Introduction

History, Social Change, and Education

This book is an introduction to the history of American education. It approaches the topic by considering ways that education has been related to social change. As such, it begins with a simple query: Do schools change society, or does society change the schools? Obviously, the answer is more complicated than this rather plain question suggests. It is not hard to see that influences run in both directions: education clearly affects the course of social development, and schools also invariably reflect the impact of the larger social context. Still, the question of basic relationships remains. Can schools function effectively as instruments of social change? Or are they shaped and therefore constrained by larger cultural, economic, and political forces at play in society, reflecting and amplifying these factors but exerting little influence of their own?

History can help to answer such questions. There have been moments in the past when reformers believed that education could easily remedy social problems, and much time and energy was devoted to improving things through schooling. But this also raised nagging questions: Is educational reform a strategy potent enough to effect sweeping change? Or is it more limited in impact, perhaps destined to ultimate failure or disappointment? The answer to this is a persistent puzzle in American history, for people in this country have placed uncommon faith in the power of education. As historian Henry Perkinson noted more than three decades ago, schooling has been an “imperfect panacea” for curing the nation’s ills, often promising changes it could not deliver (Perkinson, 1968). But even Perkinson did not say what the schools could accomplish.

As already suggested, education includes a very broad set of activities, so as a way of focusing the discussion this book concentrates on schools and other institutions of formal education. It is not intended to be comprehensive. Instead, as the title suggests, it is thematic, looking at particular events and periods that help to illuminate general tendencies and patterns or “contours” in the past. The idea is to feature moments in history that were especially telling in creating the educational organizations and arrangements that exist today. By examining key steps in the evolution of the current school system, after all, it is possible to see some of the ways that education has been related to larger processes of social change.
Obviously, this book is somewhat different from other texts about the history of American education. For one thing, it does not pretend to include everything. Names and dates are hardly a major concern. Rather, the principal goal is to help you, the reader, think about history, and the ways that institutions such as schools change, along with the rest of society. In doing this, the book draws upon ideas from the social sciences, especially those used to explain broad patterns of social change in the past. Such concepts are critical tools to be used in thinking about processes as large and complex, and as significant as these. It is important, in that case, to devote some attention at the outset to a few of the ideas to be encountered in the narrative to follow. At the same time, it also is necessary to consider just what we mean by terms such as “education” and “social change.”

Why Study History?

Some people enjoy reading history, others dread it. But beyond its intrinsic pleasures and pains, does history have any particular value? This is hardly a rhetorical question; indeed, it is undoubtedly quite common, especially concerning the history of education. After all, to grasp educational problems and their relationship to social change, the idea of studying history can seem patently ridiculous. Wouldn’t it be better to simply examine pertinent issues, and devise solutions to current problems? How can the experiences of a hundred years ago or more possibly help anyone today? What has history got to do with education?

Things change, continually. It is commonplace for people to observe that society is different from not so very long ago. In fact, we sometimes hear the comment that things are changing faster than ever. Everyday news contributes to this impression with a constant drumbeat of reports about changing attitudes, and innovations in technology. There’s a steady stream of information about “progress” in one aspect of life or another, and the ever-advancing march of science. Given this, who can doubt that we live in an era of significant social change? Why should anyone look to the past to understand it?

History poses a challenge to such questions. Are we justified in assuming that ours is an era of unprecedented change? Because we embrace the idea of progress, we may have a tendency to believe that today is somehow different—even better—than the past. After all, people then were “old-fashioned” or unenlightened, and we know so much more today. But this is a big presumption, and may not be true. How do we know that the pace of change is faster now? It is possible, after all, that some periods witnessed even greater social and economic shifts than we have today. This may come as a surprise, as there is a natural inclination to see the present as more interesting and dynamic, if only because it is so immediate and familiar—and there also is a tendency to see the future as even better. There are always pessimists among us too, and we are constantly reminded of the big problems that loom on the horizon. But most of
us like to believe that progress has been good and we expect it to continue. This is a part of the enchanting lure of presentism, and a modern faith in social improvement (Nevins, 1938).

In fact, the present is not unique as a period of remarkable change. Things evolved quite rapidly in earlier times, in some respects at a faster rate than today. Indeed, in many ways the contemporary era is one of considerable stability, even if technology and knowledge are rapidly advancing. Truly revolutionary change on a very large scale occurred in the more distant past (Aghion & Williamson, 1998). It was those earlier processes of change and adaptation that set the stage for developments visible today. One of the great values in studying history, in that case, is to better appreciate the dynamic quality of our own time, by examining the challenges faced in earlier periods. There is much to learn from seeing how people responded to a rapidly changing world, and appreciating how their experiences have shaped our own (Tuchman, 1978).

Of course it is not easy to comprehend the scope or impact of changes in the present; social change is a slippery concept. For one thing, it is everywhere. It is the very nature of society to constantly evolve, after all, just as individuals and communities develop continuously. But all change is not the same. There are major developments and minor ones, and it is often hard to distinguish between them. History can help with this. It shows how things have developed over time, and the ways that social change is influenced by events and circumstances, and by people. In this way too, history can help illuminate how we have arrived at the present, even if it can never provide an explanation for every detail. In the end, history offers a telling point of comparison, to better interpret our immediate circumstances and to respond to them.

What does this have to do with education and schools? Like social change, education also is a knotty subject, even without considering its history. On one hand it is an intricate process of human growth and development, a process we all have experienced directly (Dewey, 1938). In other respects it also is the social and institutional activity of transmitting knowledge and values from one generation to the next, involving large segments of society and billions of dollars. And because education is linked to power and social status, it is subject to almost constant debate. In its institutional form, education also has become integral to imparting and certifying skills and knowledge seen as critical to economic success, making it a topic of wide public interest. Understanding education in its many dimensions, in that case, can be a daunting proposition.

Because of these manifold purposes and functions, education often has been closely connected to the historical processes of social development. Indeed, in U.S. history, education has been a centerpiece of important periods of change. It has contributed to economic growth and political shifts, and it has helped to forge a national identity from the country’s rich tapestry of cultural and social groups. Of course, the process or experience of education also has evolved over the years, and it has been influenced by changes in the economy, the political
system, and other facets of the social structure. Schools today are quite different from those in the past, and their purposes have changed from one period to another.

Consequently, we can say that education has been on either side of social change: both as a causal agent and as an aspect of life that has been transformed because of other social forces. The link between education and society, however, is complex and constantly evolving. This makes it especially interesting as a topic of study, and as a means for reflecting on the present.

Thinking about Social Change

In recent decades the study of history has grown rather complicated. Historians no longer have a monopoly on studying the past; they have been joined by social scientists, especially those in sociology, economics, and political science. This has been a natural development, as members of these academic disciplines have become concerned with studying large-scale social change and its effects on individual lives, as historians are. Indeed, historical study has become increasingly an interdisciplinary enterprise (Abrams, 1982; Rabb & Rotberg, 1982). These newcomers to the study of history have contributed more than just new information, however. The social scientists brought with them a number of ideas and propositions, or theories, about society, to test and refine with the use of historical evidence. (Skocpol, 1984; Smith, 1991).

Some of these concepts are quite familiar, and have become terms of everyday use in conversation. Social critic Theodore Roszak has described the notions that help to organize our thoughts, those that precede information, as “Master Ideas” (Roszak, 1994). This is because they help us think about the problems encountered in life, by organizing facts, values, beliefs, and theories so that we can understand the world more easily. Some are commonly encountered in school; many have become a part of the conventional wisdom about how society has developed over the years. Roszak’s suggestion that “all men are created equal” is such an idea, a notion that most Americans share as a basic proposition of social experience. Others are a bit more obscure, but include concepts that are used to interpret facts and make sense of the events in people’s lives. A commonplace example is the idea of intelligence, which can be interpreted in a number of ways but often is related to technical skill, knowledge and verbal ability. We often use terms such as this to describe human behavior or to understand events in particular contexts. Some of the terms that are discussed herein can play a similar role, especially with regard to understanding such complex phenomena as education and historical change. Even if they fall short of Roszak’s definition of Master Ideas, these abstractions are useful in thinking about the process of social transformation.

In academic settings, such ideas often fall into the realm of social theory. As such, they can help us to understand large-scale shifts in society, past and
present. Whatever they are called, it is important to consider just how historians and social scientists have thought of various concepts to help in understanding the history of education. Social change is difficult to define, but certain concepts can help to identify its many dimensions. A discussion of social theory, in that case, is more than a hollow scholastic exercise. It provides some tools for reflecting on history, and for examining the process of social change, along with ways it has affected the educational system.

The most pertinent social science ideas are those that describe vast processes of change, denoting effects on a grand historical scale. A prime instance is *industrialization*, perhaps the most familiar and significant single concept utilized in discussions of this sort. Although not as inspired as Roszak’s example, it is indispensable to understanding the process of social change. Industrialization is a term used to represent a host of shifts in society and the organization of work that accompanied the rise of mass production manufacturing. Sometimes referred to as the *industrial revolution*, it describes a rapid rise in per capita output, or a sharp increase in the productivity of individual workers. This could only be accomplished, of course, by instituting other changes, such as the introduction of new technologies and organizing work in new ways. Historically, this first occurred in Great Britain, between 1750 and 1850. It appeared a little later in the United States, in the mid-19th century. And it developed even later in Japan and other countries. Wherever it happened, however, industrialization had a profound impact on the people who experienced it directly, and it has produced a lasting effect on the organization of society (Ashton, 1948; Brownlee, 1979).

This can easily be seen in history. Before the industrial revolution the vast majority of people lived in the countryside and worked the land in agrarian settings. Artisans made most consumer goods, often by hand, and people purchased them locally. This changed dramatically with industrialization. After the industrial revolution large numbers of people were employed in factories and related occupations (such as transportation), and lived in cities where they consumed goods produced elsewhere. They worked longer hours, often performing relatively simple, repetitive tasks, and they had little control over their work, as it came to be dictated by machines. Altogether, people’s lives changed drastically, sometimes in a relatively short time. Industrialization, in that case, meant more than just a shift in production; for many people it meant a whole new way of life (Laslett, 1965).

The process of industrialization caused many aspects of society to change. This was partly due to the sheer volume of goods and services produced. It enabled cities to be built, and fortunes to be made by a select few. For many people—perhaps most—the increased quantity of commodities meant a rising standard of living. But for others, it was a time of wrenching dislocation, especially for those who left the countryside to seek work in burgeoning cities. In the United States, many industrial workers came from Europe, traveling thousands
of miles to seek employment. The large-scale movement of people from one part of the world to another often led to cultural conflict and political instability. It also held important implications for education, as schools struggled to prepare students for a rapidly changing world (Rabb & Rotberg, 1981).

As already suggested, industrialization also has been associated with the concept of technology, the use of machinery or other devices to conserve or enhance human labor. This is another important factor in comprehending historical change. Factories called for new forms of labor controlled by mechanized processes. Similar changes occurred in other settings. Even in the countryside, introducing machinery and rationalizing production helped to reorganized work. Such changes had important implications for the development of education, as new forms of knowledge and skill were called into play. Schools were expected to help train people to work under these conditions. Technological change often required new work habits, and close attention to organization and efficiency. Eventually, as a complex industrial society began to emerge, new roles for management focused on planning and the disposition of time. This too would have important implications for education, as schools were called upon to meet the requirements of rapidly changing social roles (Cowan, 1997).

Yet another concept associated with social change—along with industrialization and technology—is urbanization. This term refers to the changing spatial arrangement of society, particularly the growth of cities and all the myriad social questions that came with them. Historically, cities grew as markets for the exchange and distribution of goods, and the location of specialized services. With industrialization, however, cities became centers of manufacturing, requiring large numbers of workers and complex transportation networks. Expanding cities meant ever more people crowding together, sharing space and competing for power and wealth. This, in turn, entailed the development of social institutions such as schools, but also churches, reform groups, charities, and a host of governmental entities to oversee social amity. As cities grew, they became more complicated, and finding new ways of managing an increasingly diverse citizenry became a major challenge (Monkkonen, 1988; Rabb & Rotberg, 1981).

These changes augmented the importance of formal education. With the growth of large cities, people’s relationships appeared to evolve. Social scientists observed a pattern of social behavior peculiar to cities. It was no longer possible to know everyone in the community or on the job. In rapidly growing urban centers, people were constantly coming and going, and close personal relationships became more difficult to sustain. In this context, people began to relate to one another in largely functional terms, based on their occupations and other social characteristics. Some believed that the social cohesion of communities began to weaken. Historically, it appeared that shared norms and expectations eroded, and familiar social controls lost their significance. More formal systems of socialization and discipline, such as the schools and police, gained new
significance as a result. A new institutional culture began to take shape in the largest cities because of these developments (Schnore, 1965, 1974).

All of these occurrences were manifestations of social change, and they made education especially important as a way of certifying a person’s knowledge, abilities, and even moral character. If it was impossible to know a man’s background, for instance, or even to investigate by asking others about him, using credentials such as diplomas and degrees could at least certify a certain standard of achievement. As the social scientists have put it, secondary relationships were substituted for firsthand knowledge of a person’s past, and as a result mediating institutions such as schools became more important in the evolution of society. Established patterns of behavior evolved significantly, and researchers noted the development of a historically new and distinctive urban culture in the largest cities (Palen, 1997).

A related concept that has come into widespread use more recently is Globalization, which refers to the growing inter-dependency of economic, cultural and political actions around the world. Like urbanization, it is essentially concerned with spatial relationships, and ways in which activities in one domain or another come to transcend countries and even continents. It is associated with rising international trade, transportation and communication, and the collapse of such barriers to movement as tariffs, export fees, and quotas governing imports or immigration. Globalization has become a widely used term in recent decades, particularly following the end of the Cold War in the 1980s and the development of digital communications technology allowing inexpensive, instantaneous communication across vast distances (Stiglitz, 2003).

Like industrialization and urbanization, of course, globalization also has a history. “World-System” scholars argue that globalizing influences have been evident for several centuries, extending back to colonial development and the rise of trade between Europe and other continents (Wallerstein, 2004). Economic historians maintain that the first “modern globalization” occurred during the era of rapid industrialization, when a growing volume of trade and millions of people moved freely around the world. World War I and the Great Depression put a stop to it, but globalization began to be evident again following World War II, when the United States emerged as the world’s principal economic, political, and cultural power. Due partly to American influence on policies of open trade and freedom of communication, it has accelerated in recent decades, a development with important implications for education (Aghion & Williamson, 1998).

Globalization is also linked to the idea of a worldwide division of labor, with national economies playing different roles in the production of goods and services. Manufacturing, for instance, has been moving to countries with lower wages for decades, where unskilled workers can be hired to work in factories cheaply. In more developed countries, on the other hand, technological development has led to demand for more skilled workers, and the rise of service
employment has contributed to higher educational expectations in job markets. Given this, it is telling that the biggest complaints about globalization come from people with less education, on balance, than its supporters, who tend to be college educated. Regardless of how one feels about it, however, there is little doubt about that globalization represents a transformative force in recent history. It is a useful and important concept, in that case, for considering the ways in which social change has been related to education (Applebaum & Robinson, 2005).

As suggested above, social scientists and historians have long noted that industrialization, urbanization and globalization have been linked to a more highly defined social division of labor. Indeed, increased specialization in productive activities was almost axiomatic during the process of industrial development; it was one of the chief ways productivity gains (the production of goods and services at lower cost) have been realized historically. At the same time, as urbanization advanced, there was a sharpening division of labor in the occupational structure of cities. Larger cities developed more specialized occupations and services. This, too, was an important manifestation of social change, and the effects are easy to see today. For instance, we usually find the most skilled surgeons in hospitals located in the bigger metropolitan areas, along with exotic health food stores, specialized music distributors, and costume shops. Only the biggest cities have the population base necessary to support such specialized activities and interests. And, of course, the growing international division of labor is perhaps the single most controversial aspect of globalization. Thus, the historical development of the division of labor has been linked to each of these concepts. Because the division of labor is closely tied to the need for new and different types of knowledge and skills, it has had profound implications for the development of education in American history (Hawley, 1950).

The division of labor in society is tied to yet another enduring concept in social theory: class conflict. This idea often is associated with social inequality and the development of the capitalist economic system. Karl Marx, the famous German revolutionary and philosopher, was probably the best known proponent of the view that capitalism inevitably produces such inequities, but it has had many other adherents too. Today, social scientists continue to debate such questions, but few dispute the importance of systematic inequality based on the type of work a person does or how much property he or she owns. And when such inequalities grow extreme, conflict can erupt. Historically, as the division between owners of capital and workers widened, Marx and others predicted that people who owned nothing but their labor—the working class—would come into conflict with those who controlled the means of production. There is much evidence of this in history, even though the apocalyptic vision of the Marxists has yet to be fully realized. With industrialization, and particularly the development of the factory system, differences between social classes were aggravated. This led to socialist movements, relatively small in the United States but larger
elsewhere, and the development of modern labor unions. Historically, there was considerable strife over the rights and living standard of workers. This too was an important element of social change. These conflicts included battles over education and schooling, especially in the nation’s growing industrial cities (Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

Industrialization, urbanization, globalization, the development of technology and the division of labor all have been important dimensions of social change as it has unfolded in the United States. They also are practical concepts, developed by social scientists and historians to explain extensive transformations in society. As such, they are vital to the task of comprehending just how education and social change have been related. But these are hardly the only ideas relevant to historical reasoning. Many additional social science concepts also are pertinent to understanding education and its shifting relationship to society. Unlike the terms discussed above, most do not deal directly with large-scale processes of change. They include ideas that have not been used much by historians, even if they are quite germane to the history of education. But these concepts also fit Roszak’s definition of “master abstractions,” and can be very useful in understanding social change in the past. To consider them further it is necessary to delve a bit more into the realm of social science ideas.

**History and Social Theory**

One of the important goals of social science is the identification of basic categories of collective experience, expressed in terms that can illuminate human behavior in a wide variety of settings. Such conceptions are the elements of social theory, ideas, or abstractions that are helpful in developing explanations of societal development. As such, they are critical to making sense of the broad processes of social transformation in American history.

A good example of a major abstraction in social science, and perhaps one of the most familiar in everyday usage, is represented by the term *culture*. Broadly defined by anthropologists as the way of life in a human society, culture can be thought of as a set of behavioral characteristics or traits that are typical of a social group. These usually include rituals or ceremonies, customs (established patterns of behavior), attitudes, and ideas that are passed down from one generation to the next. It is commonplace to think of these features of social life as especially evident in people from distant or exotic places, but they exist in contemporary American society as well. In fact, a person’s own cultural traits are often difficult to recognize simply because they are so familiar. A handy definition of culture is “when you act like your mother but didn’t intend to.” The tricky part is identifying these traits even when they are considered normal, what anthropologists have come to call “making the familiar strange.” Regardless of the social groups in question, if people exhibit the same patterns of behavior and attitudes or values as previous generations, social scientists often
use the notion of culture to describe it. Because it is so encompassing a concept, culture is a slippery term to define precisely. But it is indispensable in explaining the process of social change, particularly as it has occurred on a sweeping historical scale (Kluckhohn, 1949; Kuper, 2000).

Culture is especially useful in thinking about schooling, because education can itself be defined broadly as the process of cultural transmission. If society is to function smoothly, after all, familiar types of behavior need to be taught to each succeeding generation. This does not mean that new generations have to accept the old patterns of behavior or the ideas and attitudes that accompany them. Indeed, younger generations have often rejected key aspects of the culture of their parents. When there is a pattern of new attitudes and behaviors that develop with the young, one can speak of cultural change. And because schools are directly involved in the process of teaching ideas and shaping attitudes, they stand at the very center of the process of change in culture. A major question in the history of education and schooling, in that case, concerns the process of cultural transformation. How have identifiable patterns of behavior, customs, attitudes, and ideas changed in American history, and how have schools and other forms of education participated in these shifts (Spindler, 1963)? As suggested in the chapters ahead, the answer to this question is complicated and differs from one period of history to the next.

The question of culture gets even more complicated, however, in the realm of social theory. Some social scientists interested in education have employed the concept of culture to pose yet another abstraction: cultural capital. This idea is premised on the recognition that all cultures are not valued equally in modern society. In the United States, for instance, it is clear that certain patterns of behavior, values, and attitudes are more widely admired and rewarded than others. We all may not be pleased about it, but this is evidence of a dominant culture that continues to dictate and enforce many traditional values and tastes. Most of us are familiar with this through experience, regardless of whether we appreciate the cultural mainstream or not, but there can be little doubt that prevailing national values exist and exert great influence. The concept of cultural capital thus can be linked to the idea of social status. Certain ways of speaking, dressing and conducting oneself, after all, are associated in many people’s minds with greater standing or prominence in the social order. In this respect, various cultural forms are linked to the status of different social groups. For example, an English accent is often favored over a Spanish one; suits are preferred to jeans and tee shirts. Knowledge of classical music or jazz is often taken as a sign of sophistication, as is a taste for fine wines. Knowledge of this sort is taken to represent cultural capital, a command of certain types of information and ability that are valued or respected by others with social status. Individuals who possess such knowledge and skills often have access to greater social benefits as a result. Those who lack it are frequently considered to be inferior. In this respect the concept of cultural capital is related to patterns of social inequality.
Cultural capital can also find expression in other ways, many of which are more substantial than the somewhat trifling examples above. It can take the form of more formal knowledge, such as a large vocabulary, a well-developed understanding of history, or the ability to speak a foreign language—especially a high-status tongue such as French. People possessing these skills generally are admired in the larger society because such capabilities are rare and considered a sign of accomplishment or refinement. Cultural capital can have more practical dimensions too, such as knowledge of how institutions function or understanding how to behave in certain situations, like being a good conversationalist, or even doing homework in a timely fashion. Individuals who possess these desirable traits hold advantages in social life and often enjoy greater respect as a consequence. It is in this regard that the term *capital* is fitting. Because these characteristics or conditions allow individuals to do things that they otherwise could not, providing certain social benefits, they can be considered a tangible form of wealth (Bourdieu & Coleman, 1991; DiMaggio, 1982; Lamont & Lareau, 1988).

Schools can help to mediate the process of realizing such benefits if they reward the holders of cultural capital with greater access to credentials or other forms of social recognition. There is a considerable body of research demonstrating that various forms of cultural capital can be an advantage in school settings (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Children with highly educated parents, for instance, have access to books, music, magazines, and media technology that may help them to impress their teachers, as well as others in the larger society. If they travel abroad, attend the theater, or frequent museums, their cultural capital could be augmented even further. Parents who understand how complex institutions function can pass this knowledge on to their offspring, providing them with even more advantages. These are forms of cultural capital that are highly relevant to education today, but every historical period has been marked by one form or another of cultural advantage that can be transferred across generations. Consequently, *cultural capital* is a useful term in studying the history of education, even if the meaning of the concept is understood to shift from one historical period (or cultural setting) to another (Kalmijn & Kraaykamp, 1996; Roscigno, Ainsworth, & Race, 1999).

Another social science term that has gained wide currency in recent years is *social capital*. This idea is parallel to cultural capital, but conveys a somewhat different point. Social capital refers to advantages that individuals derive from relationships. As the sociologist James Coleman pointed out, in order for cultural capital (socially valued knowledge and skills) to be conveyed from one generation to another, it must be transmitted via positive and sustained relations between adults and children. In this connection, the existence of supportive relationships can be considered a valuable asset, and hence a form of resources or capital. Within groups, it can serve to reinforce dominant attitudes and behavior, as long as strong relations sustain them. Social capital can thus help to
perpetuate the helpful dispositions, values, and bearing exhibited by communities or other social groups, insofar as they are passed along and become evident in the young. As Coleman noted, it can be especially efficacious in networks of association and influence that serve to benefit people. There are many instances of this in everyday life. Knowing the right people to secure a certain advantage, such as lawyers or bankers, can be considered a form of social capital. Tightly knit communities, where people help one another with all types of problems typically provide valuable social capital to their residents. As Coleman noted, it usually resides in mutually reinforcing webs of relationships. When members of these communities share values that encourage socially responsible behavior, such as maintaining a job or attending school, this can be considered a tangible benefit of social capital (Coleman, 1988).

With regard to education, perhaps the most straightforward example of social capital is the effect of local communities on school attendance. It has long been observed, for instance, that some social groups seemed to encourage school enrollment more than others. The children of Jewish immigrants in American cities had unusually high levels of school attendance in the early 20th century, even though their parents were often poor and lacked formal education. Similar patterns have been observed more recently among Asian Americans. Some of this behavior appears to have been due to attitudes in the community that attached great importance to school as a place where young people should spend their time and strive for success. This can be considered a form of cultural capital, but its realization depended on the close relationships between adults and children, ties that helped to transmit these advantageous values. Historically, these groups were poor and did not have many conventional forms of cultural capital, such as knowledge of American customs or command of proper English. The school was an institution that helped them to develop these traits, but their success was dependent on values gained from relationships with adults in the community. Such examples demonstrate that it is possible for a group of children to possess high levels of social capital (strong relationships), but relatively low stocks of cultural capital (socially valued knowledge and abilities). In the case of immigrant groups with comparatively little cultural capital, social capital was a resource that helped them to overcome disadvantages, and eventually acquire certain elements of cultural capital. If a community is quite cohesive and can influence the young to meet or exceed societal expectations regarding education, we can say that social capital has enhanced their achievement (Perlmann, 1988; Rotberg, 2001; Zhou & Bankston, 1994).

Of course, this also can work in the opposite direction. There have been groups that have shunned the schools, discouraging their children from attendance. Italian immigrants, for instance, sometimes told their children to leave school and find jobs so that they could contribute directly to household income. These communities were quite cohesive and successful at exerting influence, but it is possible their relationships did not offer an enduring benefit. These
relationships transmitted values that did not represent a form of cultural capital in the larger society, hence it is not clear that they represented social capital in the usual meaning of the term. As Coleman suggested, social capital is highly situational. Indeed, if community relations have a contrary impact on school participation, children may be disadvantaged in the larger society. Some social scientists have described this as *negative social capital*, as it represents relationships that may be beneficial in a limited context, but ultimately problematic for the individuals involved. In any case, a tightly knit community with broadly enforced values and expectations contributes to social capital only if it results in a tangible advantage for the individuals in question. The impact on education depends on the character of the attitudes in question and how they are conveyed through relationships in the immediate community (Perlmann, 1988; Portes, 1998).

Social and cultural capital are examples of ideas that are commonly used to examine the behavior of individuals and social groups. In particular, these concepts are useful for explaining why some individuals and groups succeeded historically in the larger society and others did not. In this respect, both are related to the economic term *human capital*, which refers to differences in skills and knowledge that help explain why some people—and groups—are more economically productive than others. Lawyers and doctors, for example, can perform tasks routinely that would take less knowledgeable people much longer to complete, if they could do them at all. The same principle applies to nearly all jobs that require advanced levels of training. Consequently, people who possess such abilities and knowledge typically command higher wages or salaries than those without them. This, according to economists, is the reason why people with higher levels of education usually earn more money than others. As demonstrated later in this volume, human capital has become a critical component of the modern economy (Becker, 1964). To the extent that social and cultural capital can contribute to a person’s opportunities to acquire human capital—which is typically accomplished through school or other types of formal training—they can provide tangible assistance toward improving social status.

These various conceptions of capital possessed by groups and individuals are important to understanding the development of modern school systems and the way that they function in society. The concepts differ in that human capital—skills and comprehension—is usually seen as an outcome of schooling, whereas cultural and social capital—socially helpful knowledge and relationships—are typically considered factors that help account for success in school. In all three examples, however, capital is generally considered a good thing to possess, whether it is human, cultural, or social. It represents a palpable resource that can be drawn upon for social advancement. In short, the terms *cultural* and *social capital* identify resources that contribute to achievement in school and in the larger society, while *human capital* is understanding and skills that contribute to economic advancement. Broadly speaking, culture and capital are concepts that
help to characterize people and groups, and they allow greater understanding of differences in people. Together, these are ideas that have special significance in research on education today, and they are relevant to educational history as well (Rury, 2004).

People who occupy various positions in society, of course, often view the world in altogether different ways. And the manner in which they perceive problems often gives shape to their responses to them. Social scientists use the term ideology to represent the systems of ideas and beliefs that people use to interpret their circumstances and to guide their actions. This is yet another critical concept in comprehending the relationship between education and social change, and it is clearly connected to the definition of culture discussed above. One useful way of distinguishing between these terms is to think of culture as principally representing patterns of behavior, and ideology as limited to beliefs and ideas, even though each influences the other. As historian Carl Kaestle has noted, in the United States ideology has been strongly linked to the Protestant religion—or, in historical terms, to the Protestant Reformation—and a battery of ideas revolving around the capitalist economic system: private property, hard work, and self-denial for purposes of enrichment. These somewhat disparate ideological elements have worked together through American history to form a coherent worldview that has shaped attitudes and the development of institutions. There are other aspects of ideology that are touched on later, but as noted above, the development of values and attitudes clearly is a crucial component of schooling as a social institution. Ideology—and changes in it—consequently has been a critical factor in the development of education in the United States (Kaestle, 1983).

Like culture, ideology is a tricky concept. Because ideology also affects the way people see the world, sometimes it is difficult to recognize its impact in different aspects of everyday life. History provides a useful medium for examining the effects of ideology on familiar institutions and events. Some elements of ideology are more important that others; there are particular aspects of popular ideology that have been especially important, at least in the United States. Racism and sexism are collections of ideas that hold certain groups of people to be inferior in certain respects to others, notions that historically have had a profound effect on American society. Racism is an ideology that suggests African Americans and other groups should be seen as biologically different and less deserving of social status than others, particularly Whites. Sexist ideology holds that women are inferior to men in terms of intellect and physical stamina. Both of these elements of ideology have exerted powerful influences on popular thought and behavior in U.S. history. Obviously they also have held important implications for education, and for comprehending the development of schooling in the United States (Omi & Winant, 1994).

There is more to the question of ideology and its impact on education, however, than the distressing legacy of racism and sexism. Yet another aspect of
popular ideology in this country has been equity—or the principle of equality of opportunity. This idea is associated with such other familiar features of American ideology as freedom and fair play, and Roszak’s master abstraction cited earlier, “all men are created equal.” These sentiments are contradictory, of course, to notions such as racism and sexism, and other ideas that would inhibit one social group or another on the basis of biological or cultural traits. It often has been noted that popular ideology in the United States is riddled with such incompatible elements. But conflict over these inconsistencies is part of what has made the United States such a dynamic society, and helps to account for the rapid pace of social and institutional change in its history. The concept of equity became a rallying point for transforming schools at various times, especially in the latter half of the 20th century. It was during this most recent period that the largest waves of reforms to make the schools into agents of change were instituted. The nation’s school system continues to struggle with the legacy of those efforts today (Ravitch, 1983).

Concepts such as culture, industrialization, urbanization, globalization, social and human capital, ideology, and equity are useful only to the extent that they allow us to think clearly and judiciously about how society changes, and the ways that such changes have affected people’s lives. In the case of education, these concepts are helpful in interpreting just why schools and related social institutions, such as families and other agencies of socialization, changed over the course of history. Schools have evolved a great deal in the past several centuries, even if certain aspects of education seem to have remained the same. As suggested earlier, studying this process can help us to see just how schools and society have interacted over time. To do this, however, it is necessary to consider just how the schools themselves developed.

The Evolution of American Education

Schools are among the most familiar social institutions that people encounter in today’s complex modern society. They have become an integral element of American culture. Nearly everyone has attended some sort of school for a considerable length of time, typically during life’s most impressionable stages. And for the most part, people’s experiences in school have been quite similar, at least as regards the institution itself. Hallways and classrooms are nearly ubiquitous in contemporary schools, as are teachers and principals. Almost all schools divide the day into discrete periods of activity, and follow annual schedules set by state authorities. In the main, schools pursue goals dictated by sponsoring institutions and agencies, such as state governments or churches. And all of them share a commitment to individual growth or human development and responsibility to the future of society.

For most of us, these and other aspects of schooling are so ingrained that they are virtually taken for granted, one of the most telling definitions of culture.
Historians David Tyack and Larry Cuban have referred to some of these features as the “grammar of schooling,” or rules and expectations that define the institution’s structure and everyday operations. Because schools contain large numbers of children, for instance, they demand special attention to discipline and order, and they require adult authority in matters of supervision and training. Schools also place great emphasis on the routine transmission of formalized knowledge, and the evaluation of learning with more or less standardized methods of assessment. Of course, schools are also places where people make friends, play games, and do a variety of other things, but these features of experience do not identify the institution as a school. Rather, it is the rules and formal relationships of power and authority that form the familiar institutional parameters that most people associate with schools. Memories of these aspects of school life stay with individuals, and seem to be essential to the very concept of “school.” If it did not have these characteristics, it would hardly qualify as that type of institution (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

But schools have not always been this way. Indeed, many of these taken-for-granted qualities of schools did not exist in earlier times. These are aspects of schooling that have evolved historically, in response to forces of social change, and to address various social problems in the past. People like to think of schools as fixed social entities that resist change (indeed, some see social stability as a goal of schooling), but in fact they have been quite pliable and subject to modification throughout history. One of the purposes of studying the history of education, in that case, is to determine just how the familiar features of today’s schools appeared. This, of course, also can be a step toward changing these structures in the future, to make better schools.

We start with some basic questions: how did schools develop in the past, and what caused them to change? These matters are central to the history of education, and critical to anyone interested in educational reform. As a prelude to the more detailed discussions in the chapters to follow, it is fitting to take a look at some of the big changes that have affected schooling, and consider how they may have been related to some of the social science concepts we have considered thus far.

Two hundred years ago schools were held in makeshift huts or cabins, or in rented rooms in urban areas. Most of the population lived in the countryside, so small schoolhouses predominated, where any schools existed at all. Children of all ages attended, and teachers conducted many different lessons simultaneously. School sometimes only lasted a few months each session, and attendance was often sporadic. Teachers did not have regular employment, working from one term to the next, and many were barely better educated than their students. Features of school that people often take for granted, such as age-grading and a common curriculum, all had to be invented and accepted as widely observed routines, as they were during the 19th-century common school revival and later reforms. These changes were largely coterminous with industrialization. In fact,
the first modern schools were often compared to factories. Even so, the process of change was painfully slow, and often met with stubborn resistance. It may have occurred during a time of rapid social change, but building the modern American school system was something of a protracted struggle (Axtell, 1974; Cremin, 1951).

Other features of the now familiar education system developed later. Most teachers in the United States did not receive professional training until the early 20th century, at least not in the current sense of the term, and bureaucratic systems of management became widespread even later. Schools for children of different ages, grammar schools and high schools, were introduced in piecemeal fashion. Many of these changes were driven by population growth, and ever-expanding numbers of children attending schools. This was especially true in the nation’s major cities, some of which grew exponentially at the turn of the century. Urbanization, it turns out, was a central element of educational change. Without the growth of enrollments, modern, rationalized school systems would not be practical. Larger numbers of children made age grading feasible, along with the long-term employment of teachers. Just finding rooms for all of these students was a major challenge facing educators (Tyack, 1974).

At the same time, the process of industrialization and the growing division of labor became associated with curricular differentiation in schooling, and the development of specific courses of study to prepare students for various careers. By the early 20th century, high school students could choose between industrial education courses, college preparatory programs, and such specialized subjects as home economics and stenography. The idea of linking schools closely to the world of work became known as vocationalism. As schooling became associated with a host of different types of jobs, school completion (sometimes called attainment) became an important factor in the allocation of people to various types of employment. Schools were becoming adapted to the development of modern, urban America as it grew more diverse and forward-looking (Rury, 1991a).

Some would say that the education system at that time was becoming an important instrument for assigning people to different positions in the social order, a large-scale sorting machine (Spring, 1976). In the words of one observer, the schools helped to produce inequality (Kaye, 1973). Others would argue that the schools were engines of opportunity, allowing individuals to aspire to whatever position their talents were suited for (Ravitch, 1978). In either case, the central question was the link between schooling and the growing complexity of the social structure, an outcome of industrialization and urbanization. As the social division of labor became more complicated, the issues of schooling and training people for productive careers in the new urbanizing society grew in importance. Linked to this was the question of providing individuals and groups with the skills and knowledge required by the development of the economy, particularly in the 20th century. As technology advanced, and the tasks people
were asked to perform became more complex and challenging, the demand for human capital, people with appropriate skills and knowledge, grew significantly. By the late 20th century, there was a revolution in the perceived importance of human capital, and public interest in schooling reached new heights (Goldin, 2001).

These developments, in turn, made education a potent political issue, especially in cities but in other settings as well. As schooling came to be seen as an economic and cultural advantage, it also became a point of contention. The history of American education is rife with instances of groups organizing to demand changes in the schools. Such incidents were commonplace in the 19th century, but seem to have increased in frequency with the growing importance of education in people’s lives. In the latter half of the 20th century, education became an increasingly thorny issue, especially as it was related to social and economic status (Ravitch, 1983; Vinovskis, 1999). Historically, much of this agitation has focused on the question of equity, and whether one group or another was being denied equal access to education. In the early 19th century there were debates about working-class children in schools, along with women in secondary and higher education. In the 20th century, political conflicts often concerned new ethnic groups, along with questions of school funding. These battles were difficult, but they also contributed to important changes. As a consequence, many of the greatest inequalities in American education have been reduced or eliminated, even if important disparities still exist. Today the issue of equity in education continues to be a point of frequent partisan dissension, and schooling has become a major issue in national politics. Looking at the history of this issue can help one to understand today’s conflicts over education, and imagine ways to address them (Katznelson & Weir, 1985; Peterson, 1985).

This basic outline demonstrates some of the general ways education has evolved in the United States over the past 200 years, as society has developed in response to industrialization, urban development, and the growing complexity of modern life. The educational system that exists today is the result of a long process of adaptation to changing social conditions. Most of the features of modern schools that we know so well at present were formed in response to specific historical circumstances. Given this, there can be little doubt that schools will continue to change as they adapt to shifting social forces in the future.

Schools Changing Society

While it is clear that society has shaped the evolution of schooling, the converse question is less certain: how has the development of education changed society? There is, of course, the process of individual development that education typically entails. But what has been the cumulative effect, if any, of this sort of individual change on society writ large? This is a problem that has not received much attention, yet there are a number of telling examples one can highlight.
One is the case of women’s education. Early in American history, women were largely uneducated. But after the Revolutionary War there was new attention given to education for females. As public school systems were established by the states in the 19th century, most were coeducational, providing boys and girls the similar educational opportunities. Female enrollment grew, and by mid-century literacy rates for women in northern states were just about equal to those for men. Women also began to attend academies, high schools, and colleges in greater numbers. All of these changes preceded the movement of women into jobs requiring higher levels of skill, and the development of the first women’s rights movement. Did education “cause” these latter developments? The answer is not entirely clear, but it certainly appears to have contributed to them. Given the historical evidence, it is probably safe to speculate that these large-scale shifts in female employment and political status would not have occurred as they did without changes in women’s education (Rury, 1991; Tyack & Hansot, 1990).

There is a parallel instance of education effecting social change in the case of African Americans. The ancestors of most African Americans came to North America as slaves, and as such were excluded from most forms of conventional schooling, even if they cultivated their own rich forms of informal education. Following the Civil War, after gaining freedom, African Americans enrolled in schools on a massive scale for the first time in history. Although their schools were inferior to those for Whites, these opportunities did contribute to the development of an educated elite that was able to articulate effective challenges to racism and discrimination in the 20th century. Eventually, African Americans made schooling a defining issue in their struggle for civil rights, with the historic Brown case in 1954 standing as a turning point in the movement for equality. Without the development of education as a resource for the Black community, and as an object of struggle, it is doubtful that these changes would have occurred quite as rapidly as they did (Anderson, 1988; Sitkoff, 1993).

These are just two of the most dramatic and profound changes in American society that have been affected, at least in part, by the development of schooling as a formal institution (and they are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4). There are many others, as noted elsewhere in the book. And of course there were yet other changes, concerning ideology or the larger question of American culture, wherein schools have played a less dramatic but nevertheless important role in the evolution of such popular ideas as equality, democracy, and fair play. Ideology often changes at a slower pace than other aspects of society, so shifts such as these are more difficult to identify and attribute to the schools. But this does not mean that they did not occur. A part of the problem of education and social change, in that case, is identifying less obvious developments such as these, and making judgments about just how they fit into the more general relationship of education and society.

All things considered, there is much evidence that schools have had a substantial impact on society at particular points in time, even as they have been
shaped by urbanization, political conflict, and other societal changes. All of these events have established the features of modern education that most of us take for granted today. It is the analysis of this process that makes history interesting and worthwhile as a mode of analysis, for understanding how the present has arrived, and perhaps what the future holds.

A Final Word about History

Henry Ford once said, “History is more or less bunk.” Generations of students also have declared it boring. At its worst, history is a lifeless list of names and dates, or a set of formulas for describing otherwise intricate and complicated processes of social development. But at its best, history is a story complete with human drama, memorable characters, political and ideological struggle, and lessons for life writ large. For historians, it also is a science, one that requires scrupulous attention to getting the facts straight and testing explanations against the best available information about the past. This means that good history is reliable, at least in the sense that it cannot be disputed on basic matters of evidence. It also means that history is more than just a story, in the sense that it has to strive to achieve a higher level of verisimilitude than mere plausibility or internal consistency. History is also a matter of setting the record straight, attempting to identify what in fact occurred in the past as much as possible.

Throughout the narrative that follows, you—the reader—will find references to other works, usually contained in parentheses with the date of publication so that the full citation can be located in the bibliography at the back of the book. The text also refers to important authors who have studied a particular topic and who have been especially influential in shaping the work of historians. These references have been included as a way of corroborating the facts in this historical account, but also as resources for readers to utilize in investigating particular topics themselves. Please follow up on any questions that may arise in reading this book by looking at some of the relevant citations provided. The book’s bibliography, moreover, is hardly exhaustive; there are many other studies in the history of education and related topics that readers may also want to investigate. Let this volume mark the beginning of your thinking about these issues, not the end.

Of course, history is more than just identifying what happened. The historical record is always incomplete, and we have to make judgments about just what is truly significant in the great mass of surviving materials. But the expectations of history as a scholarly field exert a powerful discipline: the story a historian constructs must conform to the historical evidence. The same is true, by the way, of the major ideas just outlined briefly. The use of ideas such as industrialization or ideology must fit the evidence at hand as well. Historians argue constantly about whether these terms are appropriate to describe a particular period or series of events. Constructing historical explanations, it turns out, is a
complicated business, at least if one wants to be faithful to the factual record. Of course, new evidence is constantly being turned up, bringing down established explanations and theories, and posing challenges to the way people think about the past. The narrative of American education and social change that is presented in this book is informed by the most recent research, but eventually there doubtless will be new perspectives to consider and additional evidence that challenges some of the interpretations offered herein.

This means that readers have to pay attention to the details of educational history at the same time that they work to construct useful and appealing explanations of social and educational change. Names, dates, and statistical data, consequently, matter to some extent, although not as ends in themselves. They are meaningful insofar as they help to establish and to ratify the ideas and theories that are used to explain and understand the past. In addition to this, there is the task of straightforward historical description. A major part of the historian’s task is to paint pictures of the past, to reconstruct the world of the people whose lives and behavior are under scrutiny. In doing this, the goal is to comprehend these people and their social setting in terms of their own understanding of it. It is possible to explain and comprehend; judgment is another matter. The historian aims to reconstruct history as it occurred, while offering explanations that help depict the past in terms that are familiar and meaningful today.

The task of the historian is arduous, in that case, and the challenge of reading history is to construct and test one’s own understanding of patterns in the past. In the accounts of historical events presented in this book there are many names and dates. These comprise important place markers in the historical development of American education. They are not furnished for memorization, but rather to provide points of reference in developing your own comprehension of American society and the educational system that grew out of it and helped to shape it. Names and dates, in this case, are important pieces of the historical puzzle, and it is up to each reader to make use of them in the narrative that follows.

The book also features somewhat detailed accounts of certain events, or chains of events, that have marked the development of American education. These instances, descriptions of particular moments, are used to illustrate various themes in the history of education. Each one is labeled Focal Point. These episodes are intended to help bring an issue to life, to illuminate the broad trends that a book such as this must dwell on. Education, after all, was a topic that people often became passionate about, and the struggles they engaged in helped to create the school system—and the larger culture—which exists today. One such instance in the history of American education has been chosen to start most of the chapters, and others are sprinkled throughout the narrative. They touch on variety of themes, but several are concerned with the changing conditions of childhood. Others provide a glimpse of conflicts that marked a
particular era, or additional events that help illuminate a historical moment. In each case the intention is to offer a taste of how people experienced education, and how educational ideas and institutions appeared at different times. Although they are not highly detailed historical accounts, they also may offer some perspective for today’s problems as well.

Now the stage is set. The chronicle that follows is a history of the institutions and experiences that we have come to call “education,” and the way it fits into the larger process of change that has shaped modern society. Hopefully it will help to illuminate contemporary problems, and stimulate ways of thinking about them a little more clearly and expansively.