

WILLOW RUN
COMMUNITY
SCHOOLS

Changing Classes

*School Reform and
the New Economy*

MARTIN PACKER

Changing Classes

How do schools influence the kind of person a child becomes? *Changing Classes* tells the story of a small, poor, ethnically mixed school district in Michigan's rust belt, a community in turmoil over the announced closing of a nearby auto assembly plant. As teachers and administrators began to find ways to make schooling more relevant to working-class children, two large-scale school reform initiatives swept into town: the governor's "marketplace" reforms and the National Science Foundation's "State Systemic Initiative." All this is set against the backdrop of the transformation to a global, post-Fordist economy. The result is an account of the complex linkages at work as society structures the development of children to adulthood.

Martin Packer is Associate Professor of Psychology at Duquesne University.

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What is at stake is our vision of the kinds of human beings we would hope Americans to be in the last years of the twentieth and the first years of the twenty-first centuries, and of the kinds of education that will help bring those human beings into existence.

Lawrence A. Cremin, *Popular Education and Its Discontents*. Quoted in the report "Research and the Renewal of Education," from the National Academy of Education, 1991.

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Series Foreword

This series for Cambridge University Press is becoming widely known as an international forum for studies of situated learning and cognition.

Innovative contributions are being made by anthropology, by cognitive, developmental, and cultural psychology, by computer science, by education, and by social theory. These contributions are providing the basis for new ways of understanding the social, historical, and contextual nature of the learning, thinking, and practice that emerges from human activity. The empirical settings of these research inquiries range from the classroom to the workplace, to the high technology office, and to learning in the streets and in other communities of practice.

The *situated nature of learning and remembering through activity* is a central fact. It may appear obvious that human minds develop in social situations and extend their sphere of activity and communicative competencies. But cognitive theories of knowledge representation and learning alone have not provided sufficient insight into these relationships.

This series was born of the conviction that new and exciting interdisciplinary syntheses are underway as scholars and practitioners from diverse fields seek to develop theory and empirical investigations adequate for characterizing the complex relations of social and mental life, and for understanding successful learning wherever it occurs. The series invites contributions that advance our understanding of these seminal issues.

Roy Pea
John Seely Brown
Christian Heath

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Additional information on this project and related work can be found at my Web site: www.duq.edu/liberalarts/gradpsych/packer.html

Changing Classes

Introduction

The future of every society lies with its children. As each generation takes up tasks and responsibilities from the preceding one, its attitudes, expectations, and conduct shape the form society takes. Schools are, in the societies that have them, a central institution preparing young people for their future as workers and citizens. Schools, I would maintain, are more than places where young people are taught knowledge and skills; they are crucibles wherein children are transformed. In doing this schools give direction to our society – they can perpetuate the status quo or create a new future. And this means that those who can control our schools may exert a significant influence on the direction of social change.

This book is an account of struggles now taking place over public schools in the United States. It is the story of a single school district – the Willow Run Community Schools, in Michigan – but the lessons learned from this one case can, I believe, help us better understand what is happening all over the United States, and abroad as well.

At the same time the book is a reflection on the character of schooling. Schools are so familiar that we take them for granted, but the debates over schooling make it clear that there is much confusion about just how schools work. I believe we currently lack a clear understanding of the psychological and sociological character of schooling – of just how it is that attending school changes a young person's way of engaging the world, changes the kind of person they are. Here I offer the beginnings of such an account.

In the United States, public schools have become targets for increasingly strident attacks and demands for reform. In the early 1990s a striking and surprising bipartisan consensus developed that schools were failing, that

as a consequence the national economy was at risk, and that a “bridge to the twenty-first century” was needed that could be erected only if schooling were reformed. In particular, public schools were accused of failing to keep pace with dramatic changes in the workplace, changes in the character of industrial production and business organization.

Over the past two decades the United States has indeed undertaken a dramatic social upheaval, as computerization, merger and divestiture, downsizing and outsourcing, globalization and the World Wide Web have brought a shift from the familiar Fordist economy – standardized, large-scale, assembly-line production with a rigid and complex top-down hierarchy – to a new post-Fordist production – flexible, small-batch manufacture with a malleable and lean horizontal team organization. The production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services have all been transformed, become global, as companies move plants in search of cheaper labor, as trade agreements ease the flow of goods across national borders, and as computerized banking and trading enable currency to circle the globe in a fraction of a second.

Today the result of these changes is generally seen as an unprecedented boom – uninterrupted years of growth, low inflation, low unemployment, and a heady rise in stock prices. It is difficult now to recall how differently our situation was viewed less than a decade ago, when Bill Clinton won the presidency in part by reminding himself, “It’s the economy, stupid.” But there remains today another, hidden face to “Workplace 2000” – the costs paid for the boom include an enormous dislocation in which some kinds of work, especially manufacturing, have been eliminated, and job security and benefits have been relinquished by many workers. Poverty is growing, people are working longer hours for the same pay, there is an increasing inequity of income and wealth and a hovering threat of global economic and political instability. These problems have affected not just individuals, but entire communities. Over the past decade many communities have felt the stunningly painful effects of economic transition, abandoned as industrial facilities that provided apparently well-paying and secure jobs were closed in the name of “rationalization.”

Willow Run is such a community. A small, poor, ethnically mixed school district in Michigan’s rust belt, near Detroit, Willow Run was the child of twentieth-century state-regulated industrial production, born of a union between the power of the federal government and the wartime demand for mass production of complex fighting machines. The community was created by and took shape around the needs of large-scale industry – industry whose needs are now dramatically different.

I was fortunate enough to witness the efforts begun by teachers and administrators of the Willow Run schools to meet the challenges posed by the downsizing, southward migration, and reorganization of the auto industry. I began to visit the schools shortly after my arrival in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1991, having accepted a faculty position in the University of Michigan's School of Education. I found myself drawn into a tight-knit community with a dramatic history, a striking geography, and a wealth of good feeling.

In order both to understand the local reforms and try to facilitate them, I joined the committee that was working to foster change throughout the district. I attended the meetings of this committee, school board meetings, Town Hall meetings, traveled to the state Department of Education with other committee members, visited classrooms, attended school events, and spoke with teachers, students, parents, the superintendent, and other administrators.

So I was there when the Willow Run Community Schools found themselves caught up by not just one but two major initiatives for reform of the U.S. public schools. The first, legislation begun by Michigan's new Republican governor, John Engler, designed to bring market forces to bear on the schools and improve the "quality, performance, and accountability" of education, will be more familiar to most readers – it is a prime example of the "standards-based" movement that has swept through many U.S. states in the past decade.

But the second, though less well-known, is equally significant. It was a major program by the National Science Foundation (NSF), the "Statewide Systemic Initiative," intended to promote "systemic reform" of the public schools – a major effort that played out in 25 states and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, each of which received up to \$10 million over a five-year period.

In this book I trace the district's navigation through these reform initiatives and the changing economy, to provide an intimate look at the complexities and contradictions of public schooling, to shine a critical light on state and national initiatives for school reform, and to explore how a community like Willow Run turns to its schools in times of challenge and threat. I take the reader behind the scenes to hear teachers and administrators reflecting on the constraints and resources that influence what happens in the classroom. My story is of a community struggling to preserve its identity, of educators working to meet the needs of children in danger of being left behind by fast-paced economic change, and of the way personal change and history intertwine. The local reformers understood that if the community was to survive its children must change. The