Essay #1: The Unintended Consequences of Reform

The origins of the saying, "the road to hell is paved with good intentions" are unknown, but its meaning – that the desire for and attempt to do good can actually result in poor outcomes – still applies. This is especially true in the case of educational reform, where yesterday's new innovation becomes today's problem to be solved, often by another new innovation. As I have argued in previous journals, we cannot know reformers' intentions from their actions, or the result of those actions. However, regardless of whether or not those intentions were good – and I personally am inclined to believe that they were – the results of their innovations have not always been good for the students whom they impacted. This paper will explore the controversy surrounding three educational programs that were once considered wonderful innovations but are now problematic in ways that their framers never intended: intelligence testing, tracking, and the platoon system.

In 1904, Alfred Binet was asked by the French Ministry of Education to "develop techniques for identifying those children whose lack of success in normal classrooms suggested the need for some form of special education."[1] He did so, and at the advent of World War I, Robert Yerkes used Binet's work, and that of H.H. Goddard, to devise a test to determine who was most suited for training as officers and who should be "grunts." The positive experiences of the army in using intelligence testing in assigning recruits during the war led to its usage – after some modification – in schools, based upon the argument that it would be helpful in "the assignment of students to lanes leading

[1] Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (W.W. Norton & Co: New York, 1996), p. 179.

to different careers."[2] However, as historian David Tyack notes, "Such meritocratic proposals, however, were of less interest to urban school officials than were the practical tasks of classifying the millions of heterogeneous pupils gathered in classrooms by compulsory education."[3] Intelligence testing quickly became a feature of education across the United States, with backing from respected institutions such as Columbia and Stanford Universities, and support from principals and teachers who found that the testing simplified their work.[4]

This program of intelligence testing, intended to simplify education, has instead created problems in schools. When Alfred Binet first devised his intelligence test, he noted that intelligence was more complex than could be measured with one test, and worried that his intelligence test "could be perverted and used as an indelible label, rather than as a guide for identifying children who needed help"[5] And, in many ways, that is exactly what happened. Robert Yerkes' usage of the army Alpha and Beta tests led him to rank intelligence according to race. These ranks conformed to the racial stereotypes of the day (Nordics were most intelligent, followed by Alpines, Mediterraneans, and then African Americans), and seemed to scientifically prove that certain groups – namely, those of Western European descent – had higher educational capabilities than others, and thus should be expected to perform to higher standards (and conversely, other groups should perform less ably).[6] Today, although we fight the stereotypes reinforced by Yerkes work – for example, President Bush's advocacy for *No Child Left Behind* as a law

[2] David Tyack, *The One Best System A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 205.
[3] *Ibid.,* p. 206.
[4] *Ibid.,* p. 207.
[5] Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, p. 181.
[6] Jeffrey Mirel, Educ 741 class lecture, October 8, 2007.

that will fight "the soft bigotry of low expectations" frequently held for poor children – the very existence of such a fight indicates the continuing strength of such stereotypes.[7] Therefore, a program that was put into place for the purposes of classifying children and meeting their needs by providing appropriate coursework for the educational potential has, by reinforcing already extant stereotypes, in fact acted to retard children's ability to reach that potential.

Another program, closely tied to intelligence testing, which was instigated to improve education but has instead led to more problems than it has solved is the system of tracking students. Tracking was encouraged by the same advocates who pushed for intelligence testing, who felt that testing should be used to "segregate students by ability, to aid in vocational guidance, to detect unusually able or retarded students, and to diagnose learning problems."[8] Progressives felt it inefficient and even undemocratic to require all students, regardless of ultimate career destination, to be forced to endure the college preparatory curriculum previously prevalent in high schools – students should be educated according to their individual needs and propensities. For example, in 1906, Edward L. Thorndike felt that "not more than a third of the secondary student population should study algebra and geometry since, in the first place, they were not suited for those subjects and, in the second, they could occupy their time much more efficiently by studying those subjects that would fit them more directly for what their lives had in

[7] "THE REPUBLICANS: Bush Outlines His Goals: 'I Want to Change the Tone of Washington'" *The New York Times.* August 4, 2000.
[8] Tyack, *The One Best System*, p. 208.

store."[9] Intelligence testing was frequently used to classify students into four tracks: college preparatory, commercial, vocational and general.[10]

In the current system, students continue to be tracked, despite the conclusions of many researchers who have determined that tracking is harmful to the children who are shunted into lower tracks. Furthermore, many note that it is not helpful to those children placed in the upper tracks either.[11] Efforts to reform tracking to take into account differential abilities – a student might take upper level English while remaining in general mathematics, for example – have not changed the overall effects of tracking. In his study based on data collected in the *High School and Beyond* study, Samuel Lucas found that in some ways this change in tracking methodology (a reform attempting to make the impact of tracking more positive for students) had actually children with low social economic status:

> . . . the decline of overarching programs increased the nominal access to classes for all students. Yet, the dismantling of overarching programs removed clear markers through the curriculum, markers that the middle class did not need the school to supply for they have their own sources to tell the what courses are necessary and useful. Socioeconomically disadvantaged students tend not to have this information. Hence, disproportionate access to information seems to have played a major role in transforming a potentially egalitarian reform into an inegalitarian one .[12]

Tracking, therefore, was a reform implemented to improve the prospects and education of all children, by supplying each child with a curriculum suited to his or her needs. In execution, however, tracking has served to reinforce ethnic and racial stereotypes, and to

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[9] Herbert M. Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum: 1893-1958* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 94.
[10] Jeffrey Mirel, *The Rise and Fall of an Urban School System* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), p. 69.
[11] See, for example, Jeanne Oakes, *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).
[12] Samuel Roundfield Lucas, *Tracking Inequality: Stratification and Mobility in American High Schools* (Teachers' College Press; NY, 1999), p. 132.

deny students the opportunity to use education to climb the economic ladder. Furthermore, attempts to reform this reform have actually resulted in even further disadvantages for those children whom the changes were purported to help.

The platoon system was another idea that was implemented in response to an issue that faced schools in the beginning of the twentieth century. Also known as the Gary plan, this system made full use of the school facilities, and students spent half of their day in the classroom, and the other half in the playground, workshops, the auditorium or community facilities.[13] The platoon system solved overcrowding problems, but came with a good deal of controversy. In Detroit, for example, opponents such as Andrew B. White complained that students spent too much time on the arts and physical education, and not enough on academics. Others complained that the change of classes was hard on the students, who were unable to bond with their teachers.[14] In New York City, although championed by Mayor John Purroy Mitchel, the platoon system was disliked by parent groups and neighborhood associations, who banded together to form Anti-Gary Leagues.[15] Nonetheless, the platoon system had, and continues to have, a good deal of influence on public schools. Many districts continue to be overcrowded; New York, for example, still has high schools that run three or four overlapping sessions per day, making the most use of their facilities in order to serve the most children. Students continue to take time from academic subjects in order to take subjects such as art, music, physical education, computer skills, or even drama. This is not necessarily negative in terms of overall knowledge – students do benefit from these subjects, but they

[13] Diane Ravitch, *The Great School Wars: A History of the New York City Public Schools* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000 [third edition]), p. 198.
[14] Mirel, *The Rise and Fall*, p. 74-75.
[15] Ravitch,, *The Great School Wars*, p. 217.

do not contribute to the students' academic knowledge, although they enable administrators to make the most use of school facilities, and provide teachers with release time to work on lesson plans or other preparation or professional development activities. Perhaps more important to this argument, however, is that lack of knowledge of the origins and history of this system blinds educators to the possibilities that might be inherent in a different system – the current system is how it has always been, and always should be.

These three topics are only a sampling of educational reforms that have had unintended consequences (corproratization of schools, high stakes testing and teacher quality standards are others that deserve attention, to name just a few). They are enough, however, to illustrate the point that innovations can have unintended consequences. The possibility of reforms going awry does not mean that we should not innovate at all. It *does* mean, however, that we should be a good deal more cautious about when and how we innovate – educators need to research more, and to strengthen the links between research and practice so that the research is actually used to drive practice, rather than practitioners implementing things that seem logical, but might not actually have any evidence behind them. Moreover, we need to be aware of programs implemented by previous reformers in order to (a) avoid recreating an unproductive program, and (b) be aware of the forces that created the current system. We cannot expect to avoid every pitfall, but we can attempt to look at our own preconceptions and the system that helped to form them with a clear eye, so that the reforms that we implement have a greater chance at success.