

Chapter 2

The Story of Schools, Schooling, and Students from the 1960s to the Present

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Stories have the power to direct and change our lives.
Nell Noddings (1991, p. 157)

Originally, public education consisted of a highly localized school or set of schools that was governed and shaped by the community it served (Spring 2011). As America grew and expanded, so did the role of public education. Horace Mann envisioned the common school as a means to ensure an equal education for all students in order to transmit common cultural and moral ideals (Spring 2011).

Over time, schools became positioned as the panacea for multiple social ills, for example, poverty, inadequately prepared workers, racial inequality, and global economic shortcomings. Currently, the ideal of the common school has been replaced with the vision of market-based, business models of schools and schooling (Ravitch 2013). Given these historical policy shifts, do the diverse institutional narratives diverge from students' lives or converge with them to effect positive changes in their personal and school-based narratives, particularly with regard to their social, emotional, mental, and physical development?

Every day, students and teachers are creating and changing their individual stories within classrooms and schools throughout the country. Concomitantly, institutional narratives, as defined by national funding mandates, policy directives, and federally commissioned reports, are shaping the lives of the individual and collective inhabitants of schools. Long-term *institutional* narratives are often touted as the remedy for struggling schools and students; however, how have these changing policies intersected with or bypassed the diverse and changing *insider* narratives

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of students who may be at risk for engaging in risky behaviors? Additionally, how have the larger narratives—institutional, collective, and individual—changed over time, and how have these changes shaped the American vision of schooling? This chapter seeks to elucidate the themes and power of these narratives in relation to the public education system, politics, the social images of schooling, and, most importantly, the students who navigate school spaces on a daily basis in the hopes of leading healthy and fulfilling lives.

As we reviewed the historical and ongoing institutional narratives about education, we asked how can these outsider, institutional narratives be situated within the insider spaces, places, and lives of children and schools? The first section of this chapter describes some of the major themes in public education from the 1960s to the present. The second section examines the currently held belief that untrained outsiders and naive newcomers may be the solution to the failing public school system. Finally, we present counter-narratives from students' perspective in an effort to explore how institutional and national educational narratives have changed and shaped students' individual experiences in schools.

2.1 The Central Narratives of Schools: The 1960s to the Present

Institutional narratives contribute to the school environment and culture that individual students encounter on a daily basis. Our examination of the central narratives of schools begins with a discussion of the historical goals and outcomes of the desegregation movement because it was one of the milestone reforms in the recent history of the American public education system and its effects are still being discussed today. Next, we examine how achievement testing and international comparative assessments have contributed to public alarm about the “failure of America’s schools” and eventually led to the creation of “A Nation at Risk” (1983), the influential federal report that has influenced educational policy for the last 30 years. This report was followed by a move toward standardization and assessment-driven practices in schools as a result of policy makers’ desire to increase student achievement outcomes by controlling teachers. Then, we turn to an examination of the impact of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (2001) and conclude with an analysis of topics related to school budgets, incentives, Race to the Top, and the Common Core initiative, all of which represent the current ideology of market-based reforms to incentivize education and educators in order to increase test scores. These policy initiatives were designed to improve students’ lives, but we are compelled to ask how these reforms diverge from or converge with the insider narratives of students and their developing emotional, social, mental, and physical health and well-being.

2.1.1 *Desegregation and Radicalism*

The desegregation and radicalism movements of the 1950s and 1960s were designed to redress the inequitable power relationships in schools, and by extension in society, both racial inequality and the inequality perpetuated by the traditional canon of schools, schooling, and student–teacher relationships. Although it was an attempt to rectify racial inequalities, the Supreme Court ruling in the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) case ushered in a time of great unrest in public schools. The ruling overturned the previous Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which created the national doctrine of “separate but equal” that governed many aspects of American life, ranging from restaurants, movie theaters, and restrooms to schools. *Brown v. Board of Education* was grounded in the argument that for racially marginalized populations, the “separate but equal” doctrine unequivocally violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the US Constitution. After this initial ruling, it took the court a year to draft a plan for how desegregation should proceed with “all deliberate speed” (United States Courts 2013). Ultimately, it was decided that busing should be the primary tool for integrating schools, a decision that the American public met with a variety of emotions, from wariness to open and sometimes brutal hostility.

In keeping with the desire for equality underlying the desegregation movement, Lyndon B. Johnson attempted to redress civil inequality with a set of sweeping policy initiatives termed the War on Poverty. Numerous social welfare programs (e.g., Head Start, food stamps, and Medicare) were created under Johnson’s reform initiatives (Spring 2011). In 1965, President Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) into law. ESEA was designed to reduce the achievement gap through the allocation of federal monies to schools with the highest need. Furthermore, ESEA mandated that schools utilize accountability measures to track students’ academic progress (Standerfer 2006).

Concern for the welfare of students, as defined by measures of equality and access, was widespread throughout the radical reform movements of the 1960s and 1970s. During this time, the idea of common schools existing to create a common culture was abandoned in favor of movements toward multiculturalism and bilingualism (Spring 2011). At the same time, there was also a growing concern about the academic performance of America’s children. Concerns over the achievement levels of American children, especially compared to their peers in other countries, signaled a change in public discourse and policy that challenged the historic political discourse which centered reform around concern for students who were at greatest risk for academic underachievement or educational inequality.

2.1.2 *Reification of Student Performance and the Achievement Gap*

With the naming of the achievement gap in schools during the 1960s, public attention was acutely attuned to uneven student achievement in schools, as measured by standardized tests. This ideological shift from equity to achievement was grounded in the reformists' call for equality, but ultimately resulted in the positioning of student academic achievement over other measures of positive school outcomes, including the prevention of suicide, bullying, and substance abuse or the promotion of positive civic behaviors and engagement.

In 1965, a federal commission was convened to conduct a survey "concerning the lack of availability of equal education opportunities for individuals for reason of race, color, religion, or national origin in public educational institutions" (Coleman et al. 1966, p. iii). The commission's report, commonly known as the Coleman Report after its primary author, found that a majority of American children attended schools that were segregated, which resulted in minority students having less access to curricular and extracurricular resources. Moreover, the commission attempted to correlate student achievement with individual teacher characteristics (i.e., quality and type of college attended, years of teaching experience, salary, scores on vocabulary tests, and mother's educational attainment). The average Black student was found to attend a school with a larger percentage of teachers who were measured as "less able" in the aforementioned characteristics, which, it was argued, negatively affected student achievement levels.

The Coleman Report was the first to articulate a racial and economic division among students that came to be referred to as the *achievement gap* and has become a part of the national discourse on schools, schooling, and importance of academic achievement. The report claimed that schools were not helping students overcome their "non-school disadvantages," specifically, poverty, community attitudes, or parents' low education level. Additionally, academic achievement was strongly related to socioeconomic status and, as a student progressed through school, the achievement gap continued to widen.

Coleman and his coauthors on the commission (1966) defended standardized tests as the most reliable measure of students' academic gains. They claimed that standardized tests were particularly suited for measuring student performance because they were not mere measures of intelligence nor of student attitudes or qualities of character. Rather, standardized tests measured the skills "which are among the most important in our society. Consequently, a pupil's test results at the end of public school provide a good measure of the range of opportunities open to him as he finishes school" (Coleman et al. 1966, p. 20). The Coleman Report served to position student performance on standardized tests as the ultimate measure of a student's skills and knowledge and, by extension, as a means to measure the widening achievement gap.

The story of the reification of student performance is a narrative grounded in a shift from concern over *equity* for all students to *achievement* for all students. In the

end, what happened to the insider narratives of students who were not only at risk of academic underachievement but also in danger of engaging in risky behavior? Students' test scores and achievement gains were to become one of the driving forces behind educational reform, particularly when collective student achievement on international assessments was compared.

2.1.3 Achievement Testing and International Comparisons

The narrative of achievement testing in America has been partially defined by a national preoccupation with international rankings, as defined by students' scores on standardized tests. One potential concern with the high priority of achievement tests in education is that test results may have eclipsed concerns about students' emotional, physical, and mental well-being or their potential for larger risk-taking behaviors.

The 1957 launch of the Soviet-engineered space satellite Sputnik ignited public fears about the competitiveness of American citizens in the global economic and educational arena. These fears were compounded by the release of the results from the First International Mathematics Study in the 1960s. Among both 13-year-olds and high school seniors, American students scored near the bottom (Ravitch 2013). Concurrently, in the First International Science Test, American 10-year-olds ranked second, American 14-year-olds ranked sixth, and American high school seniors ranked last, suggesting declining performance in higher grades (Ravitch 2013). Taken collectively, these defining events in American history were used to denounce the public education system's ability to adequately prepare the next generation of citizens.

Since these original international comparative assessments, American students have been perpetually portrayed as lagging behind their counterparts in other countries (Ravitch 2013). The twenty-first-century international testing and comparison movement focused on results from the Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) assessment and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). The release of the 2010 PISA scores prompted President Obama to call the results "our nation's Sputnik moment." His statement suggests that American schools are once again in decline; however, the actual results do not completely support this interpretation (Berliner and Glass 2014; Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009; Ravitch 2013).

Of the 70 nations that took part in the 2009 PISA assessment, China was the top nation in all three tested subjects: reading, science, and mathematics (Ravitch 2013). This came as somewhat of a surprise to the international community and contributed to the news media's growing emphasis on the educational power of China, as exemplified by the *New York Times* article by Sam Dillon titled "Top Test Scores from Shanghai Stun Educators" (2010). What this and other articles did not report was that Shanghai represents an elite enclave in China where parents have extra funds to pay large sums for private tutoring services and extra classes for

their children (Loveless 2013). Furthermore, Shanghai was the only province that allowed PISA to report their results, whereas America did not specify regions or populations that could be used for international comparison (Loveless 2013).

In truth, since 2000, American students' mathematics and reading scores on PISA have not dramatically changed, and science scores have actually improved. Additionally, in 2012, US fourth and eighth graders performed at or above the international average on the TIMSS (Ravitch 2013). Although American students have failed to secure top-tier scores on international tests, their performance is decidedly less bleak than the elevated rhetoric in the popular media and research would suggest (Berliner and Glass 2014).

International assessments and comparisons have greatly influenced the national discourse about public education, but one document still continues to influence American classroom more than 30 years after its release. This government report built upon growing fears about America's global competitiveness and positioned America as "a nation at risk." Once again, the larger institutional narrative would focus on academic achievement at the expense of addressing students' overall mental, physical, and emotional well-being.

2.1.4 *A Nation at Risk*

In 1983, a government commission released a report entitled "A Nation at Risk," which stated "Our nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world" (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983, p. 3). The inflammatory report continued, "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well view it as an act of war." To combat this "rising tide of mediocrity," the commission called for reform so that America could "retain the slim competitive edge" that it had managed to maintain in the global market.

This report followed in a long-standing tradition of casting the public education system as either the panacea for or perpetuation of America's ills. The report shifted the blame for the loss of industry from corporate management and placed it firmly on supposedly inadequate schools (Ravitch 2013). Unfortunately, the report also positioned the nation as being at risk for economic collapse while overlooking the very children within the report who could also be at risk for a variety of other potentially harmful behaviors and life outcomes. In order to increase economic competitiveness, *A Nation at Risk* called on local communities and states to increase academic standards, improve teacher quality, and reform curriculum (Spring 2011). Furthermore, the report focused on the quality of teacher preparation programs and textbook materials used in schools while calling for more stringent graduation requirements so that high schools would produce students who were capable of succeeding in college (Ravitch 2013).

In answer to this call for increased standards and resources, US states passed more laws and regulations related to education than had been passed in the previous 20 years, most of them focused solely on increasing student achievement. For these lawmakers, the solution was grounded in the ideology of “more”: more time in school, more academic courses, more attention to the basics, more teacher evaluations, and more testing (Tyack and Cuban 1995). It is noteworthy that whereas these state and national mandates were designed to increase student achievement, they conspicuously omitted references to reforms to increase students’ overall health and well-being.

In some ways, state laws were ideologically aligned with *A Nation at Risk*, but, as Diane Ravitch (2013) noted, the report itself only briefly mentioned testing and positioned a more rigorous and coherent curriculum as the key to reforming American schools. While *A Nation at Risk* focused on the power of curriculum, several national policies arising from that report focused the discourse of the American public and public education on the idea of standards and assessment, a vision that would eventually rewrite the ongoing institutional narrative.

2.1.5 *Standards and Assessments*

The current accountability movement has its roots in Leon Lessinger’s book, *Every Kid a Winner: Accountability in Education* (1970). In his book, Lessinger laid out a vision for public education modeled on the institutional design of hospitals, but not on their concern for patients’ physical and mental health. According to Lessinger’s model, teachers should be highly trained before being allowed to participate fully in the professional community. Furthermore, schools should be required to publicly report their results from standardized tests so that the community could judge their effectiveness. Lessinger’s book was published at a time when the public education system was embroiled in an accountability movement to raise test scores, partially due to concerns over international competitiveness and economic stability, and it became the basis of our current system of accountability-driven reforms (Tyack and Cuban 1995).

The accountability movement in the 1970s focused on a “return to the basics” and emphasized the raising of test scores through rote memorization of discrete skills and facts (Tyack and Cuban 1995). The movement was designed to “teacher-proof” education by standardizing teaching practices to focus on the most basic levels of knowledge representation (Rosenholtz 1991). In this paradigm, instruction, assessment, and accountability were intricately interwoven with the aim to increase student achievement. In reality, the emphasis on accountability decreased teachers’ freedom to use their professional judgment and placed more pressure on schools, teachers, and students (Tyack and Cuban 1995).

The teacher education community responded to the accountability movement in the 1980s and 1990s by calling for an increased professionalization of the field (Darling-Hammond 1984; Zeichner 1991). The professionalization of the teaching

force was proposed as a means to reform school practices by empowering teachers' judgment and knowledge instead of mandating the memorization of basic skills for ease of assessment. Concurrently, national politics and politicians were leading the reformist agenda for increased accountability. For example, President Ronald Reagan ran on a platform that supported school choice and tuition tax credits as a means of increasing student performance by making schools accountable for their performance (Spring 2011).

In response to demands for increased accountability in public education, in 1994, President Bill Clinton signed Goals 2000 into law (Heise 1994). The Act gave federal monies to states specifically so that they could develop their own state standards, which would be used to standardize school curricula (Ravitch 2013). Ultimately, the standardization, assessment, and accountability reform movements were designed to ensure student achievement gains by controlling teachers and classrooms and ignored larger concerns about students' holistic growth and well-being.

2.1.6 Incompetent Teachers: Controlling Teachers by Controlling Outcomes

To maximize student performance, researchers and policy makers spent decades attempting to mandate or describe universal teaching practices that would result in gains in student achievement. A supporter of the process-product ideology in educational research, Nathaniel Gage (1963) defined research as "activity aimed at increasing our power to understand, predict, and control events of a given kind" (p. 96). The act of teaching was defined as "any interpersonal influence aimed at changing the ways in which other persons can or will behave" (p. 96).

By extension, scholars and reformers who subscribed to the process-product paradigm attempted to uncover ways to control teachers' actions in classrooms so as to maximize student achievement outcomes over other behavioral outcomes, e.g., personal, mental, emotional, and social development (Brophy and Good 1984). Given that the process-product paradigm dominated research on teaching for decades and can still be seen in some of the "research-based" strategies and programs that educational reformists tout today, the idea of controlling student outcomes through controlling teachers has been and continues to be a central narrative theme in education.

Accountability and standardization reform measures were designed to "teacher-proof" education (Rosenholtz 1991). The underlying assumption was that teachers were largely to blame for the failure of American schools and needed guidance from outside sources. According to reformers, the solution to underachievement was to mandate incentives and punishments for teachers based on student performance. Rosenholtz (1991) argued that this standardization mentality framed schools as production lines and teachers as "semi-skilled workers" who needed to be "trained" to work effectively in classrooms. The standardization movement contradicted the professionalism movement that had influenced teacher education during the 1980s

and 1990s. Standardization led to increased bureaucratic oversight, which, in turn, undermined teachers' collaboration, autonomy, and even commitment to the profession (Rosenholtz 1991).

These historical standardization mandates were a preview of the upcoming value-added accountability measures of teacher effectiveness that were to become a foundation of current accountability measures. Value-added measures treat the student as an independent and fixed variable, with teachers being the dependent variable (i.e., that students' performance defined the effectiveness and value of teachers). The reasoning goes that by measuring a student's progress from year to year, schools would be able to identify gains and losses in student achievement regardless of socioeconomic status or race (Sanders and Rivers 1996). Furthermore, tracking student achievement for 3 years would be sufficient evidence to identify "effective teachers" (Ravitch 2013). In theory, the designation as an effective or ineffective teacher could then be used to make faster decisions about hiring and firing, as well as being tied to teacher compensation, which would ultimately result in higher student achievement scores.

The value-added model and the standardization movement are based on the idea that teachers are a singular determining factor in student achievement. These reform models incorrectly place student outcomes under the direct and complete control of teachers, overlooking outside social factors, for example, family income level, that affect student performance (Berliner 2006; Berliner and Glass 2014). The idea that teachers are in complete control of student outcomes minimizes the "mutual relations among environmental demands and human responses in natural classroom settings" (Doyle 1977, p. 176). The classroom ecology paradigm argues that there are multiple factors in classrooms that affect student outcomes, including the self-interested student (Doyle 1977).

Placing the onus of student achievement firmly on the backs of teachers oversimplified the complex processes that support or hinder student learning and limited the definition of desired student outcomes to academic achievement on tests, thus narrowing the institution's focus to a single measure of student outcomes. What would happen if the institutional definition of student outcomes were broadened beyond a singular focus on achievement measured by standardized tests to better converge with the lives of children in schools? Would students be better served not only academically but also socially and emotionally? Despite these and other debates, educational reformers in the government and the private sector singled out teachers as primarily responsible for student outcomes and issued sweeping accountability mandates under NCLB (2001).

2.1.7 No Child Left Behind

George W. Bush entered his presidency at a time that was perfectly primed for major educational reform. Unlike the desegregation mandate of the 1960s, the push for accountability measures in schools enjoyed bipartisan support in the late twen-

tieth and early twenty-first century. The NCLB (2001) mandated increased student achievement by imposing severe consequences on schools that were not able to meet strict benchmarks. Although NCLB was heralded as a means to increase test scores of students who were most at risk (e.g., those in urban communities and with low socioeconomic status), in practice, the educational reform left behind or failed even to acknowledge specific student groups, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ) youth or English language learners (Carter et al. 2013a; Sugimoto et al. 2013).

President Bush promoted NCLB as a system of accountability and standards that would ensure America's ability to compete in the global economy by increasing student achievement (Spring 2011). The Act required major reform efforts on the part of schools, school districts, and states. Ultimately, NCLB mandated that all students must be tested as proficient in mathematics and reading by 2014; the logistics of accomplishing this monumental task were, however, largely left to the states. To this end, each state was required to determine what proficient looked like, then design high-stakes assessments according to their individualized proficiency standards.

Starting in the 2002–2003 school year, states were required to submit an annual report card to the national government to show student achievement by school and district. This information was made available to the public and was the basis for major systemic decisions, including teacher evaluations, pay raises, and school closures. Furthermore, students in grades 3–8 were required to be tested in reading and mathematics during the 2005–2006 school year, and in science during the 2007–2008 school year. Test results were reported by students' race, ethnicity, income status, disability status, and English proficiency in an effort to specifically track the progress of minority and marginalized students (Ravitch 2013).

Serious consequences could be imposed on schools that failed to meet the federally mandated Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) on these assessments, hence their designation as high-stakes tests. When a school was initially labeled as failing, it was targeted for improvement. If the failing school did not improve within an allotted time, it would be restructured, a process that involved the firing of administrators, teachers, and staff, as well as the possibility of the school being placed under state or private control.

The underlying ideology of NCLB was based on the concept of market-based reforms that positioned public education as a commodity, students as products, and teachers as workers. Supporters argued that yearly assessments, coupled with public reporting of data and potentially serious consequences for schools, would foster healthy competition between schools, thereby improving public education in general. In fact, NCLB focused solely on incentives and sanctions instead of on ways to improve the actual organization and pedagogical practices of schools, changes that could have been of practical benefit to schools and teachers (Ravitch 2013). As a result, teachers increasingly teach to the test, a practice that was considered unprofessional and pedagogically unsound before NCLB (Ravitch 2013). The professionalism movement of the 1980s and 1990s has been replaced by the standardization movement, in which teachers are increasingly being told what to teach, when to teach it, and, in some cases, how to teach it. In fact, some principals proudly state



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