THE GRAMMAR OF SCHOOLING

The basic "grammar" of schooling, like the shape of classrooms, has remained remarkably stable over the decades. By the "grammar" of schooling we mean the regular structures and rules that organize the work of instruction. Here we have in mind, for example, standardized organizational practices in dividing time and space, classifying students and allocating them to classrooms, and splintering knowledge into "subjects." In 1902 John Dewey argued that it was easy to dismiss the way schools are organized "as something comparatively external and indifferent to educational purposes and ideals," but in fact "the manner in which the machinery of instruction bears upon the child...really controls the whole system." Continuity in the grammar of instruction has frustrated generations of reformers who have sought to change these standardized organizational forms…

As Larry Cuban has shown, there have been striking regularities over time in how teachers taught within these institutional arrangements. At every level and subject, for example, teachers have been expected to monitor and control students, assign tasks to them, and ensure that they accomplish them. This kind of batch processing has usually been teacher centered and textbook centered, though more so at the secondary than at the elementary level…

Periodically, innovators have challenged the structures and rules that constitute the grammar of schooling, perceiving them not as the reforms they once were but as straitjackets. For example, they have tried:

- to create ungraded, not graded, schools,
- to use time, space, and numbers of students as flexible resources and to diversify uniform periods, same-sized rooms, and standard class sizes,
- to merge specialized subjects into core courses in junior and high schools or, alternatively, to introduce departmental specialization into the elementary school,
- to group teachers in teams, rather than having them work as isolated individuals in self-contained classrooms.

Typically, these innovations have not lasted for long.

Tyack, David, and William Tobin. 1994. "The 'Grammar' of Schooling: Why Has It Been so Hard to Change?" *American Educational Research Journal*, 31 (3): 483–495.

In 1994 and 1995, David Tyack, William Tobin, and Larry Cuban (Tyack and Cuban 1995; Tyack and Tobin 1994) coined the term "grammar of schooling" to characterize the long-lasting and largely unchanging core elements of schooling. These elements include batch processing of students, separation of classes by academic discipline, age-graded classrooms, teaching as transmission, leveling and tracking, and schooling as a mechanism for sorting students by perceived ability.

In recent years, however, there has been a range of efforts that in different ways try to move us away from the century-old grammar of schooling. These include personalized learning, blended schools, competency-based schooling, deeper learning, community-infused and social justice–oriented schools, and many more.

Mehta, Jal, and Amanda Datnow, "Changing the Grammar of Schooling: An Appraisal and a Research Agenda." *American Journal of Education*, 126 (4): 491.

… there is a yawning gap between the ways in which schools are organized and what we know promotes positive youth development and learning. The literature on positive youth development suggests that young people need opportunities to do work that has purpose and meaning, that they need strong connections to adults and peers, that they need to be viewed in asset-based ways, that their identities need to be valued, and that they appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the world (Halpern 2008; McLaughlin 2000). The literature on learning suggests many of the same elements matter and adds the importance of active as opposed to passive learning, intrinsic motivation, relevance, apprenticeship learning, and peer learning (Bransford et al. 1999; Herrenkohl 2010; Mehta and Fine 2019). With these findings in mind, there is a critical need to examine efforts to change the grammar of schooling, given the misalignment between this grammar and much of what we know would provide thriving conditions for youth.

Ibid. p. 492

Although there are some exceptions, when educators try to disrupt the grammar of schooling, innovation "often fails or takes hold on the periphery of the system in specialized niches" (Tyack and Cuban 1995, 87). Attempts to change school practices are fraught with challenges in part because they conflict with people's beliefs about what schools should look like and notions about what type of instruction or organization of schooling is likely to produce the best results. Teachers and parents may hold traditional notions of schooling based on their own past experiences. The grammar of schooling also persists because "it enables teachers to discharge their duties in a predictable fashion and to cope with the everyday task that school boards, principals and parents expect them to perform: controlling student behavior, instructing heterogeneous pupils and sorting people for future roles in school and later life" (Tyack and Cuban 1995, 86).

Hubbard, Lee, and Amanda Datnow. 2020. "Design Thinking, Leadership, and the Grammar of Schooling: Implications for Educational Change." *American Journal of Education*, 126 (4): 501–502.

Reimagining the Grammar of Schooling

	Existing grammar of schooling	New grammar of schooling
Purpose	Assimilate preexisting content	Engage student as producer in variety of fields and worthy human pursuits
View of knowledge	Siloed and fixed	Constructed, interconnected, and dynamic
Learning modality	Teaching as transmission	Learning through doing; apprenticeship; whole game at junior level
Roles	One teacher, many students	Vertically integrated communities: teachers, students as teachers, and field members providing expertise
Boundaries between disciplines	Strong	Permeable
Boundaries between school and world	Strong	Permeable
Places where students learn	Schools	Various, including schools, community centers, field sites, online
Choice	Limited	Open, multiple
Time	Short blocks of fixed length	Longer, variable blocks, time for immersive experiences
Space	Individual classrooms	Linked spaces, variable spaces
Assessment	Seat time, standardized tests	Creation of worthy projects in the domain: projects, portfolios, performances, research
Organizational model	Linear, top-down planning	Distributed leadership; spirals of inquiry
Stance toward community	Defensive; keeping out	Welcoming; inviting in

Mehta, Jal, and Sarah Fine. 2019. *In Search of Deeper Meaning: The Quest to Remake the American High School*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 380.

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