The Hyper-rationalization of American Education

Arthur E. Wise

The nation is losing sight of the grand goals of education as it drifts toward centralized educational policymaking which concentrates on narrow measures of accountability and projects a view of education as an instrument for future employment.

We are witnessing an unprecedented number of efforts to impose policies on local schools and colleges. These policies are being devised by state governments, by the federal government, and, perhaps most important, by the courts. State educational accountability legislation is intended to control or influence local education. Federal regulations now determine how hiring decisions are to be made and how personnel records are to be maintained. Federal legislation for the education of handicapped children now determines how these children are to be treated by local schools. Court decisions prescribe how a school system must proceed if it wishes to suspend a student or fire a teacher. Other court decisions prescribe how students are to be assigned to schools and how schools are to be financed.

Each new policy imposed upon schools or colleges means that important educational decisions are being determined centrally. With each state, federal, or court policy, decision-making at the local level is reduced. Assuming a finite amount of discretion to be exercised in a school or college, then the discretion of local officials is limited with each additional externally imposed policy.

In the past, the local board of education or college board of trustees was the final arbiter of institutional policies and practices. To be sure, some policies for local institutions were set elsewhere, but for practical purposes, most important policies and practices were established at the local level. If a student, parent, or teacher had a problem with institutional policies or practices, it was everyone's expectation that the problem would be resolved locally or not at all. Today that expectation has changed dramatically. A person with a grievance about the way in which he is being affected by his institution's policies or practices may try first to resolve it locally. However, should he fail to resolve it to his satisfaction locally, he will often turn to authorities external to the institution.

Drift to Centralization

One of the results of the phenomenon of appeal to external authorities for the resolution of institutional problems is the drift to centralization. An external authority cannot generally make policy for a single institution. When an external authority responds to a problem, it makes policy for all similar institutions within its jurisdiction. When a state authority attempts to solve an educational problem, it imposes a solution on all schools in the state. When the federal government attempts to solve an educational problem, it imposes the solution on all schools in the nation.

In the past, if a parent were dissatisfied with the quality of education, he exerted influence locally to raise standards. If that did not work, he suffered, silently or otherwise. In the past, if a child could not read and do arithmetic, his parents would appeal to local officials to solve the problem. If local officials were unwilling to or unable to deal with the problem, the search for

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a solution ended there. Now like-minded parents support state-level minimal competency testing. In the past, if a female professor believed that she was being discriminated against in promotion decisions, she could only complain to the officials of the college. If that did not work, she suffered, most often silently. Now, because women resorted to the courts and to lobbying, federally imposed protection exists. In the past, if a parent was denied access to school records, he had little recourse. He suffered in ignorance of the contents of the records. Now, federally imposed procedures regulate his access to his child's records. In the past, a handicapped child might receive less than adequate treatment at the hands of the school. Recourse by the parents of handicapped children to the states, the courts, and the federal government now guarantees adequate treatment. Students about to be suspended and teachers about to be dismissed no longer have to suffer the discretionary decisions of school officials. The courts have guaranteed that a hearing be held. Schools no longer can segregate children by race. And, increasingly, states are losing the discretion to spend more money in rich school districts and less money in poor school districts.

The perceived failure of school officials to solve important educational and social problems has resulted in a gradual and perhaps increasing diminution of local discretionary authority. While we applaud many of the results of the new educational policies, we should be worrying about a major if unintended effect—the increasing centralization of educational policymaking. We should be concerned especially because recourse to higher authority is becoming habitual. Carried to its clearly foreseeable extreme, we can envision one national system of education or fifty systems of education which are all but indistinguishable. And with it we will have none of the benefits of a centrally planned system of education. What we will have is an unplanned *de facto* national system of education.

But perhaps, it should not be presumed that a centrally controlled educational system will be less good than a decentralized one. After all, recent educational policies have rendered the educational enterprise fairer than it was. Intervention by external authorities has rooted out some very egregious kinds of discrimination. That gain has,



"The technology of testing forces the belief that there is a cutoff score which reveals a level of performance that is adequate." Photo: NAEP.

however, been purchased at a heavy cost, for schools and colleges are becoming increasingly bureaucratized, proceduralized, and regulated.

Moreover, emboldened by this success, some advocates of change now think that schools can be made both more effective and more efficient through judicial and legislative action. It is here that the difficulties of educational policy-making really begin. For one thing, the tools for educational policymaking are rudimentary. For another, the imperatives of the policymaking process seem to lead to rather narrow views of the goals of education, the role of teachers, and the nature of schools. Policymakers have a legitimate responsibility to maintain control over the process by which public purposes are served. They must make use of the best available technology for policymaking. The problem arises when the technology is inadequate to the task and distorts public purposes.

Measurable Goals

In general, education has failed to yield tools and concepts which are both policy-relevant and responsive to the unique condition of education. Educational policies to improve equity or increase productivity must rely on tools and concepts spawned in other arenas. From economics has

come planning-programming-budgeting. From business has come management-by-objectives. From bureaucratic theory has come accountability. From social science has come evaluation. From the law has come due process. Each of these tools and concepts is based upon a rational paradigm which is only partially relevant to education. Yet each has been, and is being, pushed to its theoretical limit as the educational policymaking system tries to control the operating educational system.

Experts who advise policymakers about education have struggled not only to adapt these concepts and tools to education but also to create education-specific concepts and tools. These inventions—like competency-based education, program evaluation, learner verification, and behavioral objectives—generally fail to have the effects which are predicted for them. Education has spawned testing which is seen by many to be a policy-relevant tool. The major deficiency of testing for policy purposes is that it deals with the *results* of education and not with the *workings* of education.

Broadly, education is the means by which society generates and regenerates itself. Advanced societies create formal educational institutions to serve purposes which range from the transmission of the cultural heritage to the generation of the cultural heritage. Schools and colleges confer benefits upon the society and upon the individual. The better its members are educated, the better society is thought to be. As members of society are educated, they are thought to become better members of society—better producers of work and consumers of the culture. Without laboring long at this level of abstraction, it is evident that the broadest purposes of education are not the subject of current educational policymaking. The imperatives of educational policymaking lead to a substantially narrower view of the purposes of education.

At one time policymakers were content to render goals for education abstractly, globally, and with the highest expectations that rhetoric could muster. Stated in such terms the goals were not only unattainable but also difficult to make operational. Policymakers now prefer goals which *appear* attainable and which are measurable. It may be that goals appear attainable because they are measurable, or it may be that they are chosen because they are measurable. At any rate, the rhetorical level is de-escalated and the expectations more modest. In the drive to make educational institutions accountable, goals become narrow, selective, and minimalist. That which is measurable is preferred to that which is unmeasurable. And, as sociologists of organization have demonstrated with a consistency that is remarkable for their craft, measurable goals crowd out non-measurable goals.

Instrumental Objectives

All of this does not explain why policymakers have chosen to emphasize some goals at the expense of others. The goals that are receiving current attention view education instrumentally—not as an end in itself but as preparation for life, especially for the world of work. Elementary schools are to develop in students the basic skills —reading and arithmetic—at the minimal level necessary to function effectively in society. Secondary schools are to do the same plus prepare students for vocation or career. Higher education shares the latter objective, but, for higher education, policymakers have discovered the metric of the credit-hour.

Neither colleges nor schools are viewed *by the policymaking process* as institutions for the generation or transmission of the cultural heritage, beyond that narrow sense encompassed by the basic skills and career education. Nor does the policymaking process view education as an end in itself—as the means to increase individual enlightenment and social welfare.

Consider how the available tools delimit the goals of elementary schools. In education, there is no more highly developed technology than the technology of testing. Here, tests come to define the goals of education, and schooling comes to be evaluated by changes in test scores. The generalized goal that schools should teach children to read and do arithmetic is transformed into the objective that children should be able to evidence their ability to read and to do arithmetic by taking an examination. The technology of testing forces the belief that there is a cutoff score which reveals a level of performance that is adequate.

Dissatisfaction with the abstraction of a "norm" on a test being related to the group taking the test and not to an absolute standard has led

to criterion-referenced testing. This method of testing is independent of the population tested and measures students against an absolute standard of performance. The technology of criterion-referenced testing, when combined with the ideology of basic skills, permits linking tests to the demands of adult life. The goals of education are rendered in instrumental terms, and policymakers are able to control the educational process through specification. They need only determine the basic skills or minimum competencies in reading or arithmetic that are necessary for survival in adult life. In turn, these skills will be made operational by means of criterion-referenced tests.

Throughout this process, the goal of schooling is reduced to the instrumental value of providing just enough reading and arithmetic skill to get by as an adult. While the goal of schooling can be seen in instrumental terms without testing (it has always been so seen) policymakers would not be able to control it. It is one thing to state abstractly that the goal of schooling is to prepare children to function in society and quite another to state it in terms sufficiently precise for operational control.

The transformation of general goals for schooling into narrow instrumental objectives is clearly seen in the movements known as vocational education and career education. It has always been the case that a goal of education was to help prepare people for the world of work. However, as policymakers attempt to make this goal operational through programs of career education and vocational education, the goal becomes both narrow and exclusive. It is of substantial interest to note that the attainment of this goal of schools is not measured by a test of career or vocational skills, although such tests are available. Instead, the measure of this goal is whether a school or college offers courses or a special curriculum in "career or vocational education."

In a similar vein, one of the major goals of institutions of higher education has been to provide education to students. When the provision of higher education is made commensurate with the production of credit-hours, the process of education can be seriously affected. As policymakers allocate funds to institutions on the basis of credit-hour production and as institutions allocate funds on a similar basis to colleges and departments, decisions begin to be made on a narrow basis.

The narrow instrumental view of the goals of education which policymakers appear to hold as they make policy may stand in sharp contrast to their personal views of education. In their private lives, policymakers may not see the primary (and exclusive?) goal of elementary schools as increasing reading test scores. They may not see the primary goal of secondary schools as preparation for careers. And they may not see the goal of higher education in terms of the production of credit hours.

In their personal lives, policymakers may hold a much richer view of the goals of education. Elementary schools are not only to teach basic skills, but also are to instill the desire to learn and to develop the potential of the child. Secondary schools are not only to prepare students vocationally, but also are to develop their critical capacities and to cultivate various interests. Colleges are not only to produce credit hours, but also are to preserve, create, and transmit our cultural and scientific heritage. The point is that the exigencies of the policymaking process, together with the limited technology for making policies, cause policymakers to view the goals of education in narrow instrumental terms.

Hyper-Rationalization

Having delimited the goals of education, the policymaking process requires a means for its implementation. The process demands a view of the teacher that is compatible with attaining the goals. It is here that the rhetoric of accountability enters. Teachers have failed to attain the goals; hence they must be made accountable for goal attainment. The idea of accountability can be implemented by means of the technologies known as competency-based programs. Teachers will develop in students the competencies specified by law. And teachers will know how to do this by having been trained or retrained in competency-based teacher education (CBTE) programs. But competency-based education (CBE) and CBTE contain no new theory of education or instruction.

Presumably, being directed by an accountability or CBE law is thought to be sufficient to cause the teacher to redirect his teaching in a more



effective manner. The policymaking process implies that until accountability laws are implemented teachers will engage in nonfeasance of their duties. But most teachers do not share the view of teaching as a highly rationalistic activity. Teachers' own views of teaching paint the picture of a craft-like activity. Perhaps the disparity in views accounts for the failure of accountability laws.

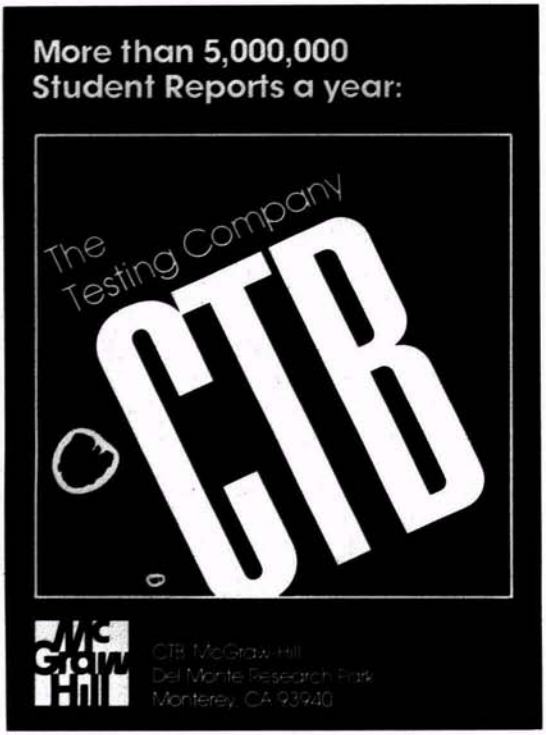
Having delimited the goals of education and having created an image of the teacher, the policymaking process requires a special view of the school. This view is drawn from stereotyped ideas about factories and bureaucracies. The school, like a factory, converts raw materials by a process into products. If one is dissatisfied with the specifications of the product, one need only to redefine the specifications.

The school, like a bureaucracy, is assumed to operate according to the Weberian ideal of hierarchical authority. Absent from this concept is any knowledge of how incentives operate in real organizations. Change will occur if the duly constituted authorities decree it. Occasionally it is added that some retraining of the teachers may be required. But that training is assumed to result in attitudinal and behavioral change in short order. Needless to say, schools do not operate as one would predict from a stereotyped image of a factory or a bureaucracy. Changes, without attendant changes in the incentive structure, are unlikely to occur.

In summary, the policymaking process seems to result in an instrumental rather than a broad view of the goals of education. It presupposes a rationalistic, and to teachers an unrealistic, view of teaching. And it presupposes that schools function like stereotypic bureaucratically organized factories. I refer to this phenomenon as the *hyper-rationalization of education.*

What are the origins of the hyper-rationalization of education? One of its prime causes is the lack of a fully developed science or technology of education. If a science of education existed, it is probable that policymakers would not feel compelled to act so frequently with reference to education, although debates about goals would persist. Moreover, when policymakers did act, a fully developed science of education would provide an array of tools for educational policymaking. Presumably, an array of tools would mean that education would not be demeaned as legislation or litigation is conceived.

In the vacuum created by the absence of a fully developed science of education, other ideologies enter. These include bureaucratic theory, legal reasoning, economic rationality, scientific ration-



ality, and important amalgamations of the preceding, like scientific management. In combination, these modes of thinking about education result in the bureaucratization, proceduralization, and regulation of education. These ideologies provide the conceptual means by which higher authorities attempt to control schools and colleges.

Enough, for the present, has been said about how viewing the school as a bureaucracy appears to facilitate policy interventions. The promulgation of policies will lead to their implementation so long as the chain of command is observed. Legal reasoning has figured prominently in bureaucratic theory since the writings of Weber. In practice, such ideas as circumscribed authority and the proper delegation of authority are hard to define as either legal or bureaucratic principles. In recent times, such legal concepts as equal protection and due process of the law have been brought to bear on schools and colleges. These concepts are employed by courts to alter educational policy and practice. Equally important, however, they have come to be important principles in the internal operation of schools and colleges. As a result of court decisions, and to avoid future court challenges, school and college administrators must function in a judicial manner. Important school decisions, such as those regarding the suspension of students and the firing of teachers, must be made in a quasi-judicial proceeding. The school thereby emulates a court.

Economic rationality is another expectation that is held for schools and colleges. The expectation is not new, but as economic thinking has become more sophisticated its application has become more interesting. Businessmen have always served on the boards of schools and colleges and have insisted that these educational institutions function according to sound business principles. Raymond E. Callahan has described the cult of efficiency which operated in the early part of this century; H. Thomas James has described the more sophisticated new cult of efficiency which has operated more recently. As budgets are squeezed, talk turns to running educational institutions according to the planning-programming-budgeting-system (PPBS) or zero-based budgeting. As teacher unions demand higher wages, talk turns to increasing educational productivity. The intellectual's search for education "production functions" goes on.

Scientific Management

The belief that scientific rationality should be brought to bear on decisions in most facets of modern life is pervasive. Education is no exception; indeed, at least the appearance of scientific rationality has been with education for most of the twentieth century. The mental testing movement, the most highly developed aspect of education treated scientifically, has profoundly affected American education. Empirical inquiry in education has a long and checkered path. From studies of "learning transfer" to H.E.W.'s "planned variation experiments," education has been studied and restudied.

Estimates differ on the extent to which systematic inquiry has affected education. Yet the scientific approach to education is active and pervasive. Hardly anyone will undertake an educational innovation without some sort of evaluation of it. The federal government will implement no educational program without "scientific" evalua-

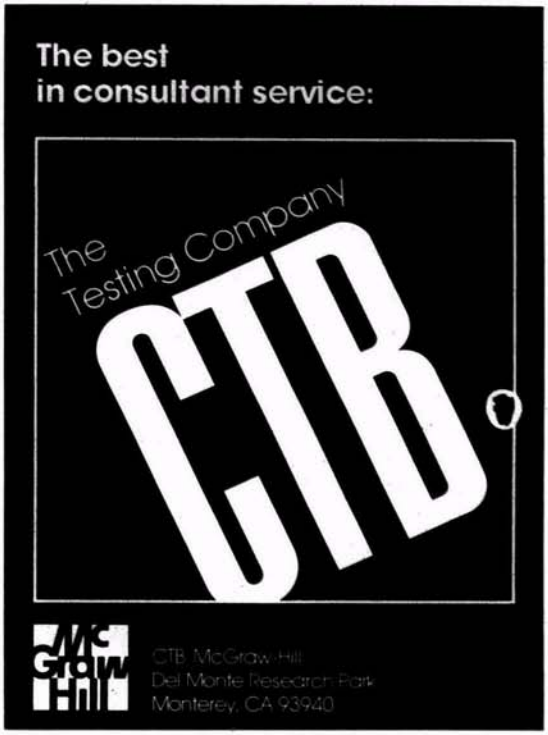
tion of the results. Courts and legislative bodies demand scientific evidence before ruling. The American Educational Research Association membership list grows. Yet, today, as years ago, scientific research in education suffers from the persistent demand that findings be implemented immediately. The result of scientific rationality is all too often scientism—the appearance of science.

Bureaucratic theory, legal reasoning, economic rationality, and scientific rationality are or can be intimately related in education as elsewhere. The appearance of hybrid phrases and words reveals this clearly. "Scientific management" and "technocracy" are but two expressions linking bureaucracy and science. Concepts such as education "production function" link economic rationality, scientific rationality, and education. Hybrid academic specializations arise like "law, social science, and education."

Thus the major ideologies and more specific hybrid ideologies come to dominate thinking about education. In the process, education is affected in profound ways. It becomes more bureaucratic and more legalistic. Whether it also becomes more rational, economically and scientifically, is less clear. What is clear is that the conceptual framework which policymakers employ to change and control education is shaped. In their minds, education becomes hyper-rationalized. In the process schools appear to become fairer places: whether they become more effective or more efficient is open to serious question.

We have long assumed that decisions should be made as close as possible to the place of operation or effect. We have also assumed that decisions should be centralized only when this will result in better decisions. By "better" I mean more effective with respect to goal attainment or more efficient with respect to the consumption of resources to attain goals.

We are now witnessing an erosion of local control and an increasing tendency toward central control of both schools and colleges. The trend appears to arise from (a) a belief in their superior wisdom by those in authority, (b) a tendency to appeal local decisions to courts and to state and federal authorities, and (c) dissatisfaction with the current efficiency and effectiveness of schools and colleges. As authority is accumulated at the center, there is the assumption that better educational



decisions will result. Were that promise not present, one assumes (or would like to assume) that the center would resist the accumulation of authority.

Whether better education results from policies made externally to the school or college is the question. Is there expertise at the center which is lacking locally? Are education professionals engaged in malfeasance or nonfeasance? Can central bodies enforce their technically superior decisions? If not, why do they continue to generate new educational policies? E

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