DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 110 400 SO 008 545

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TITLE Some Models for Interpreting the History of Compulsory Schooling.
PUB DATE 75
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Washington, D.C., April 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Attendance; *Educational Development; *Educational History; *Educational Practice; Elementary Secondary Education; Historical Criticism; Historiography; Models; Political Influences; Public Schools; *School Attendance Legislation; Socioeconomic Influences; United States History

ABSTRACT

Five models are postulated for interpreting the three historical stages in the development of compulsory schooling in the United States. These three stages include (1) a symbolic stage where compulsory public school education began to gain strength but lacked enforcement procedures, (2) a bureaucratic phase beginning around 1900 where new organizational technologies made compulsory attendance effective, and (3) a postcompulsory phase beginning in the 1960's where the legitimacy of compulsory schooling is being questioned and truancy is rampant. Model 1 interprets the development as an evolution of the self-perpetration of a democratic society. Model 2 reflects a revisionist interpretation where society's economic elites fashioned compulsory school systems in order to produce a stable, rational economy in which they could retain their power. Model 3 stresses socialization and nationalism where schooling creates citizens and legitimizes government hierarchies. Model 4 interprets stage 1 as a subcultural conflict where state legislators passed laws as a symbolic crusade of the virtuous. Model 5 interprets the development of compulsory attendance as the work of political interest groups including both business and labor. (Author/DE)

SOME MODELS FOR INTERPRETING THE HISTORY OF COMPULSORY SCHOOLING

by

David B. Tyack

In an emotion-laden subject like compulsory schooling it is easy to let presuppositions rule research and writing. Thus on this topic more than most it is desirable to develop theories of interpretation diverse enough to permit the historian to prove himself wrong when he tests them by the evidence. Accordingly in this largely speculative talk I should like to discuss a number of possible kinds of interpretation, some of them competitive and some complementary.

Perhaps I should admit at the outset that this is not a particularly common way to approach history. Quite the contrary, most historians make their reputations by developing a single line of argument. The frontier is the major shaping force in American history, Turner told us. Status anxiety explains most of the actions of political leaders in the Progressive period, Hofstadter observed. The history of immigration is the story of a loss of organic community, Handlin announced. Other historians make their reputations by attacking Turner, Hofstadter, or Handlin. And so it goes. As we shall see in briefly examining the revisonists' critique of the account of compulsion by Ellwood P. Cubberley, educational history has sometimes followed the example of other fields. Is the story one of triumphant and enlightened evolution or one of imposition and social control by elites? Or neither?

Not only do explanations tend to follow a single line of argument but sometimes the subject being investigated is obscured. After years of historiographical debate disillusioned historians may conclude that there was no such thing as "Jacksonian Democracy" or "the Progressive movement". Alfred North Whitehead warned us long ago of the "fallacy of the misplaced concrete".

What I shall do today, then, is to suggest what I take to be the phenomena to be explained in compulsory schooling and to suggest alternative interpretations.

Based on what I have read thus far -- and this is very tentative -- I would argue that there are three phases to the history of compulsion in school attendance, starting with the development of public education in the mid-nineteenth century. The first phase, which I shall call the symbolic phase, lasts until roughly the turn of the twentieth century. As Albert Fishlow and others have observed, there was a high rate of literacy and school attendance in 1830 and 1840, even before the common school crusade had gained momentum, but public schooling steadily grew as the century progressed, eventually including groups like blacks and sections like the south that had largely been educationally deprived.

School expenditures increased dramatically, and by 1900 public institutions absorbed 79 percent of all money spent on education. By 1900 33 states had passed laws requiring universal attendance (normally for children aged 8 to 14). As Solmon and Landes have shown, however, such laws did not seem to have increased attendance. Indeed, throughout the nineteenth century qualified observers such as school superintendents frequently commented that the laws were generally unenforced and indeed often unenforceable. In many communities there were not enough seats for children who wanted to attend, and machinery for enforcement was nonexistent or ineffectual. Thus, twin questions emerge for the historian who wishes to interpret this phase: why did voluntary attendance and expenditure rise sharply, and why did state legislatures pass laws which were primarily symbolic -- a stamping of the foot, as it were? (1)

The second phase, which I shall call the bureaucratic phase, begins roughly at the turn of the century, when states passed laws with effective provisions for enforcement and when school people devised new technologies and bureaucracies of coercion, such as the school census, child accounting techniques, attendance departments, and financing that depended on average daily attendance. This phase coincided with child labor laws that sought to keep youth off the labor market. The curve of enrollment in secondary schools rose particularly sharply during the general unemployment of the Great Depression. By the 1950's it became axiomatic that youth not in high school were deviant "drop-outs" and in the Kennedy administration Willard Wirtz urged that youth be kept in school past age sixteen in order to take up the slack in employment. (2)

The third phase, which I shall call the post-compulsory phase, has emerged in the last decade and is hard to pinpoint, partly because we are in the midst of it, but it seems to have two central features. The first is a questioning of the legitimacy of compulsory schooling. This may be traced to Paul Goodman and seen in the widespread interest in the notion of deschooling in some quarters, but it has also been expressed by such establishment types as Theodore Sizer, James Coleman, and the members of the Kettering Commission on Secondary Schooling. The second feature of this new phase concerns not those who write in the New York Review of Books but those who vote with their feet, the truants. The last decade has apparently been a time when hundreds of thousands of youth are habitually absent from school and when schools make only faint hearted attempts to recruit them back. Faith and practice in compulsion thus seem to be on the wane.

I turn now to some possible models of interpretation of these three phases. Note that any model calls attention to certain kinds of evidence at the expense of other possible data, and that some models, at least, contain at least implicit views of appropriate policy. Some of the interpretations I shall suggest are extrapolated from a general theory and applied to compulsion. I will start with three interpretations that might be used to explain all three phases and then suggest two that might best fit only one phase.

Two cartoons capture the essence of the first two models. Figure 1 might be taken to represent what Herbert Gintis calls "evolutionary idealism," a position well expressed by Cubberley and by Forest Ensign, who wrote the first full-scale history of compulsory attendance in 1921. In this case those who struggled for coercive attendance were agents of an almost predetermined evolution of the common school as a means of self-perpetration of a democratic society. Phase 1 was simply an incomplete stage of the reform; Cubberley and Ensign saw themselves as part of stage two, in which compulsion became real and the common school fulfilled itself. Phase 3 they might see as retrogression and betrayal, an almost incomprehensible defeat of the children of light by the children of darkness. (3)

Figure 2 gives a quite different vision. This cartoon by Diane Lasch expresses a revisionist interpreation recently developed by radical historians and economists. Since schooling ultimately corresponds with changes in the social relations of productions, the phases of compulsion need to be tied to changes in the economy. By this view Phase 1 of symbolic compulsion might represent an unresolved partial victory by segments of competing elite in the nineteenth century -- a stage corresponding to early industrial regimes and corporate conflicts. The development of effective coercion in Phase 2 followed the consolidation of corporate economic and political power at the turn of the century and the invention of new organizational forms. Elites helped to fashion compulsory school systems to produce a stable, predictable, rational political economy in which they could retain their power. In this period differentiated school systems channeled youth into the occupational hierarchy while ostensibly rationing privilege in an egalitarian manner. Expressed ideologies generally masked basic educational and economic changes and the conflicts they created. The current post-compulsory phase, like the earlier ones, reflects new contradictions of the social relations of production. It is still early to determine what these are, but apparently the growing alienation of workers, as in the Vega plant at Lordstown, Ohio, may contain a key. (4)

A third possible interpretation of compulsory attendance stresses political socialization and nationalism. This is an old interpretation -- one thinks of Edward Reisner's work, for instance -- and has regained new life in the comparative studies of historians like R. Freeman Butts and political sociologists like John Meyer and Richard Rubinson. The latter two scholars have investigated ways in which both developing and older nations have used compulsory schooling as "a mechanism of structurally and symbolically taking people from their community solidarities and relating them directly to the corporate structure" of the nation-state. Thus construed, schooling creates citizens and legitimizes governmental hierarchies. The rhetoric of compulsion in American reflected this set of purposes from the Revolution onwards and grew strident in times of heavy immigration and in wars, hot and cold. Phase 1 of symbolic laws might represent a growing consensus on the principle of coerced civic education, while Phase 2 coincided with a period of intense concern about Americanization and international commercial and finally military rivalry. According to this political model education is not primarily a private benefit but rather a means of incorporating the young into a political construction called the nation-state and weaning them from parochial or hostile loyalties. America has thus used schooling after the Civil War in the South, in the Phillipines, and in

Germany and Japan. Strong nations of every ideological persuasion have so employed public education. Phase 3 may by this view represent a reaction against a nation-state which lost much of its legitimacy through the Vietnam War and Watergate. (5)

Obviously there may be some overlapping and some congruence in these three interpretations as well as conflict. In closing I would like to suggest two other kinds of interpretation that focus more sharply on the politics of passing the compulsory laws. The first interpretation might be called sub-cultural politics. This fits especially Phase 1, the largely ineffectual laws of the nineteenth century. Joseph Gusfield's study of temperance as a SYMBOLIC CRUSADE and Paul Kleppner's analysis of ethnic and religious politics in the Midwest in the nineteenth century suggest the value of treating the compulsory laws as a species of sub-cultural conflict expressed in state politics. For example, state legislatures dominated by rural, Protestant native-born citizens sometimes passed laws to close saloons in the cities on Sunday. These were aimed at guzzling, Sabbath-breaking immigrant workers. Often these laws, like the compulsory schooling acts, were ignored by those who were supposed to carry them out, but both types of statute affirmed the values and lifestyles of those legislators who passed them. Such legislation identified the saloon-goer or truant as deviant, as lawbreaker. Such an affirmation -- a stamping of the foot -- represented a symbolic victory for the virtuous. (6)

When we turn to the passage of effective laws in Phase 2, it may be useful to examine the particular interests of the groups that made up the coalition in favor of compulsion. For some reason educational historians have generally avoided a close examination of political interest groups, perhaps because they have wanted to believe the myth of no politics in education and no education in politics. Still it seems not too irreverent to push beyond the rhetoric of noble intention and ask what was in it for each group. Labor organizations consistently advocated compulsory schooling; among other things it cut down competition in the labor market. Some employers were active in campaigns for compulsory attendance; did technology change the level of skills they needed, or did school socialize employees in desirable ways? Educators, ambivalent about coercion during most of the nineteenth century, began to advocate compulsory schooling in the twentieth; did changes in state finance make it worth their while to round up the recalcitrant? Obviously the growing number of attendance officers -- numbering in the dozens in many cities -- had a vested interest in their own bureaucratic speciality. All this is not to deny altruism in any of the groups; it is simply to say that few political events stem purely from the high minded. (7)

I could suggest other models. Did patterns of school attendance and legislation reflect the business cycle? changing skill demands? periods of general political activism? growing credentialism in the society? Did effective compulsion really require the invention of new organizational technologies, unavailable before 1900? Did changing concepts of adolescence play a crucial role? I could go on but I trust that I have made my central point. I'm not arguing for a simple addition to models promiscuously or for a history which just lists 14 "courses". But at this stage in conceptualization of

such a complex problem as the origins of compulsory schooling in America we need to retain a sense of surprise, to separate intentions from consequences, to distinguish general preconditions from triggering individuals or movements, to be open to the idiosyncratic -- in short, to be historians willing to be proven wrong in our hunches by our own research. That's the value of competing models of interpretation.

NOTES

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