C410 – Notes on Schooling and Diversity  
Halpern, July 2009

**Premises of Schooling . . .**

Schooling will provide a common socialization experience for all American children, and a common base of knowledge, skills and habits necessary for a complex, industrial economy. In doing so it will equalize life opportunity among those from different backgrounds.

There are too many children needing formal education to treat individually or idiosyncratically. A common educational program (pedagogy, curriculum, time frames) will work well enough for most children. Children will progress at more or less the same rate, once initial differences in experience have been flattened out.

Although children learn in part by acting on the world and with others – exploring, questioning, testing, constructing, deconstructing and so forth, the primary mode of learning in school will be receptive; that is, through transfer of a more or less fixed body of knowledge by teachers and textbooks.

There is too much knowledge to impart to children for it to be treated as a whole; knowledge must be broken apart into small segments and put in scientifically determined sequences.

Knowledge (literacy, numeracy, disciplinary knowledge) is best purveyed to children by specialists in pedagogy, through specialized methods, in special places away from the everyday life of the society (i.e. in schools).

It is more efficient (if not effective) to group children of the same age together for purposes of teaching and learning; it is more efficient to group children together in relatively large schools, lowering the fixed cost per child . . . . It is more efficient (if not effective) to “teach to the middle” of any group of children (and therefore to no one in particular).

Children will be motivated by competition with peers, as reflected in grades. Through such competition they will also learn how people are evaluated in the adult work world.

Children’s learning is best measured by standardized test that allow children to be compared to each other and that capture the extent to which they have mastered a common body of knowledge.

**Problems and Causes . . .**

Children present themselves to school, whether at kindergarten or first grade, with sizable differences in prior experience, background knowledge, mastery of school-related dispositions, self-regulatory capacities, understandings of what school is about, home language, family child rearing priorities, family history of experience with schooling, family resources, and many other factors.

At the same time, as per our discussion of the transition to school, most children begin school feeling good about themselves as learners and enjoying both learning and being in school; all
three of these qualities decline steadily as children progress through the elementary and middle school grades, especially for working class children, children of color and English language learners.

The protected time frame for children to adjust, learn the rules and expectations of schooling, begin to get more organized developmentally, fill in background knowledge, in other words to solidify their student selves, has narrowed. Standardized expectations are apparent already by kindergarten.

As the elementary years proceed, schooling as such works better for some children than for others. Some children simply do not fit the pedagogical approach, rigidity, narrow path and particular set of strengths valued by school as an institution and system.

Yet differences in how well schooling works for children are not randomly distributed within and across groups (race, ethnicity, social class). Schools also work (relatively) better for some groups of children than for others (at least according to standardized achievement test scores). This has recently been called the “achievement gap”.

The quality of schools and schooling – physical resources, skill and experience of teachers, quality of instruction, class size, extra-curricular resources -- varies by social class, race, ethnicity, neighborhood.

Schools continue to be strongly segregated by race and class, reflecting larger patterns of housing segregation.

Children of color are often taught by teachers from different racial/cultural backgrounds than their own. These teachers may bring assumptions to the classroom that complicate their ability to reach children (and parents), communicate expectations, and so forth.

Because of rigid age grading older children have little opportunity to help younger ones learn; because of the competitive model of schooling children of the same age also are discouraged from learning together or helping each other.

Because schooling is a one way (as opposed to reciprocal) process, schools in general tend to minimize and sometimes denigrate what children (and by extension their families) “bring” to school from home and community – home language, traditions, values, communal norms, historic approaches to overcoming adversity.

Schools leave it to children and their parents to bridge the worlds of home and school. (Minow, citing Richard Rodriguez’s argument that schooling is in part about a process of transferring loyalties and transforming identities, building a public identity in children: Rodriguez’s statement that “What I needed to learn in school was that I had the right – and the obligation – to speak the public language of the gringos”).

Historically, when children have struggled in school the fault or blame has been placed on them (their character, intelligence . . .), their parents, and/or their communities, much less commonly on school itself or on such factors as housing and other forms of segregation, socioeconomic inequality . . . (Martha Minow’s argument that the problem of difference is exacerbated in a society in which those with advantage/power use categorical thinking to justify and defend their advantage.)
A certain amount of “failure” is now – has long been – built into the system, the cost of needing to process large number of children in uniform ways (Deschenes et al).

Approaches used to identify and provide extra help to children who are struggling in school sometimes serve also to stigmatize children, through labeling, grouping, tracking, physical separation (pull-out), retention in grade . . .

In the United States a much higher percentage of children are retained in grade than in other countries. (Retention, in the absence of improved instruction, actually increases likelihood of later dropping out.)

Complicating the picture are two findings from the research literature that at first do not seem to fit, but actually do when looked at closely:

(1) A child from a less advantaged background gets more of a “boost” from school each year than does his or her more advantaged peers, even when attending a lower quality school (Downey et al.). (2) Less advantaged children sometimes lose (some of) the learning gains they have made during the school year over the summer months. School makes a bigger difference for less advantaged children because differences in non-school environments are greater among different groups of children than are differences in school environments.

Solutions (a sampling) . . .

Some solutions focus on children . . . As per prior weeks, we try to reduce differences in what children bring to school through preschool education (National Goals Panel, Goal 1: “All children will start school ready to learn”). Early on we try to control children’s progression – into kindergarten and then into first grade, e.g. place children in transitional kindergarten classes. We assess children for various kinds of disabilities and construct special programs for them. We place children in different learning groups.

Some solutions focus on schools . . . Reform efforts have focused on every imaginable macro and micro aspect of school life, from school system governance and racial balance to instructional leadership, curriculum philosophy and content, teaching methods, teacher preparation, grouping of children, motivation systems for children, explicit teaching of appropriate “school behaviors”, opening schools to community life and community support, assessment, accountability, and many other elements. The list is nearly endless and for most ideas that have been tried it is not difficult to find the opposite.

One immediate approach – as per last week’s discussion -- has been to strengthen policies and practices surrounding children’s transition to school. An example of this approach is what has been called “p-k-3”.

At it’s most general, the p-k-3 school is dedicated solely to meeting the unique developmental needs of children from preschool through third grade. It embodies the idea of schools adjusting to children; the idea that early schooling should recognize and account for varying rates of growth among children; and the idea that early schooling requires more responsive, sensitive relationally-oriented teaching.

The p-k-3 concept implies curriculum planning across grade levels, with primary grade pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment building from preschool and kindergarten pedagogy and curriculum.
(“aligning up”). This is achieved through a carefully sequenced learning agenda, with later learning building explicitly on what was learned earlier, in part through consistency across grade (and across teachers within grades).

Structural policies and practices associated with the p-k-3 framework include a preschool program well integrated into a school, small class size, looping and heterogeneous assignment of children to classrooms and flexible groups. Within a classroom of mixed ability levels, teachers differentiate their instruction to account for the varying pace of learning that is common among young children. The p-k-3 model also places emphasis on connecting parents with the school community in both formal and informal ways in an attempt to ease the transition to school.

Somewhat more generally, over the past few decades we have seen elaboration of approaches more respectful of diversity, difference – bilingual education, multicultural curriculum, inclusion (for children with disabilities) . . . These will be addressed in a second, complementary, memo.

The defining current reform emphasis is on standards, testing, and accountability, reflected in the federal No Child Left Behind legislation. The primary goal of this approach is to close the gap on standardized achievement test scores between different groups of children. It is predicated on a new role for the federal government: holding state and local school systems, schools and teachers themselves to clear – and steadily increasing – expectations (“Average Yearly Progress”), as encapsulated in state learning standards and measured by children’s achievement on standardized tests (esp. grades 3-8, states choose their own tests); and providing a mixture of extra support and sanctions when those expectations are not met. Schools must demonstrate improvement each year in all grades and across demographic groups or be deemed in need of improvement, with steadily heightening sanctions year over year.

Beyond what is implied by standards themselves, this approach is largely silent on the qualities of good schools, teaching and learning experiences or the kinds of individuals and society as a whole schools are trying to help grow.

The effects of this federally driven standards and accountability approach to reform have been mixed. In some instances there has been more focused time and attention to teaching and learning. Social promotion has declined. Yet there is also evidence that states are defeating the purpose of standards by “lowering the bar” in defining proficiency in domains for which they are accountable. In some states the tests used to measure children’s achievement do not reflect the content of state learning standards.

There is evidence as well of a flattened and narrowed curriculum as teachers focus learning time on preparing children for standardized testing. Some argue that any evidence of improved test scores primarily reflects more time spent preparing for tests. Labeling specific schools as needing improvement has had a mixed effect, leading to more targeted support and stigmatizing the school, leading to a loss of teachers and students.

A second recent approach to reform – being promoted by the Obama administration -- is charter schools, publicly funded but privately operated schools, exempt from the policies and bureaucracy of the public school system and from the rules negotiated by teachers’ unions.

The charter school movement is enormously diverse and almost impossible to characterize, beyond its implied argument for deregulation and semi-privatization of schools. Charter schools are run by community-based organizations, churches, philanthropists, universities, and
companies listed on the stock exchange. These diverse sponsors espouse any and every philosophy, approach, and educational idea, some old and some never tried before.

In the context of this diversity a growing body of research on charter schools yields some general themes. Charter school quality is as variable as regular public school quality, albeit with higher highs and lower lows. On average there is no evidence that charter school students do any better or worse academically than regular public school students from similar backgrounds. The deregulation associated with charter schools helps in some instance and hurts in others.

Because they have to reproduce many system functions in miniature, create and maintain infrastructure from scratch, and continually raise resources, charter schools are often exhausting for founders and key staff. Some observers have noted a charter school life cycle, with energy, ideals and commitment gradually waning and needing to be renewed.

Questions/Dilemmas:

How do we reconcile the idea that we should create (or re-create) a more developmentally sensitive adjustment to school with the increasing standardization of this initial period of schooling, and the focus on inculcating basic academic skills?

When children do not do well in school, where does responsibility lie? If “all children can learn” why do so many fail-- or at least feel like failures?

Should the goals of schooling be the same for all or most children? How, then, do we respond to the enormous diversity in the population of children and youth? How much variability should a mass system be expected to cope with?

What if there is a problem with the basic premises and organization of schooling?

What would it mean and what would it take for schools to bring children’s home and community resources into the schooling process?

Minow: What is equal treatment for children of different backgrounds and/or profiles of ability?

Minow: People are identified in society by traits beyond their control. Difference is socially constructed; difference as a comparative term; that it, it depends on who has the power to define it. (Look at the kinds of diversity that are contested and the kinds that are not.)

Minow’s difference dilemma: Should those who have been discriminated against, excluded, denigrated historically continue to strive for integration into a society that has rejected them, or should they strive to create their own separate society within the larger one? Is it more helpful for government to address historic discrimination, exclusion by providing special treatment to compensate for it, and thereby possibly emphasizing difference, or minimize it, and thereby let its historic effects continue to play out?

Pernicious assumptions: differences are intrinsic; the norm need not be stated; the observer can look neutrally at a situation; the status quo is natural, uncoerced
Richard Elmore on school reform: The problem is not the supply of new ideas but the demand for them . . . Elmore argues also that, at one level, it is simply not possible to get enough teachers to want deeply enough to put in the work necessary to change identity and practice.

A larger problem is the American tendency to use schools and schooling to work through problems of racial discrimination, social inequality, etc. These are, in reality, political problems, problems that adults should wrestle with first, before subjecting children to their pressures and consequences.
As per last week’s discussion and readings, Martha Minow uses three histories to illustrate the dilemma of difference in the United States, as it has played out in education:

- the history of African Americans’ efforts to achieve integration in education;
- the history of education for disabled children;
- the history of bilingual education.

These three histories share some characteristics – and differ in some ways. For example all three used the courts to remedy past and continuing wrongs and all three drew on constitutional rights and protections to make their case. In the cases of African Americans and disabled children the central fight was for integration/inclusion; in that of bilingual children it was for the right to maintain a distinct cultural/linguistic identity (as well as over the practical question of being educated in a language that fostered deep learning).

All three reflect the problems of conceptualizing and practicing equal treatment for children of different backgrounds and/or profiles of ability. All three reflect the dilemma of identifying children by a particular characteristic, which tends to reduce them to that characteristic, and leads to neglect of both their full individual selves and what they share with all other children.

**Disability . . .**

The literature on disability argues that it both real (innate) and a social construction. What are viewed as disabilities in any society change to some extent over time. New forms of disability are “discovered” and receive social recognition. Prevalence rates of particular disabilities appear to change, due to changes in cultural preoccupations, scientific knowledge, public policy, and other factors. Different sources of authority prevail at different moments – folk beliefs, religion, science, the courts, the medical community. There is some evidence also of “labeling cycles”.

The history of educational services to disabled children prior to the mid-1960s was marked by exclusion, placement in separate programs and facilities, and in some instances institutionalization. It was marked also by an emphasis on use of tests to classify normality and abnormality.

By that decade, advocates for disabled children and adults, especially the Associations for Retarded Citizens (ARCs), who had been fighting exclusion and separation in federal and state courts for a number of years, began to prevail. Advocates for the civil rights of the disabled used the same legal, especially constitutional, arguments as had those for African American children; i.e. that placement in separate facilities and refusal to serve children denied them such rights as due process and equal protection under the law; separate education was inherently unequal.

Gradual, court case by court case and state by state progress culminated in 1975 in Congress’s passage of P.L. 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which required states to provide a free, individualized public education to all disabled children, in the least restrictive appropriate environment. The law has been re-authorized every five years or so and is no called the Individuals With Disabilities education Act (IDEA).
(One painful irony of the use of a civil rights framework to fight for inclusion of disabled children in the education system is the over-representation of children of color in a few of the more stigmatized categories of disability. Children of color are almost three times as likely as white peers to be labeled mentally disabled and twice as likely to be labeled emotionally impaired. Moreover, children of color are significantly less likely than white peers to be served in inclusive settings.)

The law outlined a series of procedures (e.g. comprehensive, inter-disciplinary evaluation, development of individualized educational plans), safeguards and constitutional protections that were intended to lead to an appropriate program and placement. Parents were given a role in determining a child’s placement and in questioning decisions with which they disagreed.

At first the law applied only to children 5-18, but in subsequent re-authorizations it was expanded to include those 3-21, and eventually extended downward to birth to 3, giving rise to what we now call the early intervention system (discussed in previous weeks of the course). Children 3-5 who are not in self-contained special education settings may be served in pre-K classrooms and in community-based programs other than schools, including Head Start centers.

Although federal law creates a variety of mandates for state and local education systems, the federal government only pays for about 10% or less of the total costs of special education.

Nationally about 1-2% of children are in early intervention, about 6% in early childhood special education and about 10-12% in special education.

(New Disabilities . . . Over the past couple of decades a growing proportion of children in special education have had a primary label of learning disability (40-45% or speech/language impairment (30%), followed by mental retardation (10%), emotional disturbance (5%). There is some debate about whether learning disability is a real/useful construct, or something that exists on a continuum of abilities/learning styles. Referral of children for attentional/behavioral issues, including ADHD, is growing but the meaning and diagnosis is variable. Another growing category has been children identified as being on the autistic spectrum.)

The most significant effect of special education laws has been gradually greater presence of disabled children (both preschool and older) in regular education classrooms for gradually greater periods of time and segments of learning activity. Children with disabilities are less likely to be pulled out for special services (thus missing important curricular material and social experiences). Therapists are now more likely to come into the classroom to work with a child, at least in some school settings. Disabled children’s Individual Education Plans are usually implemented in the regular classroom context. Disabled children may have their own classroom aides assigned to provide individualized attention.

There has less progress in the deeper aspects of inclusion – integration of children into the social life and every day learning routines of the classroom and integration of adult roles and responsibilities between regular classroom teachers and special education staff.

Core classroom activities should in theory be modified to accommodate learning needs of children with disabilities, but typically are not. Bricker uses case examples to point out the need for active adult mediation so other children do not infantilize the child or children with disabilities.
With respect to adults, hard work has to be done around scheduling, common understanding of children’s needs, building on the regular curriculum to develop special learning activities, and so forth. There has been some movement to bring special education techniques into regular classroom pedagogy. Efforts have been made to create teaching teams using regular classroom teachers and special educators (Collaborative teaching).

**Challenges . . .**

There has been a longstanding tension in the special education field, between an emphasis on inclusion and an emphasis on expansion of rights. As Minow notes, assertion of rights always intensifies “groupness” . . . “Recognizing the special needs of disabled children can run counter to granting them entry to the educational worlds of other children”. Pushing hard for inclusion actually points up difference.

(Special education itself as a sub-discipline within education has been ambivalent, seeking both greater integration and influence within regular education and trying to maintain its own identity, with recognition of its distinctive knowledge base and techniques.)

Some have tried to get around the inclusion dilemma by emphasizing the diversity of learners in general, and by arguing that many elements of the approaches designed for children with disabilities are also beneficial for their non-disabled peers.

Relationships between parents of disabled children and schools have been shaped, some say distorted, by the legal basis for those relationships.

As the population of children in American schools has become more diverse, cultural values and norms around disability have become a more important variable, but one which remains largely unexamined.

Class issues . . . More advantaged parents sometimes try to dance at the edge of the special education system, demanding attention and resources for their children while resisting labelling. That may be why so many children in early childhood special education have tentative or global diagnoses.

In recent decades the story of educating disabled children has been in part about the distribution of scarce public resources. Some have asked why a particular label should open or close the door to the resources a child needs. Some have argued that distribution of educational resources is a “zero sum game”, with winners and losers.

One challenge in early childhood special education has been implementing inclusion in preschool settings that themselves have a variety of quality issues and resource constraints.

One notable challenge, alluded to above, has been that of embedding IEP goals and activities in regular classroom goals and activities. For example an IEP may specify that a child work on and master a very specific skill and the child may need repeated practice to do so. This has to be organically built in to learning activities in a way that does not single that child out. As another example, teachers in early childhood classrooms with a good deal of self-directed play and learning activity have noted challenges in integrating IEP tasks in. (It has been noted that for disabled preschoolers objectives are often developmental but methods behavioral.)
There seems a need to discern children’s perspective – take “Thomas” from Classroom 506, who seems more interested in being one of the kids than in optimizing his learning with special assistive technology, which tends to set him apart.

*Issues/ Questions . . .*

How might we better integrate legal, medical, psycho-social and educational definitions of “disabled child”?

Should those who support and educate disabled children try to help them strive to be as much as possible like typically developing children or to be as much as possible “themselves”?

Do disabled and children and their non-disabled peers have the same interests in the classroom?

If disabled children can be shown to have certain constitutional rights to an education that meets their needs, why not non-disabled children?

How do individualized education plans complicate efforts to fully include children in classroom life? What kind of individualization framework might work better than the IEP framework in that regard (e.g. if all children were individually “mapped” through a curriculum)?

Why the disproportion of children of color and children from low-income family circumstances in the special education system?

What can inclusion mean in a deeper sense when millions of children are educated in racially and/or socio-economically segregated settings?

Why do we focus in educational policy and practice on the particular differences we do – race, language, “disability”?

Minow: neither integration nor separation can eradicate the meaning of difference as long as the majority locates difference in the minority group.

**English Language Learners (ELLs). . .**

Language policy, both in schooling and in American society at large, has been a potent issue for a long time. It has been shaped by the country’s longer-term goals – for example supporting the idea of a common heritage – and at any moment in history by prevailing social, economic and demographic concerns – external threats to society, economic recession, rapid immigration, and so forth.

Language policy has also been at the heart of -- one can say it embodies -- Americans’ struggle to decide how they feel about the country’s enormous diversity.

Over the course of U.S. history there have been both “permissive”periods” in language policy – broadly speaking the 18th and 19th centuries -- and “restrictive” periods – a good part of the 20th century. At the moment we are in the midst of the latter.
Growth of mass schooling and mass production over the course of the 20th century obviously required language standardization.

Language policy issues have been heightened recently as American society has experienced a more pronounced shift in the ethnic make-up of the population – almost one third of young children in the United States now live in homes in which language other than English is spoken, at least at times. (Three fourths of those children live in Spanish-speaking homes.)

Language is pivotal because it is at the core of personal identity and at the same time mediates access to the curriculum of schooling, and later on access to jobs. (More generally, “Children’s acquisition and use of words as symbols ultimately frees their thinking and experience from the here and now and the concrete . . .”)

Immigrants’ motives and goals (for themselves and their children) around learning English can be complex, a mixture of hopes and fears.

The population of children we are immediately addressing here are sometimes called English Language Learners (ELLs) and sometimes Limited English Proficient (LEP). Definitions of ELL vary; classification practices vary by school district. A somewhat broader group is those children from English as a Second Language (ESL) backgrounds.

More broadly we are concerned about bilingualism and bilingual-biculturalism – growing up and learning in more than one language/cultural environment. (In one study of relatively recent Spanish-speaking immigrant families about 70% spoke only Spanish at home, the remainder Spanish and English.)

The recent (past 40 year) history of education policy for ELLs in some respects parallels that for African American children and for disabled children, in that it reflects (1) using the courts and using constitutional arguments to establish the right to be taught in one’s home language, if that is necessary for understanding educational material; and (2) the passage of legislation by Congress to mandate states to provide some kind of bilingual education.

The problem is that “bilingual education” or bilingual/ESL (English as a Second Language), as this process has come to be called, has been interpreted very differently by state and local school systems around the country. For example, should the goal be to develop and maintain bilingualism or to build proficiency in English (“transitional bilingual education”)? What subjects/material should be taught in English and what in one’s home language? How long should instruction and learning in one’s home language be continued? Should ELLs spend as much time as possible with English-speaking peers or be protected from those demands for as long as possible?

There are also two overlapping concerns, which sometimes get conflated – second language acquisition and literacy development (in both the first and second languages). The two issues so quickly come together because so much learning is from texts; for example ELLs are thought to sometimes lack the English vocabulary needed to learn from texts.

Bilingualism is sometimes viewed as a strength and sometimes as a vulnerability. For example bilingual children benefit from heightened metalinguistic awareness. They may also have a heightened sense of meta-cultural awareness. Yet some children enter school nearly being able to communicate and read in their home language or in both first and second languages, but never getting there. Children can sometimes become trapped between two languages, and have, for example, more limited vocabulary and decoding skills in both languages than monolingual peers, more difficulty sharing ideas, following class discussion, etc.
ELLs need what have been called cognitive-linguistic bridges; for example younger ELLs need physical artifacts, gestures, visual aids, repetition, more concrete conversations, teachers who can move back and forth between English and a home language . . . This is sometimes called a hybrid model, with the goal be communication using whatever pedagogical tools are needed, including ongoing mutual translation.

It seems simultaneously true that rigid approaches to bilingual education do not work and that it is important to have a clear philosophy and approach. Teachers sometimes describe what seem to be “compassionate compromises” between policy, their experience, and what individual children need.

**Challenges . . .**

When children are English Language Learners or come from homes where a language other than English is spoken, there is a tendency to reduce them to (or focus on them as) language learners and ignore the fact that they have the same complex learning and developmental profiles as other children.

As with children with disabilities, teachers with ELL children in their classrooms often feel ill-equipped and inadequately supported.

Some of the same “inclusion” challenges discussed with respect to children with disabilities apply to ELLs.

The rate at which ELLs acquire English proficiency is highly variable.

We still lack an adequately clear picture of developmental processes involved in second language literacy attainment during the critical 3-8 year old period, and corresponding best instructional practices.

When ELLs are struggling academically it is particularly difficult to sort out the causes. Children may even appear to be struggling more than they are; for instance, when learning a second language children may be more or less silent for some period of time – they are learning by listening – but may be perceived as not understanding or performing.

Social class issues often interact with language learning issues.

It has proven difficult in the American context for immigrant children to negotiate the demands of school and home/community in a positive way; learning English has too often become a “subtractive” process, a matter of losing one’s “family language” (and that part of one’s identity). That has resulted, further, in some loss of sense of affiliation with family, more subtly loss of a sense of having a foundation in life.

Children and youth make their own interpretation of language policy and debate, and that interpretation often is that to be different is to be unacceptable.

**Issues/Questions . . .**
What ideas and findings from what we know about language learning are most important to include in our debates about bilingual education and bilingualism?

Should ELLs learn in, do they learn best in, classrooms with a preponderence of English-dominant children? As with inclusion, might they be there but still be apart?

To what extent should schooling and language policy be used to foster “large” cultural integration, if it means the loss of many “small” cultures?

How should parents understand the goals of their children’s schools with respect to supporting the development of bilingualism or, alternatively, fostering English dominance? What are educators’ responsibilities to share their goals with parents?