Understanding the Eight-Year Study

A Case Study in Transformative Change

Populace

"Democracy must be reborn with each generation, and education is its midwife."
-John Dewey, 1916

Introduction

The Eight-Year Study was an ambitious project organized by the Progressive Education Association that aimed to transform the purpose of high school in America, from preparation for college to "democracy as a way of life," by radically reshaping the curriculum. Over the span of twelve years, and with support from philanthropic organizations and education experts, twenty-nine schools from across the country engaged in this unprecedented effort to make high school more relevant, authentic, and democratic.

Catalyst for change

In 1900, approximately one out of every ten students attended high school. By 1940, that number had skyrocketed to seven in ten (Goldin & Katz, 2009). During this same part of the century, the United States faced unprecedented turmoil: the rise of the Industrial Revolution and urbanization, along with the First World War, the Great Depression, and the Dust Bowl. And yet, while the country experienced multiple cycles of dramatic social change, the American high school system became standardized and institutionalized by the policy elites of higher education.

In 1893, the Committee of Ten, a group convened by the National Education Association, and comprised primarily of elite college Presidents, first began to standardize the education system by proposing a specific curriculum for *all* high schools that they believed would better prepare students for entry into college or the workforce. With the introduction of the Carnegie Unit in 1906 (originally meant as an accounting tool to provide pensions for professors), the high school system became inextricably linked to a series of credits and courses which became the precise requirements for entry into higher education (Krug, 1964). While this may have created greater efficiency for colleges, it became a cause for concern with a group of educators called the Progressives.

Led by educators and philosophers like John Dewey, the Progressives argued that school should prepare students for civic life within a democracy (something that would take on heightened importance in the coming years with the rise of Fascism in Europe) and address social concerns of the day (Kliebard, 2004). They recognized that industrialization had eroded apprentice programs that previously prepared students for work and life. As such, Progressives advocated for high schools as a means to not merely prepare students for college, but to build character and sustain a democratic society, an argument that clearly contradicted the intentions behind the Carnegie Unit and other similar efforts to standardize public education in the name of efficiency.

These tensions continued to rise through the 1920s and into the 1930s as educators struggled to reconcile the demands of academia and the realities of society, and the public grew increasingly disillusioned with the promise and possibilities of education. The disconnect between the needs of students and the curriculum imposed on them by elite colleges (that most of them would never attend) was captured by journalist Maxine Davis, in her book *The Lost Generation*, in which she traveled across the country interviewing youth that had experienced a World War and the onset of the Great Depression (Davis, 1936). In painfully vivid terms Davis paints a picture of wasting lives and growing despair from an entire generation. For these youth, the promise of education to improve personal and collective outcomes, a promise that two decades earlier had given birth to the High School Movement, rang hollow. What these youth wanted was work and a hopeful future, but what they had was unemployment and despair.

In 1930, the conflict between the policy elites and the Progressives finally reached a tipping point. During a board meeting of the Progressive Education Association (PEA), a commission was formed to determine how to make high schools more responsive to the needs of youth by freeing them from the tyranny of colleges (Aiken, 1942). This work, eventually led by Wilford M. Aikin, and supported by philanthropic organizations and a cadre of education experts, would undertake an ambitious national effort to redesign the high school curriculum and transform the purpose of education, launching what would eventually become known as the Eight-Year Study.

The study

In designing the Eight-Year Study, three aims were paramount: To show that there need not be a one-size-fits-all approach to preparing for college; to show that individual schools could be trusted to experiment without harming the academic preparation of their students; and to advance the idea that the purpose of a general education is to learn to live in a democracy (Bullough & Kridel, 2003). It is the third ideal that would drive almost everything that the commission and the study would stand for, informing everything from the schools selected, to how schools were supported, and to the ways they would evaluate the success of the work. In other words, the Eight-Year Study was, by intent and design, attempting to make concrete the ideal that had driven so many Progressive educators to date: the ideal of democracy as a way of life.

Over the span of twelve years ("eight years" was in reference to the time it took to finish high school and college, not the length of the study), from 1930 to 1942, 29 schools would participate in this effort to reimagine the high school curriculum, including 10 public "innovation" schools (including some school districts), 13 independent schools, and 6 lab schools from across the country (Tyack & Tobin, 1994). The schools were chosen from a pool of 200 applicants based on their national reputation for excellence, commitment to democratic purpose, and willingness to experiment with their curriculum. Many of the schools in the study were the most progressive in the country (e.g., Des Moines' Roosevelt High School, Tulsa's Central High School, Denver's

Public High Schools, Ohio State University School); however, there were also schools included that were far more traditional than progressive, some of whom were included only because the major funded of the study insisted (Kridel, Bullough, & Goodlad, 2007).

In keeping with their democratic ideal, it was decided early on that no single curriculum would be imposed on these schools. Instead, schools were free to experiment the way they wanted, provided it was driving toward the aims of the study. This local focus, and in particular the idea that you could trust schools and teachers to make good decisions, ran counter to the trend in education at the time, which had followed businesses down the path of *Scientific Management*, where the underlying principles were about finding the "one best way," standardizing systems, and centralizing top-down control over all processes (Taylor, 1914).

Importantly, leaders of the Eight-Year Study did not simply leave schools alone to experiment, they went to great lengths to support them and remove all obstacles to success. For example, one of the overarching concerns facing many schools was that while they wanted the focus to be on democratic participation, they didn't want this to come at the expense of their students being able to attend college. In response, the commission in charge of the study secured a guarantee from 284 colleges that they would waive Carnegie requirements and accept students from schools in the study based on the recommendation of the principal (Tyack & Tobin, 1994). In addition, the commission provided schools with resources, including the latest science-based insights from education and other related disciplines, and they offer teachers a relatively robust set of professional development opportunities.

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the local freedom provided by the study, schools were not uniform in the degree of experimentation they undertook. Some schools made only small changes to their existing curriculum, while others took on a wide range of innovative new approaches, including more project-based learning, expanded extra-curricular activities, collaborative teacher planning, and altered class sizes and duration. What they all had in common was a shift away from standardized practices and toward personalized ones that provided students with more individual attention (Aiken, 1943).

The most innovative of the schools went a step further, opting for a for an emphasis on common experiences that focused on what was called the "core curriculum." Core did not mean then what it does now (that all students take the same set of courses), but rather that there was a general, more often than not interdisciplinary, learning experience that was problem-focused and from which students would learn both academic knowledge and broader non-academic skills. In the extreme, the core experiences completely upended the tradition teacher-student relationship, allowing the student to actively participate not only in how the learning would unfold but even in the planning of the learning aims themselves. The emphasis on core was meant to provide these students with the kind of broad, integrated, and thoughtful education that school leaders felt they needed to participate in a democracy (Kridel, Bullough, & Goodlad, 2007).

Results

From a short-term perspective, the Eight-Year Study was largely successful. In their College Follow-Up Study, the commission compared 1,475 students in the experimental schools to students from traditional schools and found that students in the experimental schools were roughly equivalent in terms of academic performance, but were more willing to engage in cultural, civic, and artistic activities (Kahne, 1995).

Of note, since the schools were allowed to decide the extent to which they experimented, it turns out that some schools in the study simply didn't experiment at all. These schools had joined more for the prestige than out of a desire to experiment. Importantly, the commission did a second study (the so-called "study within the study") that compared students from the six most experimental schools (most of these were schools that had introduced "core" and teacher-student collaboration), to both students in the rest of the study and students from traditional schools. The results were far more convincing: students in the truly experimental schools significantly outperformed other students academically, including in honors awarded, and also scored higher on measures of personal responsibility and social awareness (Kridel & Bullough, 2002).

The takeaway from the Eight-Year Study was clear: it was possible to trust schools and teachers to experiment without harming the academic performance of students. They also demonstrated that students could be educated with a focus not on college or training, but democratic participation and that they would emerge better off as a result. In this way the Eight-Year Study was a resounding success and one would have imagined that its lessons would have made an impact more broadly across the landscape of public high schools.

From a long-term perspective, the Eight-Year Study does not look nearly as successful. Although the study did lead to innovations in assessments, teacher development, and pedagogy that can be traced to modern-day practices, the reality is that judged from the broader objectives of the commission (redesigning the curriculum and transforming the purpose of education) the study was not successful. In the years following the end of the study, the Carnegie unit would only grow in importance for high schools, a standardized tracked curriculum would come to dominate the education landscape, there would be an unprecedented consolidation of districts across the country into large bureaucracies with professional management and very little responsivity to the local communities, and in less than a decade from the end of the study the Educational Testing Service would emerge to unleash a wave of standardized testing that continues to play an outsized role in both high schools and college admissions to this day. Worse still, less than a decade after concluding the Eight-Year Study the vast majority of the schools involved themselves reverted back to more traditional, standardized curricula (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

Why didn't it succeed?

In many ways it is surprising that the Eight-Year Study succeeded in the short-term yet failed to make a lasting mark on the high school landscape in America. After all, even though it was a top-down initiative, it gave local control to the schools involved, it supported the teachers in those schools to be active participants in the scope and direction of the change, it was funded by the major philanthropic organizations of the time, it had the leading education researchers, practitioners, and policy makers involved from the beginning, and it removed what at the time was viewed as the single biggest obstacle to more democratic-oriented progressive education taking hold: the reliance on the Carnegie unit for college admissions. So why did it fail? There are at least four lessons that are instructive to this end.

1. Misunderstanding the public

The problem with top-down transformative change efforts is that it is easy to mistake the values and desires of the leaders of the work for the values and desires of the public that must be engaged for the work to be successful. This appears to be the case with the Eight-Year Study. The desire for education to prepare youth to participate in a democracy is genuinely important and noble, and it is also likely the case that most people would have agreed that this is important. However, the Eight-Year Study got underway soon after the stock market crashed, and it continued throughout the Great Depression. One needed only to read *The Lost Generation* (published in 1936) to recognize that the primary public desire at the time was for work and that the public had lost faith in democratic institutions. This isn't to say that the Eight-Year Study should have avoided democratic aims, but rather than there was every reason to couch this work in the context of preparing students for jobs and careers. This may have seemed menial to the leaders of the study, but it was everything for a public where mass unemployment, insecurity, and hunger were the rules not the exceptions. One of the most conspicuous omissions in the Eight-Year Study is the lack of a focus on students who do *not* go to college. The study was fixated on democratic participation and the control colleges had on high schools, while it ignored the biggest desire that animated the American public at the time. This made the findings less relevant to the public and cleared the field for the rise of standardized, differentiated (tracked) curricula that profoundly limited the overall value of public education, but at the very least promised some kind of work at the end.

2. Ignoring the local community

It is somewhat ironic that a transformative change initiative that prided itself on democratic participation and local control of the work at the school and teacher level, spent no time or energy at all ensuring that parents and the local communities supporting the experimental schools understood what changes were being made and why. They took for granted that parents were on-board with the outcomes and the changes in the educational experience that were required to achieve those outcomes. But after the funding dried up, many schools felt pressure by parents to go back to the way it was before, in part because the experimental curriculum looked

nothing like what they experienced in school. In the absence of creating tight feedback loops between the school and the community (and in particular the parents) this was always going to be the outcome. It is entirely possible that if the schools and the commission would have spent time engaging parents and other parties with a vested interest in the schools, these stakeholders could have come to understand the changes and recognized the importance of the outcomes, and the study would have been in a much better position to achieve lasting success at least in the participating schools.

3. Underestimating teacher needs

The Eight-Year Study is in many ways a model of how to both trust and empower teachers, and they broke new ground in the type and quality of the professional development that was offered. But it was not enough. Since the experimental schools had no textbooks or established curriculum, the burden fell on teachers exclusively. While the vast majority of the teachers came to enjoy and value the experience, many also reported being burned out. And this was with a great deal of support from the "Curricular Associates" that were hired by the commission to support schools and teachers. What the study didn't do, and in truth didn't have the money to do, was ensure a level of embedded support beyond the study years. It is not surprising that faced with the option to continue to experiment with their curriculum, but doing so without the support of the study, many of the most dedicated teachers (and their schools) opted to revert back to traditional approaches. The lesson is that transformative change requires a deep and lasting commitment to teacher development and support that must extend beyond the arbitrary time limit of whatever grant or study initiates it if the aim is to have lasting change.

4. Lacking a clear message

Even if the study had realized the need to focus on preparing students for jobs, in addition to democratic participation, the reality is that the study would still not have been successful because the commission never identified a clear and compelling message that would allow the schools to communicate with parents, and the commission to communicate with the public. To this day, it is not clear what the *main* message of the study was: Is it that you can have local experimentation without harming students? That there are multiple pathways to preparing for college? That students can be self-directed and collaborate with teachers in their learning? That the aim of school is preparing to live in a democracy? The reality is that *all* of these were discussed at one point or another as central to the study. While that may be true, such ambiguity only serves to limit support and reduce momentum for transformative change. Compare this to the High School Movement that had no central leadership and almost no coordination, yet in town after town and newspaper after newspaper the message was clear: the new high school was about *education for life*, not for college. Without a singular message, and one that preferably would have aligned with public desire, the message of the Eight-Year Study was left to others to determine. And too often, especially in media coverage, the message became about *experimentation*, which is never a good message in general and certainly was not a top priority to parents and communities living through the Great Depression and entering World War II.

Conclusion

The Eight-Year Study was an ambitious attempt to transform the purpose of high school toward democratic ideals by redesigning the curriculum. Over twelve years, schools worked to change what and how they taught, and move beyond a one-size-fits-all curriculum to create personalized experiences that promoted academic achievement, self-direction, and civic identity. However, despite producing results, the study failed to change the system. The lessons of the study suggest that even when an initiative is thoughtful, innovative, and well-executed, if it lacks alignment with the public, connections with communities, support for teachers, and a clear message, it is unlikely to generate the sustained support needed to change the outcomes of a public system.

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