Chapter 1

Bureaucratizing the Child: The Manufacture of Adults in the Modern World

This book is about two things. First, it is about the fact that modern schools everywhere take dependent, impulsive, illiterate, and stubborn five-year-old children, and create predictable, compliant, literate, and docile adults. Every modern society routinely and efficiently does this in a process lasting about 12 years. Every modern society does this even though it intrudes upon one of the most emotionally charged relationships known, that between a parent and child.

And secondly this book is about how when every modern country creates adults, they do it the same way: by creating a large bureaucracy controlled, albeit unevenly, by a central government. But despite the ubiquity of this task, citizens in every society are convinced that the education bureaucracy is inadequate and must be reformed. They do not want to make minor incremental changes; rather they call for radical reform. At all time and in all places it seems that the political powers are dissatisfied with the way schooling is done and insist that unless it is reformed and radically improved, the very nature of society is at stake. I could use many quotes to illustrate this point, but one from the conservative President George H. W. Bush, speaking in the early 1990s, is illustrative:

Don’t be content with incremental change . . . but “assume that the schools we have inherited do not exist.” This was no ordinary task, said President [George H. W.] Bush; the redemption of society was at stake: “Think about every problem, every challenge we face. The solution to each starts with
education. For the sake of the future—or our children and the nation—we must transform America’s schools. (Tyack and Cuban 1995, 110)

The irony of course is that President Bush’s call in the 1990s is hardly unique to the 1990s. By then, educational reform was already a focus of US national politics for over a century, and the assumption that the schools “we have inherited” were inadequate and in need of radical quick reform was just as persistent. So despite these demands, radical reform was never achieved, and as the newest reformers—those of the twenty-first century—are quick to point out, the United States continues to operate schools based on what they call nineteenth century assumptions about learning, the agricultural season, and the purpose of schooling.

Blame for this presumably urgent need for school reform is placed on a variety of conditions, such as culture, families, teachers, unions, state governments, federal governments, and perhaps most commonly, “the bureaucracy,” which manages the enterprise. Educational bureaucracy never seemingly delivers the reform that powerful leaders like President Bush always promise. This book is about how and why I think that this dissatisfaction with schools is a constant and something that by its very nature is idealized, and therefore something never achieved. Because I think it is a constant, I do one thing that other books do not: I do not offer “the solution” to the problem of the schools. Rather, I present public schools as modern human institutions that are everywhere needed but nowhere admired. By approaching the problem this way, I hope that those interested in the public schools, while continuing their attempts at reform, will come to recognize that there are no silver bullets, and in fact a level of dissatisfaction is inherent to a bureaucratic activity that intrudes so deeply into one of the most emotionally charged relationships in society—that between parent and child. Thus, even though I agree generally with President Bush that schools are elemental to addressing “every challenge we face,” I doubt that another transformation of US schools will result in the redemption of society. So the elemental nature of the school system explains why, in every modern country, vast public bureaucracies are created to administer, regulate, and monitor the creation of adults out of the raw material parents provide, this is, children. But, it still does not explain why there is such dissatisfaction with public school bureaucracies in so many places and times. But look at the complexity of the problem provides context.

Public schools hire a teacher corps, develop a curriculum, supervise those teachers, and ultimately evaluate whether the types of adults desired were produced. Schools do this by slowly but surely introducing the child to a broader world that goes far beyond the confines of the immediate