Some Remarks on Daniel Tröhler's, "Stability or Stagnation, or Why the School is not the Way Reformers Would Like"

George (Skip) Hills

Queen's University

PROFESSOR TRÖHLER'S PAPER provides us with a thought-provoking account of why the project of school reform as envisaged and carried out in the twentieth century has, in its varied incarnations, so often fallen short of the mark. While I find myself sympathetic to a good deal of what Tröhler has to say by way of explaining this state of affairs, I do have some questions about his account. Moreover, I would like to join him in raising some critical questions about recent "reform" efforts as a whole and in considering alternative ways of conceptualizing school reform. Finally, I want to raise the question of what all this means for historical studies of school reform. As a philosopher, I shall confine my commentary primarily to conceptual matters. I do not feel particularly competent to speak to substantive historical issues.

Let us begin by considering the title of the paper, "Stability or Stagnation, or Why the School is not the Way Reformers Would Like." To whom does the term "reformer" in the title refer? As Tröhler himself acknowledges, there are a number of different constituencies, or "stakeholders", who have an interest in reforming the school and making it into something *they* would like—including educational researchers or policy-makers, the public, and various private-sector groups. Now given, as Tröhler rightly suggests, there is little consensus on the aims of schooling, even within the various stakeholder groups themselves—beyond discourse composed of empty slogans associated with 'literacy', 'numeracy', 'character education', 'preparation for democratic citizenship', and so on—we should not expect widespread agreement either, on what a better future might consist of, or, in consequence, on what ought to be done to make schooling better so as to prepare those to be educated for such a future. In short, many agencies, institutions or stakeholder groups hold a broad range of distinct, and often conflicting, views of the proper tasks of schooling. Some see schools as doing more or less what they ought to be. Other constituencies, however, do not. Much of the discourse about reform, in other words, seems to be at crossed purposes.

Nevertheless, from the context, the reader gathers that Professor Tröhler's primary concern stems from the fact that these critics see schools, or education, as failing and thus in need of "fixing." He refers to many of these reformers as "visionaries", owing to their pursuit of lofty goals or "utopian visions." As charitable as this reading of such views may be, I am by no means persuaded that all reformers may be properly so described. Some of these critics may be possessed of "lofty goals" but these goals have little if anything to do with the betterment of public education (cf. McMurtry, 2000; Noddings, 2007, p. 10). In recent times, such critics, whether visionaries or blinkered, seem to be in the majority.

It is important to point out that talk of reform normally implies a change for the better, something commonly overlooked in the educational literature on the subject. Accordingly, it is vital to ascertain in what respect and from what point of view these changes are to be judged as better. Recently, the primary focus has been on the values of efficiency and effectiveness. Yet, to say that certain changes are more efficient and effective is not necessarily to show that they are valuable or worthwhile from an educational point of view. For example, the use of coercion and threats may be the most effective and efficient way to have students master their multiplication tables, but they are undesirable educationally speaking because they are morally suspect.

In my view, the most important point Tröhler makes in his essay is that one of the reasons why so many attempts at reform have borne so little fruit is that they have been based on faulty assumptions concerning what sort of entities schools are. Whether the reasons responsible for these misconceptions have been ultimately methodological or metaphysical, reformers have frequently succumbed to the temptation to treat schools as a "black box." On such an account, what occurs between the *input*, understood in terms of the provision of various resources—human and otherwise, and the *output*, typically as indicated by test scores, is essentially opaque and thus mysterious. Reform, so understood, is usually premised on the expectation that the policies and practices embodied in the reform proposal will be interpreted and appropriated precisely as the architects of the reform intended. Reference is made to the contents of the box only if efforts to enact the proposed reform go astray—i.e., as a result of incompetent teachers, inappropriate curriculum, or ill-equipped students, for example.

I once asked a colleague teaching in one of our local schools how one could tell when a particular reform had been implemented, i.e., has been successful. His response was that, in practice if not in theory, a reform could be said to have been "implemented" when all of the relevant in-service workshops had come to an end and all of the appropriate documents were on the shelves of the office of the school, or school board. Clearly the focus here is on the input—quite independently of what is taking place in the classroom. In the most recent spate of reforms, by contrast, the emphasis appears to have shifted to the output side of the box. Driven mainly by the specter of global economic competition, production, or productivity, has become the new benchmark of success. So a reform has "succeeded" so long as test scores are on the rise. What could be simpler? It seems to be of no consequence that students may possess little or no genuine understanding of what they have learned. Understanding is not required for production. Furthermore, as Tröhler makes plain, it matters little

what has happened to the school as an institution or the practices taking place under its auspices—unless, of course, things do not unfold as anticipated. Under those circumstances, schools or teachers are typically held to account. Thus, in an interesting way, what goes on between input and output does matter—if only as a target for blame for an undertaking gone wrong.

In short, the reforms Tröhler discusses, and others as well, founder due in no small part to the fact that they are rooted in a profoundly oversimplified view of schools and their activities. As a corrective, he proposes a new programme of research governed and guided by a richer and more comprehensive conception of schooling sensitive to its complexities and paying particular attention to the “inner workings” of the school as well as of the larger political and social context in which it is embedded.

Tröhler suggests that one of the ways in which some of this complexity might be addressed is by thinking of the school as an institution or an organization. In particular, he focuses on two such approaches: one he dubs “The Grammar of Schooling”, the other “Neo-Institutionalism.” Both conceptions seek to offer a more comprehensive and credible picture of the workings of schools and the political and social context within which they are rooted including, among other things, the ways in which they respond to reform proposals. The notion that the school operates on a logic of its own and responds to reform initiatives accordingly seems to be the central idea of those who speak of “the grammar of schooling.” “Neo-institutionalism”, by contrast, distinguishes between the institution, understood as the formal structures of an organization, and the organization, viewed as the activities in which it is engaged. The fact that institution and organization are “loosely coupled” helps to account for the fact that different parts of the organization respond differently to a reform.

Prima facie at least, I find the former species of account more compelling. Neo-institutionalism with its talk of “loose coupling” between the formal structures of an organization and its activities seems to hark back to the kind of mechanistic account characteristic of the black-box conceptions criticized earlier. Nevertheless, both frameworks provide a more sophisticated view of the school than those that appear to inform recent research on reform.

Finally, with a view to advancing the discussion Tröhler has initiated, I would draw attention to the framework MacIntyre has developed in his *After Virtue* (1981). Central to this account is the distinction between an institution and a practice. MacIntyre defines a practice as;

... any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved are systematically extended. (p. 187)

While I recognize that there has been considerable debate regarding precisely what does, and what does not count as a practice according to this analytical scheme (cf.

Dunne, 2003), there is a good deal to recommend it, especially if one is interested in a more nuanced account of the practices associated with institutions such as schools, based on the view that schools are populated by thoughtful and purposeful agents.

By way of illustration MacIntyre suggests that

Chess, physics and medicine are practices; chess clubs, laboratories, universities and hospitals are institutions. Institutions are characteristically and necessarily concerned with what I have called external goods. They are involved in acquiring money and other material goods, they are structured in terms of power and status and they distribute money, power and status as rewards . . . no practice can survive for any length of time unsustained by institutions. (p. 194)

How then does MacIntyre envisage the relationship between institutions and practices? He goes on to maintain that,

“. . . the ideas and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of institutions in which the cooperative care for common goods is always vulnerable to the competitiveness of the institution.” (p. 194)

MacIntyre cautions that without virtues, “. . . without justice, courage, and truthfulness, practices could not resist the corrupting powers of institutions.” (p.194). So there are circumstances under which an institution’s pursuit of external goals may corrupt, or undermine, the practices and commitment to goods internal to that practice. Such an account can provide a teleological, rather than a mechanistic, picture of schools and their responses to reform initiatives. On this view, they can be viewed organically as attempting to purposefully adapt to changes in the circumstances in which they are situated.

References

- MacIntyre, Alasdair C. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981.
- McMurtry, J. “Seeing through the Corporate Agenda: Education, Life-value and the Global Economy.” In *Life and School: Education, Values and the Global Economy*. Ed. S. Hills Kingston, ON: MSTE Queen’s University, Faculty of Education, 2000.
- Noddings, Nel. “Aims, Goals, and Objectives”, *Encounters on Education*, 8, (Fall 2007): 7–15.