

Book Review:

**HOW TEACHERS TAUGHT:
CONSTANCY AND CHANGE IN AMERICAN
CLASSROOMS 1890-1980**

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In How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms 1890-1980, Larry Cuban tries to answer the question of why teaching practices have stayed constant over a ninety year span while society around them has changed with the development of new technology, psychological advancements and the development of new educational theory. Looking at the organization of a typical classroom in a public school, one realizes that the first question posed by Cuban dealing with whether or not teacher-centered instruction persevered in public schools in the face of reform movements that tried repeatedly to install student-centered instruction have failed.¹ The value of his text comes from the following question that he answers, which deals with why teacher-centered practices persisted, and if they did not, what changes occurred². Cuban implicitly suggests that teacher-centered instruction persisted because of three main factors: administrative leadership, teacher buy-in and funding which is related to community buy-in. Cuban's book, although a well trodden topic has a value demonstrated in his exhaustive amounts of research and his talent for analysis which provides a basis for why curriculum reforms during that ninety year span failed.

Larry Cuban is a professor emeritus of education at Stanford University and has spent his entire professional career dealing with the education world in some capacity or another.³ Cuban has written eight books on various topics in education ranging from the integration of technology in the classroom, school leadership, and teaching in urban schools. Cuban's background in the field of education before he became of professor at Stanford University includes fourteen years of teaching high school social studies in big city schools, directing a teacher program that

¹ Cuban, Larry. How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms 1890 – 1980. Longman Inc. New York, New York. 1984 P. 7

² Cuban, Larry. How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms 1890 – 1980. Longman Inc. New York, New York. 1984 P. 7

³ Cuban, Larry. How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms 1890 – 1980. Longman Inc. New York, New York. 1984 P. VII

prepared returning Peace Corps volunteers to teach in urban schools, as well as becoming the superintendent of public instruction in Arlington, Virginia. Cuban returned to Stanford University in 1981 and three years later published How Teachers Taught. Cuban's experience informs his perspective; it becomes clear that there are "dual perspectives of historian and schoolman, the dispassionate "long view" of the disciplined scholar and the impassioned and practical concern of the front-line decision maker" at play in his assessment why teacher-centered education often prevailed. The strength of Cuban's writing does not just deal with completing research as an outsider but as person that can sympathize with a teacher's point of view and as a former policy maker.⁴

Cuban structures his book in an obvious chronological order, but does so in dividing the period of study into two distinct eras. The first part of his study deals with the time period from 1890 to 1940 focusing on the aftermath of the Committee of Ten report and origins of "progressive" education through the eight-year study, most notably focusing on Denver.⁵ The second era, from 1965- to 1980, deals with the open classrooms, alternative schools and the next wave of progressive education reform.⁶

Cuban maintains continuity throughout his book as he looks at certain geographical areas like he did in the first era with Washington, D.C. and in the second era when he used Arlington, VA. Cuban organized his research in a certain order so that the reader is able to draw parallels between each era and study. Cuban does this by first naming the area that he is going to study and looks at the geographical area and social condition in which the school itself or the system as

⁴ Cuban, Larry. How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms 1890 – 1980. Longman Inc. New York, New York. 1984 P. VII

⁵ Cuban, Larry. How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms 1890 – 1980. Longman Inc. New York, New York. 1984 P. 17

⁶ Cuban, Larry. How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms 1890 – 1980. Longman Inc. New York, New York. 1984 P. 147

whole is placed. The ensuing part deals with how the school system is set up and then focuses on elementary schools and what were the typical activities taking place in the classroom, how the classroom was arranged, and the reforms that were being implemented. Cuban then looks at the environment of the high schools in the area/district and how the teachers had their classrooms arranged, what types of instruction was implemented and how the efforts of reform were either taking hold or being rebuffed.

Cuban's research and through previous teaching experience it becomes clear that administrative leadership or lack thereof is a crucial piece to whether or not student-centered reforms could take hold in American classrooms. The most prominent example given in which student-centered education gained a strong foothold is the eight year study which took place in Denver with a lot of it being attributed to the "continuity in superintendent leadership; a leadership that shared faith in both progressive pedagogy and the pivotal importance of the teacher".⁷ On the other hand though a nation trying to educate all of its citizens argued that the mechanical system that was put into place was often "suffocating [to] imaginative teaching" perhaps because administrators were worried about being held accountable to certain standards and would therefore institute policies that would hinder student-centered approaches because no study had proven that it was a model for success. For change to occur in an entire school system, leadership is the first key ingredient that must be added, because the decision makers are the ones that decide if they are going to rely on a traditional mechanical system of education or be willing to change. Cuban's research allows the reader to delve into both sides of the argument, and by doing this; it is made clear that there is a possibility for change in education.

⁷ Cuban, Larry. How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms 1890 – 1980. Longman Inc. New York, New York. 1984 P. 82

Though administrative leadership is integral for any academic reform to begin to take place, the ones actually implementing these reforms in the classrooms are the ultimate deciders of whether or not these reforms grow roots. Cuban once again views this problem from both sides. Many teachers' viewed the goal of universal implementation of a student-centered curriculum as a hopeless endeavor because of how the public school system is set up, with "large class size, administrative indifference or hostility, and a general negative attitude" as well as the "common argument given by many teachers [citing] the great amount of extra work it took"⁸ These points of view can be easily seen because of the wealth of reforms that have swept the American educational system over the years, because it is natural to be pessimistic of adopting a reform when it is known that in a few years the reform will be pushed aside only to learn that a new one was going to be instituted. That is why teacher-centered instruction will always persevere unless the teacher is made a stakeholder in the reform movement, which was done in Denver as teachers were active participants in the revision of the curriculum that was to be put into place.⁹ Through Cuban's study it is clear that teacher buy-in is the most integral aspect of whether or not our education system as a whole could ever shift from the traditional teacher-centered model to a more student-centered system of education.

One of the major strengths of How Teachers Taught is the terminology that Cuban uses to define the breadth of his research and the questions that he is determined to answer. Herbert Kliebard notes of this in his classic on education, The Struggle for the American Curriculum 1893-1958, as Cuban chooses a topic that has a more manageable focus than whether or not schools were "progressive" or not, mainly because as Kliebard asserts that if the study had dealt

⁸ Cuban, Larry. How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms 1890 – 1980. Longman Inc. New York, New York. 1984 Pgs. 43 and 60

⁹ Cuban, Larry. How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms 1890 – 1980. Longman Inc. New York, New York. 1984 P. 70

with whether or not classroom practices were “progressive” would have been difficult, if not impossible to answer.¹⁰ The reasoning is because the term “progressive” is vague and has often been manipulated to fit an interest group’s needs.

Cuban goes about his study scientifically looking at each distinct period and the reforms that were trying to be implemented. Cuban typically uses graphs and charts to quantify his findings. Cuban does this because his research is so extensive, he tries to make inferences from photographs, the textbooks teachers used, student recollections, teacher reports and evaluations, visitor reports on the classroom, and classroom architecture such as the formation of desks.¹¹ Cuban also makes the reader fully aware of the problems facing a scholar doing his type of research:

*Historians have to cope with the twin problems of selectivity of evidence (i.e. what survives and is available may be a typical of the category) and the biases of sources (e.g. a photographer in 1900 posed students to illustrate the “New Education”)*¹²

What is most perplexing in trying to gauge the definitiveness of his research is that time and again Cuban fails to provide evidence of the type of students involved in the different studies; leading one to conclude that those students were typically the most gifted and well behaved students allowing those curriculum reforms to succeed. These conclusions have to be drawn by the reader looking at the community these schools, like the Denver model, were located in. If Cuban could have provided research to show the reader the type of students, perhaps by average GPA of the experimental group before the study began, that the teacher was dealing with in each

¹⁰ Kliebard, Herbert. The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958. RoutledgeFalmer. New York, New York. 2004. P. 217

¹¹ Cuban, Larry. How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms 1890 – 1980. Longman Inc. New York, New York. 1984 P.7

¹² Cuban, Larry. How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms 1890 – 1980. Longman Inc. New York, New York. 1984 P. 8

era and reform movement and how those students compared to their grades when they were done with the study instead of just pitting them against a control group. That would have enabled the reader to come to their own conclusions as to whether or not these reforms had merit.

Cuban achieves his aim of showing how and why the teacher-centered approach to education has persevered in the face of so many efforts to implement student-centered reforms. Even though this book is twenty-five years old it is still relevant in the study of twentieth century curriculum reform because it provides scholars, students and teachers with concrete evidence as to why classrooms have stayed relatively the same during that ninety year period. It would be interesting to have a second edition written that would go through the No Child Left Behind Era and the renewed emphasis on testing and teacher accountability and the effects these policies had on efforts made to create more classrooms implement a student-centered approach to education. Ultimately, How Teachers Taught provides an enormous wealth of information and research that would be appropriate as supplementary reading for graduate seminars in the history of American education and curriculum reform in the twentieth century.

Works Cited

1. Cuban, Larry. How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms 1890 – 1980. Longman Inc. New York, New York. 1984
2. Kliebard, Herbert. The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958. RoutledgeFalmer. New York, New York. 2004.