ED 790: Social Foundations of Schooling  
D.K. Cohen and R. Bain  
Course Syllabus  
Fall, 2010 (Cohen)  
Tuesday, 1:00 to 4:00 PM  
SOE # 4212

I. OVERVIEW

This seminar focuses on one fundamental issue for public education: What is the schools’ role in U.S. society, and what might it be? Horace Mann, one of the founders of public education, famously wrote in the 1840s that public schools would be “…the balance wheel of the social machinery”, that schools would redress growing social and economic inequality by offering equal education to all students, and that the equality of their school experience would level the playing field of adult life. These ideas became a key argument for public schools, embraced by left-wing workers, conservatives who were worried about immigrants and social disorder, and the Supreme Court in its decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. These ideas also are one reason that other aspects of U.S. social policy – unemployment, old-age insurance, health care, welfare, and child care chief among them – have been so modestly provided; if public schools leveled the playing field, other sorts of social policy would be needed less. Since the founding of common schools, Americans have turned to them repeatedly to solve deep social problems like poverty and racial segregation, which some commentators believe has pulled schools away from what they genuinely can achieve in teaching and learning. Those same ideas help to explain why, when state and federal policymakers grew concerned about inequality in the late 20th century, they turned to academic standards and tests to eliminate it in schools, rather than using wage policies, economic development, and taxation to reduce it in society.

Mann’s ideas implied two other notions: That schools could be changed to suit the purposes of those in charge, and that schools would be a powerful social force, counteracting the effects of social and economic inequality. Though the ideas have been very influential, educators, reformers, and policymakers argued about the schools' social role, and their ability to change, since public education began. Some opposed public education, especially in the South, where whites understood that education for blacks and poor whites (except in some cities like New Orleans or Atlanta there were no common schools in the South for poor whites until after the Civil War), would erode white power. By
the 1930s some liberal critics argued that schools reflected the social order rather than re-making it; George Counts and others published research which showed that the very social forces that reformers and educators thought schools would overcome actually shaped schools and the action of people in them. In the 1960s, several studies – James Coleman's *Equality of Educational Opportunity Survey* chief among them -- amplified Counts’ findings, and raised deep doubts about Mann’s ideas. Since then, researchers have vigorously probed the part that schools play in social and economic inequality; there is a great deal of evidence on the schools’ effects, but the arguments remain quite unresolved. Recent debate about NCLB turns on this point, among several others.

Teaching, learning, and curriculum figured prominently in most views about the schools and their role in U.S. society; Mann’s ideas concerned not only schools and systems, but also teaching. He argued that humane and intelligent instruction was essential to the schools’ work, opposing those who saw schools as a corrective for social deviance and argued for teaching facts and obedience. Mann and his allies in Massachusetts also were convinced that teaching and learning could change dramatically. But if many who saw schools as a democratic force argued that teachers should encourage independent thought, later advocates of democracy in schools promoted watered-down and bowdlerized versions of academic subjects. Relatively few argued that tough academic work for all students was the best way for schools to advance democracy, but that view gained some adherents in the second half of the 20th century.

These arguments, the schools’ actions, and the evidence on school performance will be the work of this seminar. We will consider the role that schools played in the formation of U.S. society, the role that U.S. society played in shaping schools, the roles they play today, and Americans’ ideas about these matters. We will approach the subject in light of several questions:

1. How have educators and others seen the role of schools in American society?
2. How did schools deliver on those ideas? What school and social factors explain schools’ performance?
3. What role did social, economic, and government structure play in interactions between schools and society?
4. What role did teaching, learning, and curriculum play in the arguments? In schools’ performance?
5. Do the answers to these questions remain stable or change?
6. In what ways have schools been able to change, and in what ways have they not?
7. What role has research played in framing the issues and offering answers?

One of the main objectives of the class is to help you learn how these questions have been answered -- i.e., how public education has shaped American society, and how American society has shaped public education. Another objective is to help you learn how you would answer the questions.

This is not a seminar in the history of education, but history will be a key part of our work. For one cannot understand the relations between schools and society without understanding how the schools began, how they changed, and the ways in which past practices, organization, and ideas pervade the present. As William Faulkner is reputed to have said: “The past is not dead; it is not even past.” Thus we will probe the questions above at several points in the evolution of U.S. schools and society.

We begin in the early 1800s, with the invention of public schools in New England, when both state schools and arguments about the schools’ relation to U.S. society first took form. We will take up the questions again, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when elementary school attendance was nearly universal, when the U.S. was well on the way to an industrial economy and an urban society, and when there were many pressures to re-invent the schools and their relation to U.S. society. We will return to the questions after WW II, when the school system that we know today had been mostly formed, when problems that had not been anticipated at the outset plagued the schools, and when public education became the focus of persistent criticism and efforts to reinvent it.

II. CLASS ASSIGNMENTS AND READING

Unless otherwise noted, all of the readings are available on the ED 790 2010 site on C-Tools. You will need your UM uniquename and password to log into
c-tools and download the readings. Be sure to bring electronic or print copies with you to class.

**Part I: Create a better society with schools.** In this part of the seminar we will investigate the ideas and conflicts that informed the formation of public education, conceptions of the relations between school and society, the learning and teaching that existed and disputes about what they should be, and the role of research in those disputes. This is a critical moment for the seminar’s work because we will be there at the creation. But since very little is ever created *de novo*, we also will investigate how the educational past shaped the new order of state-sponsored and operated schools.

**First class, September 7: The promise of public schools.**

**Discuss:**
(First part of class) What problems were schools expected to solve? What were the educational mechanisms that would enable them to solve those problems? (For the second part of class) What were Sumner’s key arguments against segregated Boston schools? What was the court’s reasoning?

**Read:**

For this class and Sept 14, read W.J. Reese “The Origins Of the Common School’, Chapter I in *America’s Public Schools*.

**Second class, September 14: Schools, Teaching, and Social Improvement**

**Discuss:**
(First part of class) What were the key differences between the Boston Grammar
School Masters’ view of learning, and those in Mann’s Seventh Annual Report? What ideas about the schools’ role in society do the arguments express?

What were the key points in the Visiting Committee’s critique of teaching and learning in the Grammar Schools? What sort of teaching did the Committee encourage? What role did research play in the committee’s work?

(Second part of class) What were Colburn’s key ideas about teaching and learning? What can we learn from his preface, and the grammar School Visiting Committee, about the teaching that public schools in Massachusetts probably inherited from the pre-existing schools?

Read:


Wrap-up: In what respects was the establishment of public schools an innovation, and in what respects a continuation of past practice?

Part II. New schools for a new society? In this part of the seminar we will investigate critiques of schools, efforts to revise schools’ organization, curricula, teaching, and their relationship to U.S. society, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. We will explore the ideas that informed efforts to revise schooling, how schools changed as they became part of a mass system, and what practices persisted.

Third class, September 21: Change and criticism.

Discuss:
What are the similarities and differences (in procedure, critique, and proposals for change), between J. M. Rice’s study of teaching and the Boston Grammar School Visiting Committee’s study? Was anything new in Rice’s critique? What would Mark Twain say about Coburn’s preface and Rice’s chapters?

Read:
Mark Twain, *Life On The Mississippi*, chapters 4,5,6,7,8,9.

Fourth class, September 28: Urban politics and schools: Chicago

Discuss:
What were the key differences between the French design for schools, and the one in Illinois? What were the key issues in the relations between schools and society in Chicago, in the decades that bracketed the turn of the 20th century?

9/27/10: The new question(s): On George Counts’ view, what were the chief ways in which society influenced schools in Chicago? How can these influences be explained? Were there ways in which the schools influenced society?

Read:
Frank Anderson, “Documents of the Convention and Education” # 38 Documents upon the Convention and Education, pp. 167-68.
Margaret Haley, *Why Teachers must Organize*

Fifth class, October 5: The system and its problems

Discuss: Counts’ puzzle: what is the best means of political control of schools?

Read:
Counts, chapters 14 and 15
Cohen & Neufeld

Sixth class, October 12: Views of schools and society: Dewey and Thorndike.

Discuss: What problems did Dewey propose that schools should solve? Thorndike? How did each think schools would solve them? How did each see the existing relations between schools and society, and what did each propose that the relations should be?

Read:
John Dewey, School and Society. Chicago, University of Chicago pp. 6-178.
Geraldine Joncich, Psychology and the Science of Education: Selected Writings of E.L. Thorndike. Read all of the two selections in this week’s folder, pp. 55-83

No class Oct 19.

Seventh Class, Oct 26: The effects of approaching universal attendance.

The advocates of common schools anticipated many benefits from state sponsored schooling for all, including education that would protect democracy from citizens’ ill-considered and ignorant action, and would combat social and economic inequality. They did not consider the likely effects, on schools, of attendance by an increasingly large fraction of the age-eligible population.

Discuss: What were the chief effects, on schools, of attendance that approached universality? Did schools become the creatures of the society they were intended to change? What do these books suggest about the relations between schools and society in the U.S.?
READ:

Robert and Helen Lynd, Middletown, Chapters 1, 3, 13, 14, 16.
August Hollingshead, Elmtown's Youth, Preface, Chapters 1, 3, 7, 8.

Wrap-up query: In what respects was the revised organization of public schools in the first three decades of the 20th century an innovation, and in what respects a continuation of past practice?

First writing assignment (due at 5:00 PM Nov 5): What problems did Dewey propose that schools should solve? Thorndike? What did each man see as the key to schools' problem solving? What are the most important differences and similarities in their views?

Eighth class, Nov 2: The dynamics of the (nearly) mature K-12 system (cont’d).

We will dig a bit more deeply into the issues on which we began last week, including the content of academic work in a school system that enrolled many students who would have preferred to be elsewhere, and in a society that valued schooling but had little use for intellectual work. Another issue that we did not yet take up concerns the effects that school attendance by most age-eligible students in the K-12 schools had on K-8 schools.

Discuss: What were the chief effects, on schools, of attendance that approached universality? Did schools become the creatures of the society they were intended to change? What do these books suggest about the relations between schools and society in the U.S.? (If these questions seem familiar, they are – they were assigned last week as well.)

Read:
Re-read Cohen & Neufeld. Shopping Mall High School, pp. 261-73 (re-read), and read pp. 264-279.
J. Zimmerman, “Storm over the Schoolhouse: Exploring Popular Influences upon the American Curriculum, 1890–1941.” Teachers
Part III: Schools and society in the era of constant reform. In this last segment we consider the relations between schools and society in a changed social and political context. Change in the economy and ideas about economic life led Americans to give greater emphasis to the economic character of schooling. The U.S. position in the world, as a super-power following WW II, placed schools, along with much else in U.S. society, in a new, increasingly international situation. The maturity of the K-12 system, with the inclusion of a large fraction of the age-eligible population, led educators and commentators to intense disputes about the nature and quality of the education that schools did and should provide. Social movements and research fed growing concern about inequality in schooling and its outcomes.

We investigate the relations between schools and society in this new context; our analysis will probe the context, several kinds of school reform, and their relationships. We will begin by considering how reforms aimed at improving the quality of education were designed, and how they affected practice. Each had significant effects. Then we will consider several reforms that sought to reduce inequality in education, and their effects. Finally, we will consider standards-based reform, which aims to increase academic rigor while reducing inequality.

Ninth class, Nov 9: The aims of schooling and the movement to repair academic quality.

Here we will consider social and political struggles over the schools’ accommodations to American culture, in the Bestor/Rickover movement to “recover” academic quality, and in the curriculum reforms that were inspired by academic critics of schools’ weak performance.

Discuss: Consider the design of MACOS: what were its strengths and weaknesses? Could the design have been improved? If so, how? If not, why not?

Read:
Peter Dow: Schoolhouse Politics.... Read pp 10-32; skim (if you can keep from

All of Wayne Welch article.

Powell, et al, Shopping Mall High School, pp. 279-92. (In the folder for the eighth class.)

Tenth class, Nov 16: Schools and inequality (1): This session will consider the design, operation, and effects of Title I of the 1965 ESEA.

Discuss: What were the key elements in the design of Title I? What explains its implementation problems and modest effects? What could have been done to design arrangements to improve teaching and learning in the program, as it existed at the end of the 1970s? What do the answers imply about the relations between schools and society in the U.S?

Read:
Cohen&Moffitt, The Ordeal of Equality, Chapters 1,2,3,4.

Eleventh class, Nov. 23: Schools and Inequality (2) This session will take up research on the schools’ role in social and economic inequality.

Discuss: What part do schools play in reducing or maintaining the educational effects of social and economic inequalities among students?

Read:

Twelfth class, Nov 30: Schools and inequality (3)
In this class we will investigate a set of reforms that aim to deal both with inequality and educational quality -- standard-based reform in the 1980s and 90s.

**Discuss:** Could ambitious state and federal policies succeed in the U.S. system? If so, what would their success require? If not, what are the prospects for educational quality and equality?

**Read:**


**Thirteenth class, Dec. 7 Schools and inequality (4)**

This session will take up another recent effort to use schools to eliminate the educational effects of social and economic inequality: The movement for Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) that began in the 1980s, and continues today.

**Discuss:** How do the nature and scope of the designs compare with Title I?
What are the key elements of each design, and the main ideas about how each would work? What explains their implementation and effects?
What is their bearing on the question of school change?

**Read:**


B. Rowan, R. Correnti, R. Miller and E. Camburn, “Improvement By Design: Lessons from a Study of Comprehensive School Reform Programs”

**Second writing assignment** (due Dec 14).

**III. REQUIREMENTS AND EVALUATION**

Though the substantive focus of the course is the role of schools in U.S. society, this course concerns scholarship in education. That includes the role
that scholars and scholarship have played in public education, how scholarship has been done, how it can be understood, and how you can do it. There is much more to good scholarship than research methods: it also requires things that methods courses deal with only indirectly, if at all: Having productive ideas, and making defensible arguments. Sound evidence and appropriate methods of inquiry are important contributions to a good argument, but they are only part of the story.

The seminar’s work consists of reading, discussion of the reading, and writing; each is a central element in scholarship.

**Reading:** Few things that are worth reading can be well understood by reading them once. Most of the material that we will read for this course, unlike many novels and much poetry, makes an argument, and deploys evidence in support of the argument. To read such material well one must figure out what the argument is, consider whether it is consistent, figure out what sorts of evidence is deployed, whether it is germane to the argument, and, if germane, whether it supports the argument. It is difficult to apprehend an argument without reading sympathetically, but it is impossible to weigh the success of an argument without reading it critically. **One of the chief objectives of this course is to help you to exercise and improve sympathetic and critical reading.**

**Writing:** There will be two, 4-5 typed, single-spaced papers. I expect members of the class to make sound arguments, to write clear, well-organized papers, and to appropriately use evidence and analysis from the readings. Competent but pedestrian work passes. Thoughtful and imaginative analysis gets higher marks. In most cases it is a mistake to suppose that one draft will suffice to produce a good paper; typically, several drafts are required to produce a presentable result. One learns what one thinks as one tries to explain it to others, and part of becoming a scholar or a scholarly practitioner is learning to become a sympathetic but effective critic of one’s own ideas. **Another chief objective of this course is to help you to improve your writing, and your sympathetic but critical reading (and editing) of your writing.**

The papers count for 70% of the final grade. These papers must be in MS Word, and
sent to me as e-mail attachments, so I can type comments (my handwriting is poor).

I expect papers to cite sources, and to reference the exact page source of the material in question. Plagiarism (the use of material, whether a direct quote, paraphrase, or a key idea, without citation), in either paper will result in a failing grade for the course.

**Class work:** Most class sessions will center on analysis of the readings in light of the discussion questions. I expect each member of the class to have well prepared answers to the discussion questions, and to be able to identify and respond to likely objections. We will begin each class by listening to at least several of these answers, and then will discuss the objections and ensuing points. There will be few lectures; active work on specific issues of analysis offers members of the class more opportunities to learn than listening to lectures, and it offers me more opportunities to understand your ideas. I expect your comments to be referenced to the readings. Each member of the class should bring copies of the readings to class, so you can refer to them readily. Most readings will be available on c-tools.

Contributions to the class discussions will count for 30% of the course grade. My criteria for judging these contributions are like those for written work: clear arguments, and the use of evidence from the readings (or elsewhere). I place the same premium on thoughtful analysis in class as in the papers. **Still another chief objective of this course is to help you to improve the conciseness and clarity your speaking.**

Assignments are due when indicated, with no incompletes or extensions. Barring medical emergencies, late papers will get no credit.

**IV. COMMUNICATION**

The best way to reach me is e-mail. My address is: dkcohen@umich.edu. My office phone is 763-0226, which my assistant, Ms. Terri Ridenour, answers. Her direct-dial number is 647-7449. Office hours are by appointment. I keep my own calendar, and the best times are Thursday before or after this class, or Tuesday afternoon.