

# *The End of Efficiency: Implications for Democratic Education*

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper provides an examination of the concept of efficiency and its application to current educational initiatives and reforms. It is shown that several movements in education are primarily based on a narrow conception of efficiency, giving rise to serious ethical concerns. Beginning with an examination of the term efficiency and common misconceptions of its meaning, manifestations of the efficiency movement in education are then described, followed by their ethical implications in terms of democratic education and equity issues. It will be concluded that the problematic consequences of efficiency initiatives in schools are mainly due to the application of an overly narrow conception of efficiency.

**RÉSUMÉ:** Ici, le concept de la compétence et de sa pratique dans les réformes et les initiatives actuelles de l'enseignement, sont analysés. Il y est démontré que plusieurs mouvements dans l'enseignement s'appuient d'abord sur une conception limitée de la compétence soulevant ainsi, des problèmes importants d'ordre éthique. Le papier commence par une analyse du mot "compétence" et des conceptions erronées de sa signification, ensuite par la description des manifestations du mouvement de compétence dans l'enseignement, puis par leurs mises en action éthiques en termes d'enseignement démocratiques et de questions d'équité. On en conclura que les conséquences problématiques des initiatives de compétence dans les écoles sont principalement dues à la mise en pratique d'une conception de la compétence qui est plus que limitée.

The label *efficient* is rarely given as a pejorative. In fact, it is generally taken for granted as positive. When we are considered efficient, we are celebrated; when inefficient, we are chastised. By proper definition, however, the term ought to carry no value at all. Efficiency is a term

often decontextualized and thereby problematically applied and assumed to produce only positive outcomes. In this paper, I tackle this concept of efficiency and its application to current educational initiatives and reforms. It will be shown that efficiency movements in education are primarily based on a narrow conception of efficiency, giving rise to serious ethical implications. I begin with an examination of the term and common misconceptions of its meaning. Manifestations of the efficiency movement in education are then described, followed by ethical concerns that impact democratic education and equity issues. It will be concluded that the problematic consequences of efficiency initiatives in schools are primarily due to the application of an overly narrow conception of efficiency.

### *Defining Efficiency*

Efficiency, as the term is commonly invoked in our society, implies a specific conception that is associated primarily with economic aims. If properly understood, however, efficiency has very general applications, meant, quite simply, to produce a desired result with minimal effort, expense, or waste (Oxford, 2006). There is a widespread assumption that the term waste herein refers to cost or resources, but this is only the case in certain circumstances. As Janice Gross Stein explains: "Efficiency clearly takes on different meanings in different spheres of human activity. The yardstick is relative and rooted in context" (2002, p.12). Efficiency is then always a means to some end. No one, or nothing, is ever merely efficient; we are always efficient *at* something. A fuel efficient car is not simply efficient; it is efficient *at* conserving fuel. It is therefore problematic to view efficiency as an end in itself or to strive for it decontextualized from an aim. As Stein argues, efficiency has become so unproblematically valued in our society that it is often misunderstood as an end, not as a means. And, as will be shown, this singular end is frequently conceived of as economic in nature.

As argued by Joseph Heath, we ought to value efficiency in satisfying our various needs, but these needs are not limited to resources or production or wealth. Efficiency, for Heath, is a valued means to achieving such goods as "our need for clean air, beautiful surroundings, knowledge, and even protection against risk" (2001, p. xvi). Moreover, pursuing efficiency helps us to determine ways in which to organize our lives, attain our goals, and how best to achieve "win-win" situations (p. 24). In this, pursuing efficiency can indeed be viewed as highly valuable.

However, the significance lies not in the act of being efficient, but in the ends it attains.

Invoking efficiency in order to attain a goal is then not problematic in and of itself. In fact, it is often worthwhile. The critique that I place is then not on the notion of efficiency. It is instead on a narrow conception of the term that has become prevalent in our society. The widespread understanding of efficiency implies a specific end, not mean. Its meaning in this sense is narrow, and a distortion with serious ethical implications.

As Heath states: "there is a strong tendency to think of efficiency only in very narrow terms – to judge it by looking at the total value of goods produced by the market. This is deeply wrongheaded" (2001, p. xvi). The common understanding of efficiency links it inextricably to economics. The term is almost interchangeable with cost-effectiveness, cost cutting, value for money, or productivity (Heath, 2001; Stein, 2002; Welch, 1998). Due to a decontextualizing of the term, routinely linking efficiency to "an ethos of business style principles" has become pervasive (Welch, 1998, p.157). Efficiency's value has been reduced to its contribution to economic growth. This prompts the belief that a lack of contribution to economic productivity implies "inefficiency" (Heath, 2001; Meyer, 1998; Stein, 2002).

As argued by Stein, the promotion of efficiency "engenders almost blind loyalty," and in this sense can be viewed as a "cult" (2002, p. 4). The pervasive demand for efficiency, in terms of productivity, therefore exists beyond the corporate arena and has infiltrated the provision of public goods. As will be shown, an excessively narrow conception of efficiency, limited to economics, is that which is most often applied to the realm of education.

It is this *limitation* of efficiency to economics within educational mandates that is critiqued in this paper. Economic efficiency ought not to be presented as inherently problematic. It can be highly valuable to conserve resources. Problems arise when economic efficiency is sought *at the expense* of other aims. The objective of economic efficiency must be tempered by the pursuit of other aims of education. This paper demonstrates that economic efficiency is often presented as the *dominant* aim of education, leading to what Susan Meyer describes as a reductionist, technicist approach to pedagogy and educational policy. There is no doubt that resources are important. However, it is possible that policy-makers can strive for a degree of economic efficiency so long

as other aims are identified, pursued and not subjugated to financial objectives (Meyer, 1998).

### *The Efficiency Movement in Education*

The notion of efficiency as a cult in fact preceded Stein, and was first applied to schools by Raymond E. Callahan in his 1962 book *Education and the Cult of Efficiency*. Callahan critiqued the promotion of “modern business methods” employed to reform schools, for he felt that educational concerns were “subordinated to business considerations” (1962, pp. 5, 246). Schools in Callahan’s time were conceived of as factories, meant to provide a practical curriculum “in order to serve a business society better” (p. 18). The drive toward economic goals within schools were a result of what Callahan termed a “cult of efficiency” in education, and manifested in the application of business methods to achieve financial, more than educational, ends. Over 50 years later, the present applicability of Callahan’s critique is quite notable.

For instance, Anthony Welch depicts current efficiency movements in education, which are “predicated upon the idea that both individual worth and the worth of education can be reduced to economic terms” (1998, p.158). Educational reforms falling under the term efficiency movements have been widespread since the early 1990s and implemented in such countries as Canada, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> These reforms have been widely critiqued as neo-liberal or neo-conservative in nature (Olssen, 1996; Portelli & Pinto, 2005; Stein, 2002; Welch, 1998; Wrigley, 2003). The policies are described by critics as adhering to a specific ideology based on free market principles that include a reduced role of government, consumer choice, and individualism. A central tenet of neo-liberalism is economic prosperity as a primary aim (Freire, 2001; Olssen, 1996; Portelli & Pinto, 2005; Welch, 1998). Educational aims that are espoused in these movements are then reduced primarily in relation to economic growth. Improvements to education are defined as investments and the student body is viewed as human capital. In this sense, education is a commodity. It is then only natural that business methods are readily applied to educational policies (Welch, 1998). It is apparent that in Callahan’s assessment, along with those of contemporary theorists, the term efficiency as applied to education implies the economically narrow conception.

One manifestation of this efficiency movement is increased corporate involvement in schools. Within a Canadian context, Alison Taylor

describes a common view of education "as a means for developing a highly skilled workforce and thus securing national economic prosperity" (2001, p. 169). In this, there exists a strong impetus toward creating ties between businesses and schools. Business-Education conferences have been popularized in their endeavor to promote partnerships and cooperation between corporations and schools. A corporate-backed research institution called the Conference Board of Canada has been widely successful in sponsoring these conferences in several provinces. For instance, the conferences critique curriculum in terms of its applicability to the workplace, promoting a refocusing toward more business-oriented subjects. Also promoted are co-operative, apprenticeship, or workplace learning programs. Business leaders are increasingly involved at the policy level in education, as well, voicing their opinions on what can best make a student employable. In consistently invoking the catch-phrase "Knowledge Economy," business leaders and educators inextricably link education to economic development (Taylor, 2001).

The rise in commercialism in schools further demonstrates the influence of the educational efficiency movement. As argued by Alex Molnar and Joseph Reaves, in schools, while students are molded to enter a specific workforce, they are concurrently "conditioned to express civic and economic participation through consumerism" (2002, p. 18). Such activities that perpetuate this consumerism include allocation of school space to advertising that markets towards children, sponsoring of educational materials by corporations, and incentive programs where students or schools receive awards or funding from businesses for engaging in specific activities. According to a study conducted by Molnar and Reaves, corporate spending on marketing to youth has never been higher. They conclude: "In an ongoing quest to capture lifelong consumers, corporations are turning schools into servants of a marketing machine" (p. 48). Commercialism in schools and business involvement in educational programs are connected to a limited definition of efficiency, wherein schools are viewed as a critical component of economic growth. An assumption is made that the more businesses are involved in the structure of schools, the more efficiently schools and students will contribute to the economy.

Furthermore, the curriculum ought to be not only applicable to the workplace but also *common*. Efficiency is related to this standardization drive in part due to the belief that "universal standards ... will make practice more efficient and less confusing" (Portelli & Vibert, 2001, p.

66). It is assumed that this allows for easier, less time-consuming and therefore more cost-effective assessment via standardized testing. For instance, the provincial Progressive Conservative government in Ontario in the mid-1990s introduced both a common curriculum and rigid standardized testing structure which are still in place today (Dei & Karumanchery, 2001). These tests are widely viewed as efficient measures of student achievement, and tend to concentrate on literacy and mathematics skills (Dei & Karumanchery, 2001; Macedo, 2000; Welch, 1998).

The widespread promotion of privatization of education and school choice also reflects the efficiency movement. The push toward privatization derives from the conception of the state, as a provider of goods and services, as essentially inefficient (Stein, 2002; Welch, 1998). The privatization of schools can create competition, and there is a widely held belief that problems plaguing the public school system may be cured via school choice initiatives. The conservative Fraser Institute has been a strong proponent of the school-choice movement in Canada. It is argued by the Institute and other advocates that "an educational market will foster competition among schools, rewarding the cost-effective schools that provide quality education and punishing the failures as parents 'exit' " (Stein, 2002, p. 99). Those who advocate privatization "treat parents and their children as individual 'consumers,' educators as 'suppliers,' and government as the regulator of the rules of the market, not as the direct provider of public education" (Stein, 2002, p. 99).

### *Ethical Implications of the Efficiency Movement in Education*

It is apparent that there is an impetus towards greater efficiency in schools, and that this conception of efficiency is reduced to economic aims and market ideology. Manifestations of this efficiency movement, such as corporatism, consumerism, high-stakes testing, curriculum reform, and privatization, prompt several ethical concerns. In particular, the degree to which education can be deemed democratic must be questioned, given the impacts of the efficiency movement.

For John Dewey, a democratic society includes such elements as free communication and association, equal participation, and "must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder" (Dewey, 1916/1997, p. 99). He

stated that “democracy means freeing intelligence for independent effectiveness” (Dewey, 1903/1977, p. 230). In this, democratic education must do more than teach students about the mechanics of political processes, but also foster in them a sense of agency within this process. A school itself must also adhere to democratic principles; the classroom must be a democratic place. Students may then see that they are participants in their learning, and thereby schools can create citizens who have the capacity and drive to act toward social transformation. This moves beyond the notion of education as knowledge acquisition (Levin, 2000; Portelli & Pinto, 2005). John Portelli and Ann Vibert advocate a meaning of democratic education that incorporates such elements as “critical thinking, dialogue and discussion, tolerance, free and reasoned choices, and public participation” (2002, p. 17). Given these descriptions, in my view, democratic schools are meant to allow student participation in what and how they are taught, to be arenas of social change, and therefore transformative toward a more democratic society. As will be shown, efficiency movements in education counter these democratic principles and aims.

For instance, corporate ties to education generally reflect not the interests of educators, parents, or children, but of business leaders. At Business-Education conferences, Taylor has found that business representatives identified most of the issues to be addressed and created the agendas (2001, p. 184). In this, one must question the degree to which these ventures are in the best interests of the students, or if they are simply furthering the interests of the business community. Furthermore, one may question if equity plays a role in this “new vocationalism” (p. 181). In that the majority of the apprenticeships have attracted male students, to what extent do these programs reproduce gendered workplace roles? Also, many of these vocational programs are offered only to certain streams of high school students, where there is a targeting of those deemed non-college bound. In this, are these programs contributing to the reproduction of class divisions? (Taylor, 2001) While the endeavour to create a better workforce may be argued to contribute to economic prosperity, there are serious concerns if the best interests of the students are being truly furthered by these business-education initiatives. As Welch asserts: “the current business and market principles of efficiency upon schools and universities results in predictable distortions of the principles of social justice and equality, towards ones of economics and business management” (1998, p. 171).

Consumerism in schools raises similar concerns. Commercial ventures in schools have been found to “influence the structure of the school day, shape curricula, undermine quality education” (Molnar & Reaves, 2002, p. 17). The pervasiveness of commercialism in schools prompts questions concerning the perception of students as investments and the degree to which they are being socialized and targeted as consumers without their consent. Noam Chomsky argues that “early in your education you are socialized to understand the need to support the power structure, primarily corporations – the business class” (2000, p. 17). In this sense, education is viewed primarily as a commercial venture, where, as Henry Giroux asserts, “the only form of citizenship offered to young people is consumerism” (1999, p. 141). This counters the democratic participation of students in their own learning, treating them in an instrumentalist fashion, or as Paulo Freire has described, as objects instead of subjects (2001). Students are more economic agents than learners and citizens with individual needs, desires, and histories.

A counter-argument can be made which asks: What if students want to become economic agents? This is a fair question, for a student may democratically choose to be treated as a consumer and involved in the various initiatives of the efficiency movement. The problem, however, is that their current treatment is not their choice. If the students do not wish to be treated as consumers, they have no means to opt out. It is the lack of consent which demands critique, and can be deemed unethical and undemocratic.

Further supporting the argument that the efficiency movement reduces democratic education are the implications of standardized testing and curriculum reforms. Standardized tests, despite their efficiency in assessing certain skills, support test-guided teaching that prevents students from developing other abilities which allow them to examine the world critically (Giroux, 1999; Macedo, 2000). Teaching to a test only promotes, as Freire has described it, “banking education,” and hinders true learning. As he explains: “in the context of true learning, the learners will be engaged in a continuous transformation through which they become authentic subjects of the construction and reconstruction of what is being taught” (Freire, 2001, p. 33). This process cannot occur when teaching is restricted in its content and guided by standardized tests. Independent thought and critical thinking are devalued and suppressed via “this form of mindless skills-based education” (Macedo, 2000, p. 4).

Critical thinking is not merely problem-solving or thinking creatively. It includes a “dispositional component” where individuals’ actions are informed by thinking critically in given situations (Portelli & Pinto, 2005, p. 3). In allowing the space and encouraging students’ critical thinking, they may then learn to question the world around them, including what and how they learn in schools. In this way they may act as participants in their own education, countering banking education and the possibility of indoctrination (Freire, 2001; Portelli & Pinto, 2005). Critical thinking is therefore a central component of democratic education, in its fostering of participatory learning within classrooms that are democratic spaces.

Challenges to critical thinking, which in turn hinder democratic education, result from the efficiency movement, such as space and time limitations due to high-stakes standardized tests and rigid curriculum policy. The economic focus in education addresses the needs of future employers, yet is likely at the expense of other aims, such as instilling political empowerment in students. The emphasis on testing that focuses on basic literacy and mathematics limits the room in which students may engage in critical thinking. Teaching as test-preparation allows little opportunity for students to critically examine their experiences in and out of schools (Portelli & Pinto, 2005; Wrigley, 2003). As Terry Wrigley explains:

Students struggling to negotiate a complex set of power relationships, values and ideologies need space to explore plural and shifting identities, to critique the dominant discourses (globalization, consumerism, economic rationalism and religious fundamentalisms) and work out how to position themselves within a complex intersection of power relationships and consumer identities. They need to deal creatively, at an affective as well as cognitive level, with problems of poverty, patriarchy, sexuality, racism and war. (2003, p. 108)

The absence of critical thinking that results from efficiency movements act to hinder students’ abilities to understand and address important global issues and dominant ideologies. Test-based teaching, in opposition to democratic practices, only furthers the power of hegemony, repressing the critical transformative aim of education. Ideologies that likely reflect only the interests of dominant groups may be easily ingrained in students when critical reflection is suppressed. This suppression is only perpetuated when learning is restricted by a common curriculum and teaching is guided by high-stakes standardized testing. If not given the

opportunity to engage critically with alternative perspectives, closed-mindedness or indoctrination may result (Chomsky, 2000; Freire, 2001; Portelli & Pinto, 2005).

The standardization of curriculum also raises equity concerns and must be problematized in terms of its design. Advocating a common curriculum, George Sefa Dei and Leeno Karumanchery argue, raises the following questions:

Who is writing this new curricula? How do the new curricula address question of equity and social difference? Whose values, ideas, and knowledge are being represented? One must ask how outcomes are to be achieved by all when the playing field is not level. (2001, p. 201)

Similarly argued by Portelli and Vibert, the standardization movement assumes a "common culture" giving little consideration to the diversity among students while emphasizing conformity (2001, p. 69).

Markets have become the models for schools and curriculum, potentially subjugating equity considerations in education. As Welch states: "the cult of efficiency often masks an economic, technicist conception of education which resists any incursions by criteria of equity or social or individual development" (1998, p. 171).

Furthermore, a significant characteristic of the limited conception of efficiency is its restricted applicability to that which is easily measurable; only what is empirically verifiable can be deemed efficient by economic standards. This implies that anything unquantifiable, that cannot be proven to contribute to economic aims, is often considered inefficient. Meyer employs the term "technicism" to describe the reduction of educational issues to only that which is quantifiable. Technicism, she argues, is an indicator of the hegemony of rational scientific thinking. Quantitative data, it is argued, is much easier to communicate and is more readily accepted than non-empirical arguments to support policy (Meyer, 1998). Technicism influences the emphasis on quantifiable outcomes that are stressed in the common curriculum and assessed by the associated standardized tests. This reductionist approach has repercussions for democratic education and equity issues, for there is a risk that non-quantifiable outcomes of education will be considered as secondary aims. Examples of such educational aims are fostering critical thinking, anti-racism, and other equity measures.

Finally, the drive towards privatization, in the aim at improving the cost-effectiveness of schools, raises obvious concerns surrounding equity

given that access is often dependent on the socio-economic class of the student. The disempowering of the public sector in provision of education reduces the likelihood of providing quality education to whole communities. Moreover, the said improvement of schools via competition implies that a school is the same as a business, assuming similar aims. Any responsibility that education may have to increase democratic practices is subjugated to the pursuit of efficiency (Giroux, 1999; Stein, 2002; Welch, 1998).<sup>2</sup>

These manifestations of the drive toward efficiency in education all demonstrate an excessively narrow conception of the term, with economic growth, market mechanisms, and cost-effectiveness at the core. There are questionable outcomes of these initiatives and reforms, in terms of equity and democratic education. Furthermore, they rest on a specific conception of the aims of schooling and the nature of the student. Concern is limited to those aims of education which can be quantified and potentially contribute to the economic base of society. The focus on efficiency has been shown to suppress various social aims of education, such as equity and democracy, yet supports other aims such as the development of human capital and consumerism. The efficiency movement also implies that there is no intrinsic worth to education; that schools are simply meant to create avid consumers and a profitable workforce. This would explain the acceptance of teaching guided by tests, where students are not meant to think critically about the world, but instead to learn basic skills that can be transposed to the workplace and thereby help them succeed in capitalist society.

One may question the degree to which students are viewed as means to economic ends in this focus on efficiency. This raises a serious ethical concern, for there is an instrumentalist perception of students, by which their opinions, needs, desires, and independent thoughts are disregarded. Students are instead viewed as investments. Manifestations of the efficiency movement in education weaken "the role that public schools might play in keeping the experiences, hopes, and dreams of a democracy alive for each successive generation of students" (Giroux, 1999, p. 142)

### *Conclusion*

Educational initiatives and reforms are often based on a misleading conception of the term efficiency. There is a pervasive assumption that efficiency ought to be a means to a very limited end, namely economic growth. Educators and policy-makers must be cautioned against narrow

and simplistic applications of this concept (Meyer, 1998). As has been shown, this overly narrow conception influences policies and practices which give rise to ethical concerns surrounding the aims of education and the treatment of students. However, this does not discount the value of efficiency in terms of its proper use. For instance, I would advocate initiatives implemented that promote more efficient means to the end of equity, or social justice. The goal of efficiency is not problematic, if this desire is contextualized and aims at ethical ends. Even in the case where economic efficiency is pursued, it is only unethical if it is at the expense of other, likely unquantifiable outcomes. As argued by Callahan half a century ago, concerns for efficiency in education must aim at humanist, not economic goals. We must consistently question why we continue valuing efficiency, by examining the ends at which our efficiency aims.

#### NOTES

1. Some have labeled similar reforms as "effectiveness" movements. See, for example, Terry Wrigley (2003).
2. For a more comprehensive examination of the complex privatization debate, see Stein's *Cult of Efficiency* (2002), which provides an excellent investigation of the relationship of efficiency to privatization and school choice movements in North America.

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