

What May a 75-Year Involvement with the Language and Ideology of Business Tell Us?

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THE FACT THAT the question "What can education learn from business?" is still being considered makes it imperative that it be looked at historically for it implies a position that has been the guiding thought behind most curriculum work in this century. That is, it asked then and still asks today that curriculum workers and educational administrators view themselves as holding positions similar to those of "captains of industry." The position requires educators to employ a management ideology, one whose fundamental interest is in the strict control of human activity so that schools can efficiently shape their raw material (that is, students) into predetermined products.¹ Calls for a business oriented accountability and competency based performance measures

¹ Cf., Michael W. Apple. "The Adequacy of Systems Management Procedures in Education." In: Albert H. Yee, editor. *Perspectives on Management Systems Approaches in Education*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Educational Technology Publications, 1973; and Herbert M. Kliebard. "Bureaucracy and Curriculum Theory." In: Vernon F. Haubrich, editor. *Freedom, Bureaucracy, & Schooling*. Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1971.

What results can we see from the massive reliance of our schools on a business and factory model throughout this century and the conservative ideological and economic position which lies behind it?

have their historical roots in the early 20th century reform movement's concern for efficiency. They are replete with suggestions that if educators could just follow industry, nearly all the major problems facing education would be solved.

For example, the authors of a recent text promoting the efficacy of behaviorally stated objectives for education cite business as the exemplar of the principles worth emulating. "The business world," we are informed,

... is replete with instances of major corporations succeeding or failing on the basis of only a five percent profit or loss. In education,

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too, if the effectiveness of teachers' efforts could be improved by just *one* percent, the potential dividends to millions of pupils would be immense.²

Now no one will quarrel with the aim of making education more effective (though the conflict over what this *means* is critically important). However, the fact that the business world is the touchstone against which we are to compare our efforts makes it critically important that educators realize that this very comparison is a continuation of the factory orientation implicit in so much of the educational literature of this century. Once this realization sinks in, then we must begin to raise serious questions concerning the adequacy of employing business models for dealing with what are basically ethical and political, not technical, questions in education. Let us look historically first.

Search for "Efficiency"

When this issue of borrowing models for education from industry was first considered by school people it was seen in the context of making the schools, or at least the rhetoric of schooling, answerable to the charge that they be "socially efficient." As the industry and business of their time were seen as successful in relationship to their efficiency, so too the demand on schools became one of upholding efficient operation as the most important goal.³ While "the task was great" there was available to early school people the idea that it would be soluble if they made their operations "scientific."

The notions of science and efficiency were joined forcefully in Frederick Taylor's

² W. James Popham and Eva L. Baker. *Establishing Instructional Goals*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970. p. 9.

³ For a revealing analysis of the social efficiency movement, see: Raymond Callahan. *Education and the Cult of Efficiency*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962. Edward Krug's *The Shaping of the American High School 1880-1920* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964) points to the fact that the reform movement contained elements of both public service and social control. That the latter was the one actually operationalized is argued in: Joel Spring. *Education and the Rise of the Corporate State*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1973.

text, *The Principles of Scientific Management*. These principles, which first proved their worth in the area of railroading, were soon seen as having applicability to other areas of human activity, especially education. Taylor's basic approach was to increase the productivity of the individual worker through careful analysis of his or her activities and a subsequent increase in the speed of these operations. As an archtypical example of how this operated, his readers were presented with the story of "Schmidt," the pig iron carrier, who through the application of scientific management was induced to increase his productivity 300 percent with a consequent increase in his wages of 60 percent. While one might (and should) wish to raise certain ethical questions about the above example,

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there can be no doubt that to many it must have appeared as the panacea for schools then charged with both the moral and economic well-being of the nation.

Taylor's principles were not universally admired, however, and in a text which deserves consideration by many of today's educational reformers a caveat is offered⁴:

To one interested in getting things done, there is an almost overwhelming appeal in a system in which every minute detail is fully efficient. . . . Based on force, it is a system in which the administrator or supervisor is complete and absolute dictator. In some affairs of industry where the process is purely mechanical and is no more than an instrument of means

⁴ William L. Patty. *A Study of Mechanism in Education: An Examination of the Curriculum-Making Devices of Franklin Bobbitt, W. W. Charters, and C. C. Peters from the Point of View of Relativistic Pragmatism*. Contributions to Education # 739. New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1938.

toward some extraneous end, such a directly efficient system is undoubtedly desirable. Whether or not there are any such affairs in actuality, and whether or not social processes can be so considered, is a question demanding consideration before an attempt is made to be thus mechanically efficient.

This warning, one we still could learn from, appeared as too little and too late, for not only did the scientific management position affect the thinking of school administrators, it also had its effect upon the people who were beginning to describe the field of curriculum. They too were to accept the analogy between business and schools. This activity analysis was adopted by early curriculum planners who used it in an attempt to reduce all human activity to particulars; particulars that could be efficiently taught to children in schools. Through the construct of activity analysis, for instance, one early curriculum planner was able to liken a recipe for French Dressing, which shows the items in order of their performance and supposedly

in the working units of the cook, to the job description of a department store clerk, which included the nine duties the clerk was to perform.⁵ It is important to recognize, here, that this mechanistic or atomistic view of human behavior can be seen as growing from the same roots which supported the administrator's self-concept as a business leader.

Are Business Methods "Neutral"?

At the outset, one must admit that the use of business methods such as Taylor's by administrators and curriculum workers does sound neutral, as if these educators were merely employing "rational" procedures for creating "better" schools. Unfortunately, such a view is a bit naïve, for it ignores the conservative social beliefs of the proponents of these strategies and the latent outcomes that

⁵ W. W. Charters. *Curriculum Construction* New York: The Macmillan Company, 1923. Chapter IV.

Educational Leadership Announces Themes for 1975-76

Manuscripts and/or photographs relevant to the proposed themes for the 1975-76 issues of *Educational Leadership* are now being solicited. Topics and deadlines for receipt of manuscripts are the following:

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Length of manuscripts should be approximately 1400 words typed, double-spaced (about five pages). General style should conform to that of the journal. Photographs and other illustrative materials whether directly related to an article or not are especially requested.

Manuscripts should be submitted in duplicate and materials to be returned must be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope adequate to return material. Decisions on materials will be made as promptly as possible.

Materials should be addressed to Robert R. Leeper, Editor, *Educational Leadership*, Suite 1100, 1701 K St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006.

can actually occur when these strategies are employed.

A prime example of this can be seen in the phenomenon of massive testing in schools, for supposedly if schools are to be businesslike then, of course, we must test and retest, to find out whether our goal of a systematized and standardized product is being reached. This dominance of a testing mentality both in today's vulgar accountability ethic and yesterday's more overt business orientation is of considerable import. Historical figures of the testing movement, as well as some early proponents of industrial methods in the curriculum field such as Franklin Bobbitt, showed a strong interest in popular eugenics. Testing was one way, and a major one at that, to eliminate future people from our cost-benefit minded society.⁶ Furthermore, they shared a sense, as well, that schools primarily should assist the business and economic structure of the United States in preventing the "maladjustment there is today in respect to the *adaptation* of people to their work."⁷ Whether it was C. C. Peters as in the above quote, Bobbitt, Charters, or Thorndike, the orientation was covertly founded upon a conservative social ethic—the role of the school was to eliminate waste and this was often interpreted as providing an efficient sorting machinery for the production of workers to meet the needs of industry and the already existing institutions of the society with little critical questioning.

The fact that it is possible to take the position that the economic and ideological structure of the United States provided then and still provides today the "luxury" of intense poverty for a significant portion of our population, the "benefits" of alienating and degrading assembly line or "assembly desk" labor for others, and the "choice" of often

minuscule opportunities for members of minority groups or women is totally left out of this picture.

Is This a Suitable Model?

If it is the case, then, that the roots of much of the business and efficiency orientation at the beginning of this century in education lie in the conservative soil of a vision of curricula differentiated by social class and race, one might want to examine whether a similar perspective today does not serve an identical function. To deal with this question, let us look carefully at some of the characteristics of the corporate state and ask if models taken from industrial enterprises are appropriate for making schools responsive to students. We shall merely list a number of observable characteristics, each of which is immediately followed by some questions committed educators might want to ask of those people who are so enamored of systems management and business models in education.

1. (Characteristic) Power resides at the top. Workers have little or no *significant* input into decisions since these decisions must be as centralized as possible so that efficiency is heightened.

(Questions) Will the use of business models and ideology increase the already strong dominance of a bureaucratic and control model of schooling? Will it eliminate any real hope for *significant* teacher, parent, and student involvement in the means and ends of the institution?

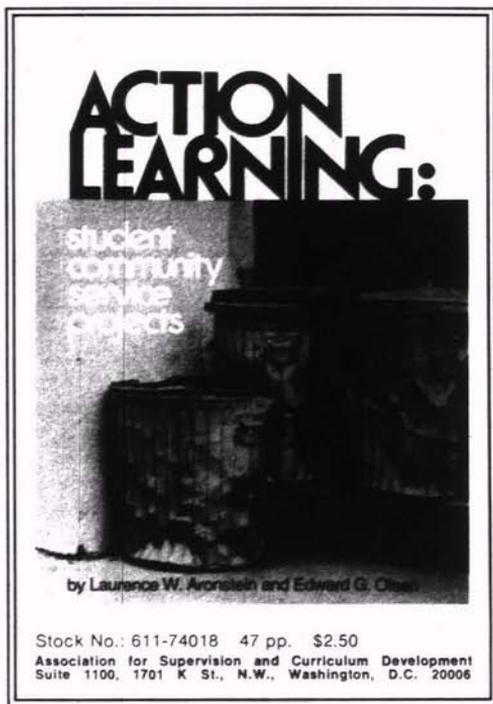
2. (Characteristic) Profits are maximized so that a limited class of people live off the surplus labor of blue and white collar workers.

(Questions) Will schools continue to serve as a sorting machinery which provides labor for the maintenance of this profit? Is our job as educators to provide an efficient laboring force to help corporate entities maximize their profits at the expense of others?

3. (Characteristic) Goods and services are produced and marketed based on the massive and subtle teaching of the public by

⁶The most complete picture of the conservative posture of the testing movement can be found in: Clarence Karier. "Ideology and Evaluation." In: Michael W. Apple, Michael J. Subkoviak, and Henry S. Lufier, Jr., editors. *Educational Evaluation: Analysis and Responsibility*. Berkeley: McCutchan Publishing Corporation, 1974.

⁷C. C. Peters. *Foundations of Educational Sociology*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1932. p. 222. (Italics added.)



advertising that people need these often relatively useless (and sometimes harmful) articles.

(Questions) By running the school as an efficiency factory, what is the hidden curriculum that students will learn? Will they internalize the role of passive consumers of bureaucratic wisdom and unfulfilling goals? Does this deny the very real differences between groups in access to knowledge and power in this country and, hence, result in a homogenization of consciousness that prevents legitimate self and group interests from emerging?*

4. (Characteristic) Workers in industry are increasingly alienated and often find little or no personal meaning in their work.

(Questions) Can educators who accept as part of their task the preservation and dis-

* On the relationship between economics, consciousness, and knowledge production, see: Trent Schroyer. *The Critique of Domination*. New York: George Braziller, 1973.

covery of personal meaning accept models of running institutions that have been proven to either ignore it or treat it as unimportant compared to the efficiency of the institution?

5. (Characteristic) Large corporations continually manipulate public opinion (for example, the "oil crisis"), often support subversion of freely elected governments (for example, Chile), and often lobby against consumer and public affairs legislation.

(Questions) Given the ideology that says "what is good for industry is good for the people," can we assume that business models are disinterested procedures for helping schools? Since they seem invariably to lead to manipulation and considerations of efficiency and smoothness of operation above all, are they appropriate for our relations with students and community members, especially those individuals and groups who have been ignored, exploited, or oppressed by the basic ideological and economic structures of the United States in the first place?

One's answers to these questions depend on the perception one has of the responsiveness of the economic and social structure of advanced industrial societies like our own. If educators care to equate good education with technical efficiency, then perhaps business models may serve (though the near bankruptcy of Lockheed through the use of systems management raises an interesting question here to say the least). If, on the other hand, education is valued through a process that holds highest an educator's responsibility to treat students justly and ethically, then business may not be the place to look.

Perhaps our basic question should not be "How may education become more businesslike?" but rather "What may a 75-year involvement with the language and ideology of business tell us?". Those of us who, unlike Popham, see the stagnation of schools as *resulting from* the massive reliance on a business and factory model throughout this century and the conservative ideological and economic position which lies behind it, may already have an inkling of the answer to the latter question: "Enough is enough." □

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