

On the Meaningful Diversification of Schools

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Supported by the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities in China.

Received 15 February 2014; accepted 10 May 2014
Published online 26 May 2014

Abstract

Under the impact of the dominant Neo-liberal ideology, primary and secondary schools in the United States and Britain began to carry out diversification reform, including the diversification of the strategic management model, diversification of business entities and the diversification of school-running subjects. As far as the writer is concerned, the diversification of school-running model is just the superficial form or primary state of the diversification of schools; in relation to such “formalistic” diversification, diversifying schools in a real sense is more significant. Based on learning from the ecology, the writer believes that the diversification of schools should focus on building a healthy school ecosystem which emphasizes the autonomy and innovation of school reform as well as stresses the cooperation between schools.

Key words: Diversification of schools; School reform; School ecosystem

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Xu, Z. R. (2014). On the Meaningful Diversification of Schools. *Higher Education of Social Science*, 6(3), 161-165. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/hess/article/view/4876>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/4876>
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INTRODUCTION

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Under the influence of the dominant Neo-liberal ideology, primary and secondary schools in the United States and Britain began to carry out diversification reform,

including the diversification of strategic management model, diversification of business entities and the diversification of school-running subjects. In addition to the traditional public schools, private schools and church schools started to develop their own unique features. At the same time, magnet schools, charter schools, home schooling, and other new forms of alternative education have emerged. With regard to the current diversification reform in schools, how should we analyze its nature, value and significance? “Diversification is not the inherent characteristics of some substitute, but is a systematic orientation or an open attitude towards new alternative or experimental things.” This means that diversification opens up system rather than a rigid one or several organizational forms. But will the introduction of a completely different school model make school diversified? Is starting a charter school or a magnet school qualified as diversification? To some degree, it is quite superficial to understand the diversification of schools like this. Some scholars have wisely pointed out that school form is rooted in the concept and inherent power of school. Diversifying running-school model does not necessarily lead to diversified school forms, but at least, it will open the way for the emergence of diversified school forms. Diversifying school model is only the surface of school diversification, or in other words, school diversification in this sense is only at an initial stage. So it is a more profound and complicated task to proceed from this point to carry out distinctive internal school construction that centers on school’s educational goals, curriculum resources, teaching methods, and school culture. After this, different forms of schools will show their inner life, which involves taking specific strategies to make organizational changes. Therefore, in relation to the “formalistic” diversification, diversifying schools in a real sense is more significant. This understanding has deepened people’s knowledge of school diversification, and has increasingly gained momentum in the current school reform across the countries in the world.

1. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DIVERSITY IN ECOLOGY

The diversity concept is originated in ecology. In the ecosystem, diversity is an important ecological principle, which requires that a healthy ecosystem should maintain a diversity of biological species and that different species should occupy different ecological niches, exchange material and energy with each other, and form a symbiotic relationship to safeguard the stability and balance of the eco-system. The so-called ecological balance means that within a certain period of time biological species, environment, and biotic populations can be highly adapted to each other through energy flow, cycling of materials, and information conveyance so as to achieve a harmonious and unified state. Since biological balance is not constantly stable but in a dynamic equilibrium, it has become the important foundation for the internal ecosystem to maintain viability as well as to attain sustainable development. There are a few key points for the concept of “diversity” in ecology: first, the biological species constituting ecosystem should be diversified; second, the diverse biological species should be divided into different levels and occupy different niches in the ecological chain. The number of biological niches will determine the diversity of biological species, and only the dominant species can occupy a certain niches; therefore the diversity is dependent on the structure and function of niches instead of the form and number of species; third, since the environmental carrying capacity of ecosystem is stable within a range of time and space, and the resource distribution is uneven, scarcity of resources will pop up. At this point, the difference in diversity will lead to competition within the ecosystem, while the competition will in turn promote ecosystem’s development, thus forming a stable symbiotic relationship between different ecological species. In short, diversity is the prerequisite for the ecosystem to enhance its internal vitality and to achieve sustainable development. Similar to such natural ecosystem, human society is also a complex ecosystem. The writer is firmly believes that it will be of great inspiration to carry out a study on human society by means of the principles and methods of ecological diversity.

2. RECONSIDERATION ON DIVERSIFYING SCHOOLS: AN ANALYSIS OF SCHOOL REFORM FROM ECOLOGY’S PERSPECTIVE

Cremin L. A., the former dean of the Teachers College of Columbia University and the famous education historian, used the term “ecology of education” in the book *Public Education* for the first time. Cremin believed that the concept of ecology was useful because it emphasized linkage, and that the approach of the ecology of

education was “to place and examine various educational institutions and structures in the society where they are associated with each other and which has been maintaining them and been influenced by them (Fan, 2000, p.26).”

If we study the school system with a relational viewpoint, we will find that the school organization has the characteristics of bio-organism which can adjust its relationship with the environment in accordance with the environmental changes to safeguard its own survival. Besides, by likening the school organization in educational system to the bio-organism in ecosystem can we deduce the basic principles of school diversification from the principles of biological diversity. Why school diversity is so important? Stadtman has cited a list which includes numerous advantages of diversifying schools; for instance, it can increase learners’ range of choices, enable schools to make timely responses to the pressure resulting from changes in a complicated and manifold social environment, and can maintain the independence of educational organizations to effectively limit the centralization of power and so on (Birnbaum, 1983, pp.1-2). In a word, diversifying schools can meet the demands of learners and society. In addition, school diversification is also the internal need of school system. According to the ecosystem fundamentals, a system must not only be consistent but also has internal differences, otherwise the system would not exist. Diversity contributes to the stability of system and gives good protection for the system itself. Since the school is an open system, loss of diversity will make its function single and unable to meet the need from other functions in terms of politics, society and economy.

On this basis, we can provide a brief description of the diversified ecosystem of school. Assuming that each school was a biological tissue and that a certain type of school was similar to a certain biological species, schools in a particular region would be varied but not follow the same pattern. With its own characteristics, different types of schools would occupy different niches in school ecosystem, and there is a symbiotic relationship between them that they will not only compete but also cooperate with each other. Similar to such natural ecosystem, educational ecosystem also emphasizes diversity and stresses the complementary relationship between the structures and functions of the schools. It does not attach important to the number of schools and the organizational forms. So the diversification caused by school functions or by the differences in functions is more significant and real in its own right, which is totally different from the diversification caused by school forms.

3. DEVELOPING SCHOOLS' CONNOTATION: THE GOAL OF DIVERSIFYING SCHOOLS

The major trend of today's education reform and development around the world is to improve the quality of education through reforming schools. School reform is a comprehensive reform that covers such three aspects as school's basic form, inner matrix and teaching practice, including the value, center, structure, process and motivation of education. In fact, it is not a natural process to make reforms from school's basic form to inner matrix, and then to its teaching practice, for it involves changes in school's development model, namely the change from the form of school's organization to the change in the internal elements of school, thus the school will go on the road of connotative development. The connotative development of schools refers to the development of schools' overall strength, which can be epitomized by the comprehensive improvement of schools' schooling level. As mentioned earlier, biodiversity requires biological species to form their private ecological advantages in different ecological niches. Similarly, school diversification also requires different schools to create high-quality education resources to meet different demand, and the meaningful diversification of schools also seek better schooling quality and level, and regards it as the priority of school reform. So diversifying schools are the proper meaning of schools' connotative development.

However, unlike the natural ecosystem where biological diversity is maintained through natural selection and survival of the fittest, the diversify of schools in educational ecosystem has to be achieved by manually reforming schools. This kind of reform cannot be accomplished overnight through simply changing schools' organizational forms, for school education is essentially an activity of cultivating human beings. Therefore, the objective of school reform should be centered around the educational activities, go deep into the teaching and learning aspect, and carry out distinctive internal construction through unique educational goals, curriculum resources, teaching methods, campus culture, and others, so as to make various schools show their inner life, thus ultimately improving their schooling quality and finding their own way to development. This article does not intend to further explore the specific strategies of diversifying schools to achieve connotative development; instead, it only sheds some light on the direction that the meaningful diversification of schools should go towards.

3.1 Autonomy: Making Schools Become the Mainstay of Reform

School reform is the basis of changes in the educational system, which means that the school is the basic unit of self-organizing system so that schools should be made to become the mainstay of reform. Based on exploring

the regularity of running schools, we realize that a single schooling model is not suitable for all students, and that all the schools cannot be measured by using the same ruler. In this sense, we should proceed from the actual situation of schools to find out the direction of reform and establish schooling models that have their own characteristics. The diversification of schools can meet the end, for it goes against the original educational concept with single schooling model, unified requirements, and achieving homogeneous development. Besides, the diversified educational system will give schools the liberty to run schools through reforming the management system, which will stimulate the vitality of school reform. In addition, schools will effectively solve their own problems and find the way to develop their resources on the basis of school-based management.

Since the 1980s, the United States has gained important experience during the process of diversifying its schools which were to implement school-based management and participatory management. The aim is to ensure that the schools become the mainstay of reform. However, this does not mean that the schools can enjoy complete autonomy, for each educational policy throughout American history would be more or less influenced by politics. Some people believe that education is the arena of political struggle. For example, some programmes used by western countries to privatize schools were aimed only to serve certain political interests, although they purported to increase the diversity of schools ostensibly. So these programmes are totally independent of the true goals of the educational reform. Mark Bray once pointed out that the aim of some privatization programmes was to weaken the power of teachers' associations, while others were intended to ensure the success of political elections. But the latter was rarely relevant to the reasonable comments given to the optional policies; on the contrary, it had relation to the promise given by some politicians and to the desire of weakening competitors (Bray, 2002, p.111). It is true that politics and society will exert impact on school reform, but the important principle of school reform is to try to return it back on the track of discussing educational principles. From this perspective, the diversification of schools has given much more authority and professional protection to schools in terms of reforming.

It should also be noted that letting schools become the mainstay of reform does not mean completely lifting the restrictions to schools' management authority. Michael Fullan held that the reform failure was caused by simple reform policies or by lack of reform policies. "What the top-down policy brings is a disaster rather than liberation; what the bottom-up policy brings is scattered trifles and will be eventually reduced into an uncontrollable situation (Fullan, 2000, p.231)." The revelation we can get from the reform is that both centralization and decentralization of power have shortcomings, and both top-down and bottom-

up policies are essential. In any case, the diversification of schools does not come from subjective will, but is the result of schools' autonomy reform.

3.2 Innovation: Schools' Diversification Should Form Their Distinctive Cultures and Characteristics

The school reform in a real sense will change the school as a whole. It cannot be simplified as the reform in a certain type or aspect of school activity, nor can it be simplified as the reform in a certain phase or one side of school activity, such as the reform in organizational structure, classroom teaching, teaching methods and teaching strategies. Of course, school reform includes the reform in these aspects, but it is beyond that (Wang, 2011, p.152). This holistic reform requires us to go deep into the connotative development from the surface of changing structures, and a unique and consistent school culture. The soul of such reform is to innovate professional learning and teaching methods. Without reforming the classroom teaching, the diversification of schools will remain a paper work. Additionally, if innovation cannot be achieved on professional learning and teaching methods, the diversification of schools will be restricted.

In the diversification reform of American schools, any school that has gained success in reform has its own features. This is mainly reflected in the innovation of its educational goals and curriculum content. For example, the charter schools in Connecticut had a better remediation capability. In Delaware, the work of charter schools focused on preparing students for university. Wisconsin established the Green Charter Schools Network, which united together the schools that showed concern to ecological environment, and the number of such schools continued to increase. Students did not have to attend classes especially designed for environmental studies, because their courses were always linked to environmental studies. Moreover, the STEM courses in Baltimore Polytechnic Institute were mainly on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (Education Week, 2010, pp.91-98).

As the requirements for the reform come from all sides, the reforming process is likely to shoulder heavy burden, become monotonous and lack consistency. For example, when the old reform program had not been fully implemented, a new reform program was introduced. The reform programs were numerous but were not targeted. Many schools and school systems carried out every reform program without judgment, which made the situation worse. Bracke and other researchers called such schools "Christmas-tree schools" due to the fact that the reform programs were as many as the ornaments on the Christmas tree, which is only fair without. In fact, successful organizations are often not those who had the maximum reforms, nor are those who sent the largest number of staff to attend HRD meetings; instead, they are those who have purposefully carried out many learning activities. So

relevance and knowledge innovation are the key to solving the problem of inconsistency (Fullan, 2000, p.229).

Nowadays, many scholars have put the focus of school reform on its cultural construction. School culture refers to the values, norms, beliefs and assumptions shared by school members. As pointed out by Fullan, reconstruction is the reform in the structure, role and the relevant factors of organization, while what really makes schools exert significant impact on students and teachers is the development of the professional learning communities in schools, namely, the cultural reconstruction of schools. This reconstruction process is to make the teaching evaluation and anything about teaching become the focus of teachers' work, about which the teachers were never or rarely concerned before. Furthermore, the reconstruction process will turn such focus on teachers' efforts to make improvement in this regard. Although reform in structure may promote or hinder the process of cultural reconstruction, the development of the professional communities is surely the key to schools' improvement (Liang & Huang, 2010, p.25).

3.3 Cooperation: Reshaping the Reciprocal Relationship Between Schools

The replacement of the homogeneous competitive relationship with a reciprocal relationship between schools suggests that the diversification of schools must go beyond the neo-liberal market competition concept. To a large extent, the reciprocal relationship between schools is similar to the symbiotic relationship in ecology, which is inevitable for educational reform to look at itself from the perspective of ecology.

The result out of the competition between schools is often to grade schools by level; for example, it is rather common in developing countries that schools are classified according to the standards of key schools and common schools. People think such classification and resource allocation will lead to an effective use of resources. In fact, the modern school grading system is not a truly efficient institutional arrangement. Grading system often sacrifices the quality of public education. "The relative surplus in the supply of public education products (actually it is the relative surplus of crude education) reduces the efficiency of education, and also causes a shortage of specialty education, quality education and optional education in a sense. The reason why such low-efficiency educational system has survived is partly due to people's demand for the public goods—social justice, or is partly because of the implicit income under this system; besides, the low-efficiency educational system is also the result of political coercion which often makes its presence by giving requirements such as increasing public educational products, enhancing a fair society, and ensuring social stability. Since social justice and personal gain is at the cost of freedom, honesty and even integrity, this system also facing an overall imminent crisis (Kang, 2003, p.355)."

In order to change such system, it is necessary to City often develop hand in hand, forming a so-called “New retrospect on the structure and function of the diversified York effect (Education Week, 2010, p.65)”. They do not snatch school system. For instance, it may be a good method to resources with each other, but have been figuring out how to change the vertical structure of the school system into a dig pools deeper and create resources conjointly, so that all horizontal structure. At present, education ecology theory schools can be developed. British scholars such as Geoff Whitty has always been concerned about the status and role have analyzed the role of the British educational policy and of the school in the educational system. Some scholars educational reform measures taken by independent schools and have proposed the concept of “educational community” extended schools in breaking the link between social background (Goodlad, 2006, pp.37-383). In other words, communities and the gap of students’ academic achievement. In their research should be regarded as the best educational institutions, paper, the authors believe that the task of bridging the gap and education is not only limited to school education, cannot be shouldered unilaterally by schools, but should be done just like religion is not limited to the church. There are by the cooperation between schools and other institutions in the two main understandings for the role of schools in the social ecosystem. Studies have shown that the ability of schools educational system. One holds that schools should go in terms of weakening the impact of poverty on children is very beyond teaching the traditional disciplines, but become limited, which is due to many factors beyond the control of the the education center, entertainment center and service school system. They concluded that strategies related to structure center related to education in the communities. The and “outside-the-school strategies” are necessary, and that “the other view argues that schools should clearly specify 20-year competition between schools cannot help disadvantaged their own role, and clarify their special functions and students improve their academic performance, but rather it is the the functions when they cooperate with other institutions. cooperation between schools that can bring hope”. So we should Education should not be conducted by just one institution, retrospect on school management and its management structure but is carried out in a complete educational ecosystem— (Fan, 2013, p. 28).

composed of schools, families, places of worship, television, newspapers, museums, libraries, businesses, industries and other institutions. In this regard, it would appear that there are various relationships between a variety of different types of educational institutions and quasi-educational institutions. In other words, there is an educational ecosystem made up of schools and other educational institutions in which a variety of different types of schools can also generate a school ecosystem. If we can understand and make a good advantage of such ecological viewpoint, the partnership between schools will enjoy healthy development. To the end, first of all, we should recognize that with a common goal and in a certain region, schools share an inherent association with each other; after taking some preliminary steps, they will have a good cooperation. So far, every country in the world is exploring the horizontal classification of schools, but not ideal result has been found. For instance, the United Kingdom developed schools with characteristics according to majors and disciplines; some countries are finding out the potential of cooperation between schools guided by different educational goals. Although establishing school systems that enjoy cooperation and diversity is just an ideal dream, the opportunity to achieve this idea may have come.

For example, in the United States, some successful charter schools do not share the same competition as that in the market, but are committed to the “cooperative competition”. In specific, the charter schools in New York

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