this day. The progressive contribution to today’s debates in educational reform is clear: it provided a disconnect between ideas and their implementation into the practice of education. As
Smith says “it would be disastrous to equate progressive educational thought with its practice” (Smith, 1980, p. 2), which is ultimately what happened and would become a major contributor for the complicated process of defining and conceptualizing educational reform ideas.
Chapter Five:

The Corporate Reform Movement and the Myth of Choice

School choice is not a ‘new’ initiative or movement. Over time, there have been varying motivations for choosing how one was educated. For those who could afford it, there were private schools and tutors: at the turn of the twentieth century there was a rise in religious schools (particularly Catholic Schools). Where did the idea of choice come from? Currently, choice is described as a means for an individual to improve their life potential, but it is also described as enabling reformers to respond to the needs of businesses and corporations. While school choice has always existed in one manner or another, the reasons ‘why’ an individual family might exercise their right to choose drastically changed in the mid 1950’s.

School choice began as a reaction to racial desegregation; it was a strategy that many families developed as a way around integration. This is perhaps best demonstrated by understanding the Brown v. Board of Education case. In May 1954, the United States Supreme Court overturned Plessy v. Ferguson, which enabled schools to be ‘separate but equal.’ For a racially charged south, desegregation was an unwelcome turn of events, so this federal mandate produced a less-than-favorable response from the general public. As a result, desegregation became a negative interpretation of school choice that the federal government and reformers hadn’t anticipated. As public schools in the south became
desegregated, white families chose to move to the suburbs, or attend private schools, all in an effort to keep themselves segregated from individuals who were not ‘like’ them. In his article “The Paradox of the Promised Unfulfilled: Brown v. Board of Education and the Continued Pursuit of Excellence in Education,” Paul Green writes:

Organized resistance to public school desegregation took varied forms. One was to remove White children from public schools. In most states, especially the South, this was accomplished through the establishment of private schools for Whites using public monies. In Northern and Midwestern urban areas, Whites increased their movement to more affluent suburbs further segregating poorly resourced neighborhood schools and their students. (Green, 2004, p. 268)

Green sheds light on the fact that the desegregation movement did not result in the expected outcome of racial integration. The Supreme Court decision created a backlash amongst the public that in no way resembled the intention of the verdict. As stated previously, and reinforced by Green above, choice became a method for white families to avoid integrating. They could ‘escape’ the desegregation movement simply by enacting choice and moving to a new district or sending their student to a private school. It was this attitude towards desegregation that would have a long lasting impact upon how school choice would be valued by the public.

However, desegregation simply furthered choice as a method; it did not establish it as a movement. In 1955, during this period of social unrest, economist Milton Friedman published an article “On the Role of Government in Education.” It was this particular article that many credit as establishing school choice as an educational reform movement,
keeping in mind that regular implementation of vouchers didn’t become widespread until the 1990’s. Friedman believed that the best kind of education enabled parents to choose for themselves which school their children attended. Friedman was a proponent for individual choice when it came to education. Freedom of the individual took precedence over the needs of society. This was a deviation from the goals of common school reformers and even progressive educators. Friedman argued that the only way to ensure that parents had the ability to choose was to provide the family with a voucher (funded through public monies) that could be applied at the school of their choosing. Friedman writes:

In what follows, I shall assume a society that takes freedom of the individual, or more realistically, of the family, as its ultimate objective, and seeks to further this objective by relying on voluntary exchange among individuals for the organization of economic activity. (Friedman, 1955, p.1)

For Friedman, maximizing choice was the best way to meet the demands of families, which he felt took precedence over the needs of the community. He argued that, in prioritizing families, communities would ultimately feel the benefit.

Many historians consider Friedman as the father of the ‘market model’ of education. Viteritti writes, “Friedman predicted that competition would lead to the elimination of failing public schools, and that the availability of public dollars for private institutions would increase the supply of new schools” (Viteritte, 2003, p. 15). Friedman believed that the only way that families could truly be free to choose was if a market driven system guided public education. For Friedman, market principles were the most effective way to run and operate an educational system. Viteritti continues, “Friedman’s ultimate
vision of education in America was to supplant the existing school system with a
marketplace of schools that were publicly financed and privately run. Others would see
his vision as a plan for the demise of public education” (ibid). While Friedman certainly
believed that individuals should choose how they are educated, he did not necessarily
believe that all choices should be ‘equal.’ Friedman argued that competition should develop
in an effort to create the best education system possible. He writes:

a mixed one under which governments would continue to administer some schools
but parents who chose to send their children to other schools would be paid a sum
equal to the estimated cost of educating a child in a government school, provided
that at least this sum was spent on education in an approved school. This
arrangement would meet the valid features of the ‘natural monopoly’ argument,
while at the same time it would permit competition to develop where it could.

(Friedman, p. 5)

Friedman also argued that parents could supplement their voucher with additional funds.
This suggests that Friedman was not particularly concerned with the issues of equity, as is
often argued by school choice proponents. Friedman’s faith in market principles is shared
almost universally by corporate reformers today. Both shared a deep faith in the infallibility
of choice programs to improve education, meet the needs of individuals, and sustain the
economy for the community.

**The Ideal of Equity**

Since Friedman first introduced his version of a voucher system, choice has been
increasingly linked to questions of equity and methods for generating more of it (even if
this was not Friedman’s intent). Proponents of choice argue that, in giving individuals control, they will be able to exercise that control and choose an educational opportunity that made sense for them. However, is equity possible to achieve through the vehicle of a voucher, or choice?

In *Policy Paradox*, Deborah Stone describes equity as a policy built around the concept of the redistribution of resources. What Stone articulates is the complicated process of deciding ‘what’s fair and to whom?’ Stone writes, “Equality may in fact mean inequality; equal treatment may require unequal treatment; and the same distribution may be seen as equal or unequal, depending on one’s point of view” (Stone, 2002, p. 42). Stone questions the ideal of equity by pointing out that it is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Stone argues that school choice policies are often designed with equitable distribution in mind, yet they typically lack clarity on what they mean by equality as an educational outcome. In other words, what might be considered equal to one individual is not equal to another. Stone uses the example of offering a group of people a cake. If you have one individual who does not like cake, then cutting equal sized slices will not be ‘fair’ and ‘equal’ to that individual who does not eat cake. Likewise, simply offering a voucher for school does not mean that the voucher will provide an equal opportunity for every individual to whom it is offered. This is what Stone ultimately meant when she suggests that choice policies lacked clarity. If this is the case, and Stone is correct, what does this lack of clarity ultimately mean for school choice policies? Discussions around equity are based on the premise that equitable distribution is both helpful to the individual, and to society at large (as Friedman thought it would be). By providing vouchers, families are
enabled to choose schools that best meet their needs while forcing those schools that are not being selected to either become marketable, or halt operations. Yet, the unfortunate reality is that most of the time what is ‘marketable’ is a school with students who are performing highly on state accountability assessments. The burden on public schools is to become marketable. Liz Gordon writes:

The main reason given for school choice is to empower families to choose the school that best meets their needs, thereby encouraging ‘non-chosen’ schools to improve. It rests on specific assumptions derived from the economic sphere, and not only shares some problems of consumer choice (not all consumers have equal resources to choose), it also fails to take into account at all the deep cultural and historical discourses of power that shape schooling. (Gordon, 2008, p.189)

What school choice reformers typically support, and Gordon articulates, as the primary aims of school choice are, 1) give families power through choice and 2) to force un-chosen schools to improve or close. What many of these policy makers and reformers have in common is a shared faith in the application of market principles to improve the public system of education and its outcomes. In the minds of such reformers, equity is derived through measures of accountability and efficiency. The assumption on the part of school choice reformers is that individual consumers will have access to a myriad of resources that will enable the market to thrive. But as Stone has demonstrated, equality is a fickle goal. Not all individuals will have the same access to resources—and not all of them will view their choices as equal.
One of the best ways to better understand the intricacy of attempting to achieve equity is by evaluating choice policies in at least one particular state. Consider the voucher system in Ohio for a moment. The EdChoice Scholarship Program (EdChoice) offers 60,000 vouchers to students throughout the state of Ohio. Students are able to use the voucher to attend any private school that is registered through the Ohio Department of Education as a provider (a provider is a school that accepts the EdChoice voucher). Families first apply for the scholarship and, once accepted, apply for enrollment at one of the accepted providers. Once admitted to an EdChoice school, the voucher that is provided by the state will only cover the cost of tuition. It does not cover any additional costs like registration fees, materials, etc. The primary purpose of this program is to allow students to have access to a better education if they live in a district with schools that are failing the state accountability system.

But, as both Gordon and Stone note, simply handing a parent a voucher does not necessarily provide them with access to more schools. Proponents of vouchers typically ignore the lack of resources that so many families have available to them. For instance, families with limited access to transportation can only choose between those that their system of transportation gives them access to. Or perhaps, in some cases, the only schools willing to accept the voucher are those that are faith based, and for some parents, this may not be a true alternative.8

8 A review of the Ohio Department of education website, https://scholarship.ode.state.oh.us/Provider, indicates that in Franklin County alone, almost all of the approved school providers are religiously affiliated.
When it comes to increasing educational opportunities, equity is not a fundamentally bad goal worth pursuing. There are certainly a large number of students out there whose educational attainment is limited by what is immediately available to them. This is certainly problematic in a liberal democratic society. However, it is perhaps worse to ignore or remain naïve about the intricacies of school choice initiatives. This is reaffirmed by David Kirp:

The language of equity continues to be deployed by policy makers devising a new national course, state legislators crafting financing formulas, school administrators, shaping an institutional mission, teachers designing a classroom environment, parents making decisions about their children’s futures, and even fifth graders judging the fairness of their teacher’s treatment. But so many and so conflicting are the meanings assigned to equity that the concept cannot be used as a yardstick for appraising school reform. (Ravitch & Vinovskis, 1995, p.98)

Kirp describes what Stone and Gordon both describe as the difficult of looking to equity as a measure for the success of schools. Assuming that this is the panacea to all social and educational problems is problematic at best, and dangerous at worst.

**The Failure of Meritocracy**

Part of the reason that equity carries so much resonance with policy makers and the general public is due to the failure of meritocracy, a long standing ideal tied to the American Dream. Meritocracy is the belief that the hardest working are the ones who will find success in life, no matter what socio-economic status they were born into. In his book *Twilight of the Elites: America after Meritocracy*, Christopher Hayes suggests that
meritocracy is still supported by the vast majority of Americans - it is valued as a significant tool for pursuing the American Dream. Like equity, meritocracy has broad appeal and, in fact, these two concepts really promote one another. Those who have benefitted from it swear by its power, and those who haven’t hold out hope that they too will soon experience it. Hayes states:

Naturally the winners are tempted to conclude that the system conferred outsize benefits on them knew what it was doing. So even as the meritocracy produces failing, distrusted institutions, massive inequality, and an increasingly detached elite, it also produces a set of very powerful and influential leaders who hold it in high regard. (Hayes, 2012, p. 31)

Meritocracy reinforces the belief that anyone and everyone can find success (however the individual defines it) in life through hard work and persistence. The reality (as in the case of equity) is that this is much more likely to happen if those “hard workers” also have access to a wide variety of resources (time, money, etc.)

To demonstrate the failures of meritocracy in generating greater educational equity, Hayes gives the modern day example of what has happened to Hunter College High School. Located in Manhattan, this school is public and open to all students, as long as the individual is able to test into the school (by scoring high enough on a standardized assessment). Hunter is routinely ranked as one of the top public high schools in the nation, and graduating from Hunter means a better chance of attending an Ivy League institution where obtaining a career that will provide access to a higher socio-economic status is much more likely. According to the Hunter College Campus Schools website, the only means of
admission is through taking and meeting the minimum cut scores on a standardized test. To sit for the exam, students must have met qualifying scores during their 5th grade year at their respective elementary schools. What Hayes suggests is that Hunter, while a public school, has never had a student body whose demographics actually matched the composition of the city around it. In other words, Hunter is not your typical neighborhood public school. Hayes contends that, a high school which espouses to be a meritocratic system, has become increasingly unequal. Hayes argues that this has continued to worsen as those with access to resources (money, time, and test prep) have been able to use them to their advantage. The result is that Hunter College looks and behaves more like a private high school, rather than a public one. And while the school may strive to be meritocratic, where the students who excel do so via their own hard work, it instead has become increasingly unequal, favoring those with access to resources.

This desire to find and gain access to the best resources is driven by an increasingly consumer mindset. Hunter College High School, like other competitive schools, is feeling the impact of this. Hunter uses a test as its requirement for admission; families pay for expensive test prep courses to ensure their children perform well. The result is that those who can afford to pay are more likely to gain admission to schools like Hunter. A further review of the Hunter College website demonstrates how complicated the issue of equity and meritocracy have become. Hunter’s website shows the admission process is now entirely online; no paper based applications are accepted. Presumably, everyone has access to a public library and therefore a computer. However, those that have a computer at home are more likely to have the opportunity to develop the computer skills (through the daily
usage and practice with the computer) necessary to submit an online application. These skills can be learned without a home computer, but immediate access would certainly seem to aid in preparation and mastery. While neither of these things (standardized tests, or access to computers) are directly discriminatory in nature, it is evident that having access to additional resources certainly improves the odds that a student would gain admission.

To illustrate that he is not alone in his criticism, Hayes quotes the 2010 Hunter College High School student commencement speaker Justin Hudson:

More than happiness, relief, fear, or sadness, I feel guilty. I feel guilty because I don’t deserve any of this. And neither do any of you. We received an outstanding education at no charge based solely on our performance on a test we took when we were eleven-year olds, or four year olds. We received superior teachers and additional resources based on our status as ‘gifted,’ while kids who naturally needed those resources much more than us wallowed in the mire of a broken system. And now, we stand on the precipice of our lives, in control of our lives, based purely and simply on luck and circumstance. If you truly believe that the demographics of Hunter represent the distribution of intelligence in this city, then you must believe that the Upper West Side, Bayside, and Flushing are intrinsically more intelligent than the South Bronx, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and Washington Heights, and I refuse to accept that. We are talking about eleven-year olds…. We are deciding children’s fates before they even had a chance. We are playing God, and we are losing. Kids are losing the opportunity to go to college or obtain a career, because no one taught them long division or colors. Hunter is perpetuating a system
in which children, who contain unbridled and untapped intellect and creativity are discarded like refuse. And we have the audacity to say they deserved it, because we’re smarter than them. (Hayes, 2012 p. 33)

Both Hudson and Hayes identify a system, intended to support equality, which has become strikingly unequal. Such evidence suggests that perhaps faith in meritocracy alone is misplaced. Hayes points out that Hunter operates on the belief that the best and the brightest students are the ones comprising the student body. The administration, teachers, and students at Hunter still believe theirs is a truly meritocratic system. They believe that using a test in place of subjective items like resumes, recommendations, or even interviews goes a long way in ensuring that all students will have the opportunity to have access to a Hunter education. What supporters of Hunter have failed to recognize is that only using test scores is no longer a guarantee that the process is fair and open to many, or that it is as equitable as they intended. Hayes writes “While it rejects, with a kind of bracing austerity, any subjective aspects of admission, its hard-line dependence on a single test is not strong enough to defend against the larger social mechanisms of inequality that churn outside its walls” (Hayes, p. 40). Those in favor of maintaining the test as a form of objectivity forget that other forces are at work that are outside of the individual’s control. In the case of Hunter College, students who cannot afford the pricey test prep or have no access to computers at home are at a disadvantage. No matter how hard working these students might be, they are limited. Test preparation and online admission become barriers that keep poorer families from making their children competitive in the educational marketplace. In other words, meritocracy may not be enough to overcome lack of accessible resources.
Furthermore, Hayes writes, “the legitimacy of a hypercompetitive social order such as our own derives from a shared sense that everyone is playing by the same rules, that there is an inherent fairness to the terms of the social contract, and that the system basically manages to confer the most benefits on the most deserving” (p. 69). Hayes, like Stone, suggests that defining our school system based on ‘fairness’ or ‘equality,’ while noble, might not be enough. In this instance, a deep seeded faith in the fairness of meritocracy has become problematic. In both instances, school choice for equity, and school choice with meritocracy, individuals who lack access to resources are often left behind. Even more problematic is that the issues imbedded in this approach often go unrecognized and unchallenged by the general public.

The School Choice Movement “Hijacked”

The school choice movement really had two key ideals which it espoused, equity and meritocracy. These ideals had support from both reformers and from the general public alike (exemplified in Hunter College High School). Because these ideals have become such an integral part of society, it was easy for corporate reformers to take advantage of this rhetoric (equity and meritocracy) and promote a reform initiative that continued to move public education away from its democratic aims. Ultimately these ideals would come to support and encourage the use of accountability and efficiency. As cited in chapter two, the corporate reform movement is defined by its faith in an ideology that supports the application of business practices to public education. Ravitch defines the corporate reform movement this way:
The movement is determined to cut costs and maximize competition among schools and among teachers. It seeks to eliminate the geographically based system of public education as we have known it for the past 150 years and replace it with a competitive market-based system of school choice—one that includes traditional public schools, privately managed charter schools, religious schools, voucher schools, for-profit schools, virtual schools, and for-profit vendors of instruction. Lacking any geographical boundaries, these schools would compete for customers. The customers would choose to send their children and their public funding wherever they wish, based on personal preference or on information such as the schools’ test scores and a letter grade conferred by the state (based largely on test scores). (Ravith, 2013, pp. 19-20)

Ravitch paints a picture of the corporate reform movement that is one of antagonism towards public education and shows a marked preference for a privatized system over a public one. Corporate reformers believe that privatizing the American education system will solve all the problems they see with public education (e.g. failing test scores and high dropout rates). Kevin McDonough and Walter Feinberg depict this changing view of educating, writing:

Public education is at a critical juncture in virtually every liberal-democratic nation in the world. In contemporary liberal societies it was legitimized as the institution that would build a liberal and democratic industrial nation state by developing the surplus loyalty required to cement the particularistic and diverse religious and culturally components of a nation state together. Today is an object
of suspicion among those who view the modern state as the agent, not of freedom and liberty, but of colonization and oppression. (McDonough & Feinberg, 2003, p.1)

Americans have had a conflicted relationship with public education since it was conceived. As previously defined, Labaree calls this conflict ‘school syndrome.’ It is a conflict between the wants of the individual and the needs of society. This has been exemplified with the school choice movement. This conflict is what corporate reformers ultimately take advantage of. It is also what has bred the myth of choice. Arguably, one of the most important components of the corporate reform movement has been school choice.

At the heart of the corporate reform movement is the belief that public education could be improved by implementing business practice as educational reform. Many of these reformers would see the public education system replaced entirely. Choice enters the conversation as a middle ground over a completely privatized system. Allowing families to be ‘consumers’ of their education is ultimately what is going to improve the American educational system, according to corporate reformers. While choice has always existed by virtue of where a parent lived or could afford to send his or her child to school, choice policies today are far more complex and robust in nature. The question is, why do choice policies garner so much support, both politically and in the public eye? Joseph Viteritti indicates “Education is correlated with nearly every positive social attribute imaginable, from economic security, to civic participation, to a healthy family life” (Viteritti, 2003, p. 14). The more that individuals and society view education as a
ticket to ‘the good life’ (however that is conceptualized by the individual), the more likely it is for the general public to accept school choice policies put forth by the corporate reform movement. School choice suddenly becomes the means by which an individual can obtain the kind of education that leads to the life of his or her desire, or wish to build for himself or herself.

The difficulty with school choice policies is that they have a tendency to be much more complex in nature than corporate reformers would have anyone believe or than the public realizes. School choice is often articulated as simply the ability to choose where one wants to go to school. Because of this, it is venerated as the great equalizer. Viteritti continues; “Advocates of this approach define the problem in education more sharply, and see choice as a mechanism for improving educational opportunities for underserved communities, primarily low-income racial minorities whose children attend failing schools” (Viteritti, p. 13). School choice is a prime example of what Labaree defined with school syndrome. It was an attempt on the part of reformers to provide opportunity on the one hand and for individuals to preserve their advantage on the other. However, school choice is an exceedingly complex issue that is not so easily defined or conceptualized.

Problems Created: The Myth of Choice and the Privatization of Public Education

When an initiative is promoted under the auspice of fairness and equity, it is easy for one to become a proponent for it. The implication of choice is that individuals will be afforded a level playing field. These assumptions about equality and fairness enable
reformers to use the positive connotations of choice to get the public to buy into the reform initiatives they create (like EdChoice). As Feinberg writes:

Some argue that choice will tilt the scale in favor of equality because parental choice and the possibility of selecting a better school for one’s child will provide poorer parents with the same opportunities that middle-class and wealthier parents receive when they decide to change from one neighborhood or district to another for the sake of a better school. (Feinberg, 2008, p. 230)

Proponents of school choice genuinely believe that public education is not an equal experience for all students—and in many ways they are be right. The evidence of this inequality (according to choice proponents) is in poor student performance on standardized tests and the lack of accountability in teachers and schools.9 Choice, however, provides opportunity to select better performing schools, ones that display high overall performance on standardized testing. As parents select the “highly performing” schools, the underperforming schools, in theory, are either forced to close or overhaul their curriculum and staff. This is, in effect, the corporate approach of ‘letting the market decide.’ In this way, school choice is very much a capitalist and consumerist approach to education. By giving parents a choice, the market determines which schools continue to operate, thereby ensuring that students have access to a quality education. But if choice is truly a myth, and parents are not directing the educational market, who is? Feinberg continues:

A dose of reality is in order here. With welfare on the rocks, health care and mental health care underfunded, single mothers required to be in the work force, and public

housing on the decline, it is unlikely that poorer families will have the time or the
resources to scout out the best school for their child, and if they manage to do this,
it is even less likely that they will have the time or the resources to transport their
children far away from their neighborhood. (Feinberg, p. 231)

Feinberg further emphasizes the fact that the issue of choice is not as simple as just handing
out vouchers. He furthers my definition of the myth by suggesting that those most in need
of additional opportunity, through the assistance of a voucher, aren’t actually getting that
assistance. Due to the complexity of choice as an issue, it is fair to suggest that its reform
initiatives are more myth than reality.

Whether or not school choice is actually a myth, is furthered by educational
philosopher Jane Roland Martin. Martin furthers Feinberg’s argument in a lecture
presented on the intricacies of choice and how simply saying someone has ‘choice’ does
not make it so. In her lecture, Martin describes what I label as her four criteria for ‘free
choice.’

1) Choosing at the very least involves the seeing or recognizing of alternatives,
not simply the existence of alternatives.

2) Just as choosing involves the seeing of alternatives it involves preference for
some alternative.

3) Autonomous choosing is necessary for free choice to exist.

4) If the choice itself is to be autonomous and rational, surely the commitment to
an alternative must be based at least in part on knowledge or belief about the
consequences of the various perceived alternatives and the choosers own purposes and interests and principles.

Martin describes the difference between simply ‘picking’ something and actually ‘choosing’ it. According to Martin, picking implies a lack of thought, while choosing enacts a feeling of engagement. While Martin’s lecture was published in 1975, her four criteria for choice remain invaluable for better understanding choice policies today. Given the increased emphasis on school choice as a means of solving the myriad of problems facing public education today (underfunding, poorly performing, etc.), Martin’s criteria provide an interesting and useful means for critiquing current school choice initiatives. Every choice program that is proposed ought to be evaluated based on the criteria that Martin proposes, rather than simply being implemented without reflection. Martin writes “Nor do the proposals of most of those who advocate free student choice make any provision for the complexities of choice” (Martin, p.18). Martin states eloquently what so many politicians and reformers fail to understand or recognize: that simply giving a choice does not constitute a free choice. Giving a voucher does not equate with choice. If there are no alternatives, if the individual does not recognize the existence of those alternatives, or if they have no understanding of the consequences of his or her choice, then it cannot be said that the individual is actually choosing. All four criteria must be met in order for the individual to experience free choice. This is not to suggest that there isn’t perhaps a place for choice, but rather that using Martin’s criteria will enable both reformers and the general public to think about the initiative first. Careful reflection would go a much longer way in creating more equity than negligent implementation.
Ultimately, school choice as it is currently defined and conceptualized is nothing more than a myth. It is a myth because it cannot solve all of the problems that reformers have asked of it. It cannot be all things to all people. As a function of the corporate reform movement, school choice has the potential to be limiting rather than liberating.

**Privatization: The education system of our future**

For most of the school choice movement (from Friedman through voucher programs like EdChoice), the focus of reformers has been on the genesis of greater educational equity. Whether a family chooses a public school with their voucher or not, the point was to enable them to choose. Since corporate reformers have latched onto school choice, they’ve shifted the conversation to focus on privatizing the public education system. Ravitch claims:

Reformers don’t like to mention the word ‘privatization,’ although this is indeed the driving ideological force behind the movement. ‘Choice’ remains the preferred word, since it suggests that parents should be seen as consumers with the ability to exercise their freedom to leave one school and select another.

(Ravitch, 2013, p. 41)

What school choice has in its favor is the faith of the general public, which is the very thing that the privatization movement lacks. So, reformers are increasingly pushing the school choice agenda since it appears to have ‘buy in’ from the general public. The belief on the part of corporate reformers is that eventually choice will lead to a privatized system of education. As students and families exercise their choice, it has the potential of
shifting students out of the public school system, or perhaps forcing that system to act in privatized ways.

In order to understand why reformers might be in favor of this, understanding what makes a public education public is necessary. A school that is funded by tax dollars, monitored by a state department of education, operated by an open admission policy, and administered by elected officials is traditionally deemed to be public. A public school is rarely defined by any other terms and often evokes so much passion from its proponents that there is little room for any critique or debate. Higgins and Abowitz discuss the problems with zealous advocates of public education:

The trouble is that when we rush to defense of the public schools, we are immediately overtaken by pieties: the public schools ensure an educated electorate; safeguard against the balkanization of the republic into class, racial, and religious groups; guarantee economic opportunity to those whose families are not well off and connected. There is nothing wrong with these statements, except for the fact that they are all probably, more or less, false. (Higgins & Abowitz, 2011, p. 365)

Because public education can evoke such a passionate response in its supporters, it is easy for proponents, to be blind towards its shortcomings. But, this problem also exists for those who are critical of public education—they fail to see the good that it can contribute to American society. Yet this ‘blindness’ is not limited to its proponents. Critics of public education too often fail to see the good that it can contribute to
American society. When either party becomes so impassioned about their opinion on public education, it can prevent discussions and debate.

Defining and conceptualizing public education may be difficult, but attempts should still be made to conquer these challenges. The alternative is to defer entirely to the corporate reform movement. Educational philosopher Deron Boyles complains that schools have already deferred to the corporate reform movement. Boyles writes: “My claim is that public schools inordinately function as private markets—as places where a unidirectional narrative of ‘givens’ reinforce individualism, competition, and corporatization under the guise of merit, testing, and school business partnerships” (Boyles, 2011, p.433). He is very specific that they (public schools) are already functioning as private markets. As American society becomes increasingly consumer driven, does this ultimately force public schools to privatize or act in ways that only support consumer interests?

Many historians and philosophers would argue that public education has never been truly public and has always been defined by consumer goals. Boyles writes: “As an institutionalizing force or practice, common schools were neither public nor democratic in anything other than a cursory or symbolic way” (Boyles, p. 436). A similar argument has been made by authors, such as David Labaree, the message being that perhaps we are overly optimistic about the public aims of the public education system.

There is much to suggest that the evolution of the public school was not necessarily driven by a need to provide opportunity to all students, but rather by an
inclination towards protecting the status quo. David Tyack reinforces Boyles’ argument in his book *Seeking Common Ground: Public Schools in a Diverse Society*:

Voucher-financed choice in a sense resolves the problems of democratic governance by dissolving them. No longer would people need to negotiate a sense of unified purposes or find ways to accommodate differences. Parents could choose, or help to create, schools that fit their values and goals. Left out of the plan, say critics, is the ability of citizens, whether parents or not, to make collective decisions about the education of the next generation through their elected school board representatives. (Tyack, 2003, p. 6)

The trouble with applying market-based principals to public education is not just the potential impact upon the individual, but to the larger community. For Tyack, a completely privatized system would spell disaster for many important components of American democracy, including, as he states a “need to negotiate a sense of unified purposes or find ways to accommodate differences” (ibid). Ultimately what privatization does is support the consumer mindset. The balance shifts to the needs of the individual over those of society.

School choice is slowly becoming less about aiding a ‘failing’ system and more about finding ways to influence the consumer. Ravitch further describes how consumerism supports the privatization of public education:

The reformers define the purpose of education as a preparation for global competitiveness, higher education, or the workforce. They view students as ‘human capital’ or ‘assets’. One seldom sees any reference in the literature or
public declarations to the importance of developing full persons to assume the responsibilities of citizenship. (Ravitch, 2013, p. 35)

Just as Tyack suggests, Ravitch furthers the point that a privatized education system is inherently unsupportive of developing individuals who could manage active, engaged citizenship.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Since school choice initiatives began, generating equity has been identified as its primary goal. The hope is that, by creating more equity, a greater number of students will be able to find success. But more than that, the expectation is that, as individuals are increasingly finding success, it will in turn drive overall societal improvements. Labaree criticizes public schools, writing:

> After its early success, it has done very little to foster its core goals of democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility. It has not been able to promote equality of race, class and gender; or to enhance public health, economic productivity, and good citizenship; or to reduce teenage sex, traffic deaths, obesity, and environmental destruction. In fact, in many ways it has had a negative effect on those problems by draining money and energy away from social reformers that might have had a more direct impact. (Labaree, 2010, p. 243)

Labaree writes a scathing reflection of schools and education, but it not a wholly inaccurate one. The more that public education accepts and implements components of the corporate world, the more likely it will fail to meet the needs of a democratic society.
While school choice may have begun with the intent to support equity for the individual, this has slowly been hijacked by the corporate reformer and the consumer. School choice, like both the common school and progressive era, has found itself corrupted by consumer and corporate aims. The trouble with many of these reform initiatives, as Labaree has identified, is that reformers want to protect too many, often opposing, ideals. In the case of the school choice movement, the goals were to generate more equality and opportunity, while preserving meritocracy and the American Dream. Ravitch, Labaree and others have identified these conflicts as being key to the success of programs that utilize accountability, testing, and privatization.
Chapter Six

The Reasons for This Dissertation

And it’s Philosophical Underpinnings

I have attempted to argue in this dissertation that today’s corporate reform rhetoric is steeped in a long history of educational reform movements that have overvalued and overemphasized the practical purposes of public education. The actions of individual consumers who value their education primarily as a consumable product, combined with the interests of corporate reformers, have contributed significantly to the shifting rhetoric around publically supported educational institutions at every level. The result has been a system of public education that has been hijacked, at least rhetorically, by a vocabulary of consumerism and careerism. Why does any of this matter? It matters because the language that dominates our discourse has a propensity to create the reality that validates it.

My discomfort with these attitudes began to emerge when I was a senior at Denison University. As graduation neared, I grew increasingly frustrated with the questions from family and friends about the kind of job I would pursue upon graduating. Not that these questions were unimportant, but they seemed to be asked as if that was all that mattered. As though the point of my education was merely to find employment. However valid these questions might be, they were profoundly off-putting to me. After four years of
study at a highly regarded liberal arts institution, designed to cultivate character and enlightenment, the value of my education was being reduced to a program of job training.

A visit to the Denison University’s website reveals its official mission:

Our purpose is to inspire and educate our students to become autonomous thinkers, discerning moral agents and active citizens of a democratic society. Through an emphasis on active learning, we engage students in the liberal arts, which fosters self-determination and demonstrates the transformative power of education. We envision our students’ lives as based upon rational choice, a firm belief in human dignity and compassion unlimited by cultural, racial, sexual, religious or economic barriers, and directed toward an engagement with the central issues of our time.¹⁰

This mission statement implies a commitment to educate students to be thoughtful human beings and good democratic citizens, a responsibility that goes well beyond mere vocationalism. Notwithstanding the importance of the ‘practical concerns of life,’ if these are the only considerations which matter, much is lost. I do not mean to suggest that the reduction of public education to the mundane is a fait accompli in America today, however, there is good reason to believe that American society is moving rapidly in that direction. Looking at the popularity, and ever increasing political clout of the rhetoric being used currently to frame public school reform, makes it hard to think otherwise. An education that is fit for democratic citizenship is more robust than any form of vocationalism by itself could possibly provide. To quote David Robinson on this point: a

¹⁰ Retrieved April 30, 2015 from: http://denison.edu/campus/about/our-values
university “…is the place that invents the method of invention, the place established specifically to criticize its own core precepts and claims. It is the exercise of a rational creature’s refining himself, and refining himself in the kilns of debate and disagreement, rhetoric, inquiry, guidance, philosophical introspection” (P.L. Smith, personal communication, October 2, 2015). I have written this dissertation to show the relevance of Robinson’s attitude for education at every level, not just the university, including when it purports to be “of, for, and by the people,” or what I think of as “the public’s education” where the imperative is to cultivate democratic modes of living.

Admittedly, the ideas behind my dissertation began as largely anecdotal. But it has evolved, I think, into a philosophical reflection on the role education reform rhetoric now plays, in support of a form of consumerism that I believe is dangerously anti-democratic. It has not been my intent to settle the many questions faced by educators today. Rather I want to help liberate them from the thought that they must accept an inappropriate and educationally impoverished vocabulary of success. Instead, I’d like to provide them with insight on where to go from here.

Tyack argues that “…public schools represent a special kind of civic space that deserves to be supported by citizens whether they have children or not” (Tyack, 2004, p. 182). He insisted that public education still has a very important role to play and that it would be detrimental to the future of American democracy if it were ever to disappear as an effective agency of the intellectual and moral enrichment of its citizens.
A surprising number of the critics of reform cited throughout this dissertation seem to be disagreeing with Tyack. Labaree, for example, argues that our system of public education has from its inception, faced too many problems to be a useful instrument for cultivating democratic attitudes and values. He writes as follows:

So is the American school syndrome curable? I think not. It’s too deeply embedded in our values and traditions and too integral to our identity as a liberal democracy, which is always trying to establish an uneasy balance between equality and inequality and this necessarily constructs a school system that fosters both access and advantage. A change in the school system in any fundamental way- the essence of the reform ideal- can only really happen if we are willing to change American culture and society in an equally fundamental way. (Labaree, 2010, p. 244)

Labaree recognizes the problems inherent in the corporate reform movement, but thinks they are unsolvable. He believes that educational reformers make themselves look ridiculous by attempting to solve social concerns through educational reform. Labaree’s arguments indicate that educational reform has become a Sisyphean task, where the boulder of ‘reform’ continues to roll back upon us.

Be this as it may, we should never stop thinking and talking about what is going on in our schools, or tolerate what they are doing when we think it is dangerous. There is nothing to be lost in believing we can find a more suitable language for thinking and talking about our schools than what American business will allow. In my case, I think
this language can be found, with some adjustments, perhaps, in the philosophy of education developed by John Dewey.

**A Deweyan Response to the Corporate Reform Rhetoric**

Dewey’s core philosophical ideas provide the grounds for a rich alternative to corporate reform rhetoric, while also acting as a deep criticism of it. These ideas have also served to provide the philosophical underpinnings of my dissertation. I will identify and briefly discuss these ideas and how they might create a richer and more robust conversation than current educational reform rhetoric allows for. These ideas are (1) his radical conception of experience, which involve “continuity” and “interaction,” (2) his conceptions of intelligence and (3) growth, along with (4) the standard he used to judge the extent to which a community was democratic. My hope is that contrasting these ideas with the rhetoric of corporate reform will make it easier to recognize the vapid character and gloomy prospects for American education when it operates under the auspice of corporatism.

(1) Within both philosophy and our common vernacular, human experience is typically thought of as a private, mostly passive, state of mind. Dewey’s conception of experience is radical because it portrays experience as primarily an active process that is in great measure publically observable and only secondarily as a private, mostly passive mental state. That is to say, a person does something, then undergoes the consequences. The process sparks awareness, a conscious sense that something is going on. This in turn sparks mental activity aimed at planning a course of action. Thinking in these terms has
validity, which is to say “traction in the world,” that formalized thinking usually lacks. Dewey tells us that, “every experience is a moving force. Its value can be judged only on the ground of what it moves toward and into” (Dewey, 1938, p. 38). Were it not for our efforts to make our way within our environment, our experience in the form of private, mostly passive, mental state would be crude and practically useless. This is not to deny that Dewey saw potentially immense value in experience of this kind. Only that it rested upon an active process that made its existence possible. Experience in any form is built upon biological activity that creates, without necessarily controlling, what emerges as a result. He also recognized that human beings benefit immensely from genetic gifts passed on to them by their ancestors. He was quick to point out, however, that if we fail to exercise them properly, by which he meant creative and intelligent experimentation, within the circumstances we find ourselves, these gifts will be easily wasted, like the muscles and bones of our body atrophy when not properly used.

In *Experience and Education* Dewey presented two ideas to help assess the quality of an experience for educational purposes that I found especially useful in my critique of currently popular educational reform rhetoric. One of those ideas was “continuity,” which he said was a measure of the extent to which an experience leads to an enlargement and enrichment of further experience, rather than the arresting or distorting of it. In the former case, when experience leads to an enlargement and enrichment of further experiences, it was said to be “educative.” In the latter case, when it arrests or distorts the growth of further experience, it was said to be “mis-educative.” Dewey went on to elaborate:
an experience may be such as to engender callousness; it may produce lack of sensitivity and of responsiveness. Then the possibilities of having richer experiences in the future are restricted. Again, a given experience may increase a person’s automatic skill in a particular direction and yet tend to land him in a groove or rut; the effect again is to narrow the field of further experience. (Dewey, p. 26)

When an experience is neither educative nor mis-educative Dewey said it was “non-educative.” The other idea, which I found particularly useful, was the concept of “interaction,” (which Dewey later refers to as ‘transaction’). By ‘interaction,’ Dewey meant the recognition that experience arises first and foremost from the constant interplay between what one feels, believes and expects, on the one hand, and on the other hand, what one stumbled on or finds upon investigation. One of the reasons why Dewey would ultimately utilize a different term to describe this kind of experience was because of the importance of what he was trying to describe. A genuine ‘interaction’ is more than a relationship of mutual influence, but a transformative experience where the nature of the thing is changed. Both of these factors (continuity and interaction) are equally important in determining the quality of an experience, he said.

(2) How does one go about cultivating intelligence within our students? A robust understanding of Dewey’s conception of intelligence is imperative for better understanding the limitations of the corporate reform movement. It is helpful to distinguish Dewey’s conception of intelligence from reason and knowing. As any student of philosophy could tell you, reason can be exercised independently of experience. Indeed, it can and has been practiced much more robustly with experience factored out
completely. Some of the greatest achievements of reason (mathematics and theoretical physics for example) would not have been as impressive if experience had been a primary component. In fact, experience would have, quite simply, gotten in the way.

As for knowledge, it is not the same thing as understanding. Knowledge can be thought of as coming to us in different forms. Some philosophers have defined ‘propositional knowledge’ as being able to know that such and such is the case, which is to say that we can grasp knowledge linguistically. ‘Performative knowledge’ is knowing how to do something due to possessing a skill of some kind. We can also know to do certain things, given specific circumstances; this involves having a skill, plus a tendency—philosophers have referred to this as ‘dispositional knowledge.’ Notice that with each of these forms of knowledge, comprehension is not required of the individual, nor does one need to have any involvement in its formulation, or be encouraged to trace the origins of that knowledge. We can distinguish knowledge and intelligence on conceptual ground, just as we can distinguish reason and intelligence. All three (knowledge, reason, and intelligence) play a vital role when it comes to education at its best.

However, it should be crystal clear why Dewey gave the highest priority to cultivating or fostering intelligence in those being educated. For Dewey, it was imperative that intelligence was cultivated, especially in a democracy where people are given power. It is no exaggeration to say that he regarded teacher’s primary duty as doing just that. Here again we might ask, given the type of society we profess to be working for, does the rhetoric of corporate reform and consumerism, as a model for education, take account for, or even care about intelligence as Dewey understood it?
(3) Admittedly, Dewey’s conception of growth can appear to be overly romantic, or perhaps “vague and ambiguous” might be a better way of putting it. But one suspects this was deliberate on his part. He was thinking holistically about mind, body, and spirit, trying to view them as a single unit that complimented and worked in tandem. It is hard to write about this sort of thing in analytical terms, especially if it is being done independent of circumstances. Dewey was also working from the conviction that human beings are built on a biological platform, that they are highly social and linguistically sophisticated animals who use language not merely to shape their physical environment, but to construct a powerful conceptual reality that is equally capable of humanizing or destroying the species.

There is not much we can say with certainty about what contributes to educational growth. Which subjects are necessary? And how much is enough? Is knowledge of Euclid’s theorems enough, or is the development of analytic skills more important? What about Shakespeare? Should reading the ‘classics’ be given a higher priority? How does one measure educational growth? What should we regard as the minimal level of achievement? It is easy to imagine that Dewey would want these questions to be answered by as many affected parties as possible within the circumstances they find themselves. Beyond that answers are nebulous and elusive. However difficult it might be to conceptualize educational growth, there is no excuse to ignore it, or reduce it to simple-minded terms. Does corporatized schooling honor this fact? Can it even tolerate it? By the nature of what it strives for (consumerism and careerism), it neither does, nor can.
(4) The standards Dewey used for judging the extent to which a community was democratic was presented and brilliantly defended in *Democracy and Education* reads as follows:

Now in any social group whatever, even in a gang of thieves, we find some interests held in common, and we find a certain amount of interaction and cooperative intercourse with other groups. From these two traits we derive our standard. How numerous and varied are the interests which are consciously shared? How full and free is the interplay with other forms of association? (Dewey, 1916, p. 83)

If a democratic society is expected to cultivate consciously shared interests that are numerous and varied, as well as foster an intelligent interplay with different forms of associations that is full and free, then, one would think, so too should education. Whether or not this is true for every educational institution, the public’s schools should be worthy of the type of society that it purports to support.

Dewey’s ideas helped solidify my feeling that democratic citizenship should be of paramount importance in any educational reform movement. His ideas were insightful when it came to understanding my frustration over those who thought that it was appropriate to judge my Denison University liberal arts education, primarily, on whether it was likely to result in a good paying job. Here, at last, is the big question this raises for those who would support the rhetoric of corporate reform and consumerism as the best model for the ‘public’s education:’ “how well does it measure up to the standards and expectations inherent in Dewey’s ideas?”
In an earlier cycle of educational reform, during the 1950’s and 60’s, when behaviorism, behavioral objectives, and behavioral modification were in vogue, it was assumed that behavior was shaped by its consequences. Furthermore, it was assumed that the consequences that mattered were themselves definable in strictly behavioral terms. It was said that if a teacher could control the consequences of the behavior engaged in by his or her students, then that behavior could be modified. It other words, the behavior could be shaped and controlled in predictable ways. This movement ultimately failed as a panacea for the general ills of education, quite simply, because it didn’t work. It turned out that human beings were much more complicated than the movement accounted for. Yet, there was another reason why this initiative was found to be lacking, a reason that was politically, morally, and philosophically, far more important.

Let’s say that a math teacher is having a hard time getting her students to do their homework. She might promise each of them a McDonald’s hamburger every time they finished an assignment and turned it in on time. Even if every student were to initially take her up on this, there is a problem educationally speaking. Eventually, increasing numbers of students would recognize that they could cheat by having someone else complete their homework. This temptation would only grow as they watched their peer’s cheat and still get their free hamburger. Furthermore, there would likely be a few bright students who would realize there were other ways to get McDonald’s hamburgers that were easier and more desirable to them. They could steal them, or quit school and get a job at McDonald’s, for example. Even if none of this actually occurred in practice, there
is another, far more important reason why this failed, and deserved to fail, as an acceptable educational reform movement. It assumed that the consequences of behavior were arbitrary, not just arbitrary in the sense of being independent of any contingency, but independent of any context or set of circumstances, other than the whim or the authoritative will of the teacher. The teacher has the power, she “holds all the cards.” Being solely a function of the teacher’s power, or the power of those who shape and control the behavior of the teacher, the relationship between behavior and its consequences becomes inherently irrational, or merely a function of power.¹¹ Anytime raw power is randomly used to control or influence the behavior of others, they become merely conditioned and learning is prevented. Even if the power is driven by positive reinforcement, it still has the power to do harm, where individuals lose their agency. While this may be rare when it comes to educators and those who they report to, it is naive to think that the welfare of students is always their primary concern. How are we to judge if power defines their relationships with students? What assurance do we have that, intentionally or unintentionally, these people are not doing more harm than good to students, especially if we have reason to believe they were educated in the same manner they are now educating others?

A good way to critique this earlier cycle of educational reform is to view it philosophically, morally, and politically from the perspective of Dewey’s ideas

¹¹ Teachers are as much the victims of the misplaced authoritarianism of corporate sponsorship as students. The example here is to merely demonstrate how behavioral modification, like many other reform initiatives, have been influenced by corporate practices. See discussion in Chapter Two for further reference.
referenced above. It failed on every standard. It ignored experience completely, regarding experience as irrelevant to the science of behavior and to anything that mattered in education. Intelligence was defined in merely functional terms, as being able to anticipate or control the consequences of behavior. Growth was equated with learning, which in turn was defined as “a change in behavior not the result of maturation or fatigue.” As for the standards to be used for judging the extent to which a community or society was democratic, behaviorism had nothing interesting to say. A good society was thought to be nothing more or less than one that could survive in a precarious world. And what was good for the individual was what would utilize all human talents, without waste, in pursuit of this end. It should be said that this earlier educational reform movement was not much interested in political, moral or philosophical questions. But that is precisely why it would have to be repudiated, even if had not failed in other ways.

The educational reform movement rooted in behaviorism is a brief example of how one might use Dewey’s ideas to analyze the value of a particular reform movement. What this particular reform movement had in its favor was that it was supported largely by the social sciences, especially the field of psychology, and was supported by a significant faction of the educational profession. On the other hand, the corporate reform movement of today has been imposed on the educational profession by economic, political, and commercial interests, which come from beyond the university. How might we apply Dewey’s principles to further shed light on the criticism of corporate reform that I describe throughout this dissertation?
There is every reason to be suspicious of the corporate reform movement. One suspects that the kind of education which Dewey was a proponent of, one that fosters individual enlightenment, humanized values, and community, has not been the priority of corporate reformers. Whether on purpose or not, the movement appears to be unaware and unconcerned about the very things that have traditionally drawn serious minded people to the education profession. The most defining feature of the corporate reform movement in education is its insistence and faith in the relative importance of accountability. This idea is not just applied to students, but perhaps even more so to educators at all levels of education, but particularly teachers.

How is accountability to be understood? P.L. Smith has argued that accountability originated as a legal concept used primarily in business to write and adjudicate contracts. For example, if I wanted someone to build a garage with specific features, I might sign a contract with a builder to put up a structure exactly like the one I specified. If and when it was completed in accordance with the terms of the contract, I would be obligated, by those very terms, to pay the company what was stipulated. This seems straightforward enough. It is a perfectly acceptable way to do business. But it is not usually the best way to go about educating people, at least not in the way educators have traditionally went about it.

In business there is no obligation to educate people, and in education there is no requirement to make a profit. The expectation of material gain sometimes gets in the way of education, just as the desire to educate people sometimes interferes with making a profit. Within the world of business, especially within corporate organizations, it has
long been recognized that the language of accountability can be easily and effectively applied to relationships within the organization. Individuals can be held accountable for achieving results that are specified by others. There is a legitimate concern here, even in business, when people see themselves as mere instruments for executing the will of others, they can, sometimes with surprising ease, lose their sense of responsibility, moral or otherwise, for what they do. Thus, Smith’s contention is that an emphasis on accountability can undermine responsibility. It is never a smart thing, even in business to favor short-term material gain over enlightened long-term self-interest.

When it comes to respecting experience, as Dewey conceived it, the rhetoric of the corporate reform movement looks initially to be somewhat of an improvement over the earlier reform movement, to reduce everything important in education to strictly behavioral terms. However an improvement it might appear to be, the motives seemingly clash with education as I envision it. The behavioral objectives and modification movement was content to merely shape and control behavior. The rhetoric of the corporate reform movement implies the intention to shape and control consciousness as well. A case could be made that it has a preference for experience as active rather than passive, even for continuity and interaction in a limited sense. But it makes no room for experimentation, or control of inquiry by the learner. Experience is always directed by the teacher, who is directed by others higher up, who are trying to shape and control the mind as well as the activities of those to be educated.

It is hardly different with intelligence. Yes, an educated person must know how to think and possess knowledge at an ever increasing level of technical sophistication.
However, it is thought and knowledge of a kind, that would make one a good employee or a good consumer, where the person would buy into what was given. Would this not limit “growth” in Dewey’s sense of the term? Indeed, I believe he would view this as mis-education. Lastly, what hope would there be for our democracy? What kind of community would we have any chance to develop? Surely not an intelligent or democratic one, in deweyan terms.

Dewey believed that educational reform should rest on a serious and thoughtful review of actual needs of students. He reminds us to be careful when deciding how to proceed when implementing new subject matter or instructional methods. To quote him: “there is always the danger in a new movement that in rejecting the aims and methods of that which it would supplant, it may develop its principles negatively rather than positively and constructively” (Dewey, 1938, p. 20). This is a point educational reformers today often seem to miss. Why? Perhaps it is because they neither know nor care about factors like continuity, interaction, experience, intelligence, and growth in the way Dewey did. Perhaps too, this is why educational reform movements today are so dogmatic. They rest on a superficial view of education and/or care more about other things, such as employment opportunities, crime statistics, or growing the economy.

Dewey did not want the legacy of progressive educational thought to be limited to a reaction against traditional education. He saw a much more important role for progressive educational ideas. Essentially it was to see human experience in his terms and for educators to operate on the implications of this idea with the goal of nurturing a democratic community. What seems to be happening instead, if the rhetoric of current
day reform is any measure, is that students in our educational institutions are being increasingly mis-educated, if they are being educated at all. Their growth is unhealthy, sometimes more like cancerous growth, compared to what Dewey was after. This kind of growth all too often prevents them from having richer, more meaningful experiences in the future. As Dewey put it, “…every experience affects for better or worse the attitudes which help decide the quality of further experiences, by setting up certain preferences and aversion, and making it easier or harder to act for this or that end” (Dewey, p. 37). In the case of students today, whose ‘experience is always directed by the teacher, who is directed by others higher up who are trying to shape and control the mind as well as the activities of those to be educated,’ it should be clear that such an experience would likely create an aversion, making future experiences less likely to be fruitful.

So how might Dewey’s criteria of experience and understanding of growth apply to the reform initiatives espoused by corporate reformers? Throughout this dissertation I have striven to demonstrate the negative impact that consumerism and corporatism can have on the ways in which society understands the role of public education to serve. The primary problem I have is one that Michael J. Sandel identifies in his book What Money Can’t Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets, that public education should, for moral reasons, be protected from purely market forces.

Sandel describes the time in which we live as being dominated more by a market society, than a market economy. Instead of the market functioning primarily as a vehicle for capitalism and driving the American economy, it has come to define and control the ways in which we relate to one another and behave towards the world around us. He
thinks “this explains why the last few decades have been especially hard on poor and middle-class families. Not only has the gap between rich and poor widened, the commodification of everything has sharpened the sting of inequality by making money matter more” (Sandel, 2012, p. 9). In other words, it’s not just that poor and middle-class families have less money to spend, but assets and opportunities that were once available to them are now commodities they can no longer afford (Sandel gives the examples of political office, schools, and medical care). He continues, “when we decide that certain goods may be bought and sold, we decide, at least implicitly, that it is appropriate to treat them as commodities, as instruments of profit and use” (Sandel, p. 9). As evidenced throughout this dissertation, the public’s education has clearly become one of those things.

He describes the shift in the ways commodified items are valued when an item, such as public education, becomes commodified by reformers and the public alike, it is demeaned and merely becomes an instrument of profit. While Sandel shows impressive insight in this regard when it comes to society writ large, I believe Dewey should be our model when it comes to education of the type the liberal arts strives for. If Dewey’s principles of continuity and interaction are applied to this same scenario, one or both has the potential to be violated, and therefore the experience of education (in this case) would be mis-educative.

One could evaluate every chapter of this dissertation on this standard, but looking specifically at the privatization of education through school choice, one of the primary complaints against the school choice movement is that it tends to generate more
inequality, than not, on the standard of wealth and power. One might imagine combining
Sandel’s ideas with Dewey’s to show that schools are likely to become mere instruments
of private profit and the result is inevitably the mis-education of democratic citizens. The
principle of continuity (the future experiences of the individual) and the principle of
interaction (objective and internal conditions) become irrelevant. If education, especially
public education, is nothing more than a tool for an individual to get ahead (as described
at length in Chapter Five) or efficiently serve others in material ways, it fails in its most
important mission. A commodified public school is one that lacks the quality of
experience which Dewey describes. The question is whether or not a privatized system of
education is more likely to promote or hinder the growth of its students. Just because an
experience is appealing or agreeable or can get one a job is no reason for believing that it
has accomplished all that it should.

Dewey writes; “since growth is the characteristic of life, education is all one with
growing; it has no end beyond itself. The criterion of the value of school education is the
extent to which it creates a desire for continued growth and supplies means for making
the desire effective in fact” (Dewey, 1916, p. 53). Ultimately, a deweyan would want
something different from their public education system. Whatever the intentions of
corporate reformers, their movement fails to meet the standards put forth by Dewey
(experience, intelligence, and growth) if the goal is to support a democratic community as
Dewey defined it. This alone should cause reformers to pause and rethink the rhetoric
which has been espoused up to this point.
Public education has, throughout history, been faced with changes that would eventually lead to the support, and acceptance of the rhetoric of corporate reformers. Americans have long seen public education as having multiple purposes, many of those practical, and rightly so. Concern grows when these purposes begin to favor practical aims only and become distorted into careerism and a privatized market. As indicated previously, the purpose of this dissertation was never to try and solve the myriad of problems that are facing public education today. Instead, the point was to demonstrate the influence and power of corporate reform rhetoric in determining our educational aims, and to introduce some alternative ideas for consideration.
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