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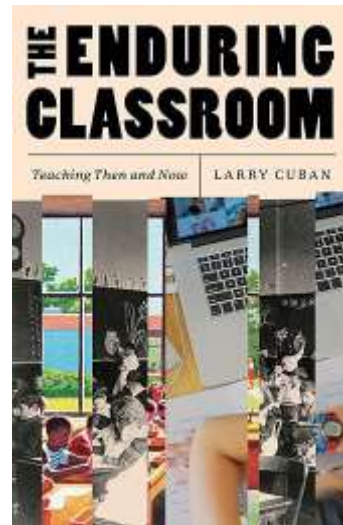
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Teaching as It Is, Teaching as It Could Be: The Ever-Changing, Never-Changing Classroom

Despite decades of reform, many classrooms today remain strikingly similar to those of the past: rows of desks, standardized curricula, and teacher-led instruction. Why do these structures persist despite waves of education innovation? What forces sustain traditional teaching methods, even as new pedagogies emerge? In *The Enduring Classroom: Teaching Then and Now*, Larry Cuban, a former high school history teacher, district administrator, superintendent, and Stanford professor, grapples with these questions using historical depth and policy insight. Drawing on six decades of experience, he examines why U.S. classroom instruction has remained remarkably stable, even as reforms promise transformation.



Building on his previous works, Cuban continues his exploration of the persistence of traditional instructional methods. While those earlier studies focused on the historical trajectory of teaching practices, *The Enduring Classroom* offers a more concentrated analysis of why these practices endure despite widespread calls for innovation.

Blending historical analysis and policy critique, Cuban investigates the tension between education reform and institutional resistance. His narrative, structured around six core questions, explores how and why teaching practices remain entrenched. As he writes: “Classrooms are part of a school; schools are part of a district; and districts, embedded in communities, follow state policies—a hierarchy similar to a set of the familiar nested Russian dolls” (p. 16).

The Six Core Questions

Cuban’s concise, research-rich analysis revolves around six fundamental questions, offering insights into historical and contemporary teaching practices. In just 98 pages, backed by 186 references and a comprehensive 5-page index, he distills

decades of scholarship into a highly readable exploration of why classroom practices persist despite reform.

1. How have U.S. public school teachers taught?

Cuban examines the two dominant instructional traditions—teacher-centered and student-centered learning—and explains why teacher-centered instruction remains the default mode despite persistent reform efforts.

2. Have public schools and teaching practices changed over time?

Yes and no. While Cuban acknowledges shifts in instructional styles, he argues that the fundamental structures of schooling-age graded classrooms, standardized curricula, and teacher-directed lessons—have remained largely intact. He highlights:

- The feminization of teaching, from a male-dominated profession in the early 19th century to women comprising nearly two-thirds of elementary school teachers by the 1880s with men still dominant in secondary schools until the 1970s.
- A shift from formal to informal teaching styles, shaped by evolving parental child-rearing practices.
- Persistent systemic challenges, such as disparities in school funding, racial and ethnic segregation, and rigid bureaucratic structures, that remain despite landmark rulings like *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and *Ingraham v. Wright* (1977).

3. Why have schooling and classroom practice been stable over time?

Cuban revisits the “grammar of schooling” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995), the deeply embedded structures that make changes in schooling difficult. He also critiques teacher preparation programs, asking, “Do we prepare students to become teachers in schools as they are, or do we prepare students to teach in schools as they should be?” (p. 35).

He further examines the competing public and private goals of education, balancing civic engagement and workforce preparation while meeting parental expectations for student success in a market-driven economy.

4. How *should* teachers teach?

Cuban traces progressive education’s legacy, highlighting the Progressive Education Association (PEA), which, in 1919, emphasized:

- Student autonomy;
- Interest-driven learning;
- The teacher as a guide, not a taskmaster;
- Holistic child development;
- Stronger school-home collaboration.



Larry Cuban

Although the PEA closed in 1955, its philosophy persists in progressive networks like the Public Education Network (PEN) and Edutopia, which advocate inquiry-based, hands-on learning where students “get their hands dirty, experiment, inquire, and learn by doing” (p. 48). However, Cuban argues that these methods remain less emphasized as institutional inertia sustains teacher-centered instruction.

5. How do teachers teach now?

Cuban explores how contemporary instructional practices have evolved particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. He asks:

- Given the availability of online resources, do we need to teach all the time?
- Can learning start with students identifying problems they wish to solve?

Despite the recent rise of hybrid and online learning, Cuban questions whether these innovations will endure or fade as schools revert to traditional models.

6. Why have change and continuity defined U.S. public schooling?

Cuban’s final chapter underscores that education reform reshapes the landscape but rarely the geography of schooling. He identifies the qualities of effective lessons: clear organization, varied activities, frequent teacher-student interaction, and a strong lesson summary. Cuban also acknowledges his bias, favoring hybrid approaches that blend teacher- and student-centered methods within the constraints of age-graded schools.

A Thoughtful Critique of Education Reform

Cuban introduces the concept of “dynamic conservatism,” arguing that education reform tends to adapt rather than radically transform schooling structures. He convincingly demonstrates how historical teaching and learning patterns persist despite ongoing efforts to reimagine them, reinforcing his broader thesis that schools are as much about preserving traditions as they are about innovation.

However, while Cuban effectively explains why schools resist change, he leaves certain key questions underexplored. For instance, in an era where globalization, privatization, and digital learning increasingly influence education policy, his analysis remains predominantly U.S.-centric. Future research could explore whether his arguments apply to education systems with less centralized governance or different societal expectations of schooling. Comparative studies might offer a richer perspective on whether Cuban’s concept of dynamic conservatism manifests similarly or differently across various national and cultural contexts.

Similarly, although Cuban acknowledges the promise of hybrid instructional models that blend teacher- and student-centered approaches, he does not delve deeply into the conditions necessary for widespread adoption. He documents examples of pedagogical hybridity but stops short of exploring why these approaches remain the exception rather than the rule or what structural changes might enable scaling them up. Given the increasing push for personalized learning, competency-based education, and flexible school models, a more nuanced discussion on implementation barriers would have strengthened his argument.

Who Should Read *The Enduring Classroom*?

This book will interest educators, policymakers, researchers, and parents seeking a deeper understanding of why schools change incrementally. Cuban challenges simplistic reform narratives, illustrating that tradition and innovation exist in constant tension. His work builds on his previous scholarship, particularly *How Teachers Taught* (1993) and *Inside the Black Box of Classroom Practice* (2013), reinforcing his long-standing argument that education evolves gradually rather than through revolutionary shifts.

For education scholars, the book offers a concise, research-backed analysis of how institutional forces sustain traditional instructional practices, even in the face of policy pressures to modernize. For policymakers and school leaders, it is a cautionary reminder that systemic inertia cannot be overcome through top-down mandates alone—sustainable change requires a multi-layered approach that considers historical precedent, teacher agency, and community expectations.

However, those seeking prescriptive solutions or concrete policy recommendations may find the book more descriptive than actionable. While Cuban's insights into the resilience of the "grammar of schooling" are compelling, he leaves open the question of how schools might realistically break free from these entrenched patterns. His analysis would benefit from a more explicit discussion of reform efforts that have successfully disrupted traditional classroom structures, offering potential pathways for meaningful change.

Ultimately, *The Enduring Classroom* is an insightful and accessible contribution to the fields of educational history and policy analysis. Cuban's work is particularly valuable in an era where calls for innovation in education are often met with persistent structural barriers. His historical lens reminds readers that understanding the past is essential to making sense of the present—and imagining the future—of teaching and learning.

Yet, Cuban's study also raises questions for further research. What mechanisms—policy-driven, institutional, or grassroots—might accelerate meaningful reform if schools inherently resist change? How might non-traditional school models challenge or reaffirm the persistence of the age-graded, subject-based classroom? And as education systems worldwide grapple with AI, automation, and new models of credentialing, will these forces further entrench traditional schooling structures or finally disrupt them?

While *The Enduring Classroom* does not claim to answer all these questions, it provides a critical foundation for future conversations. It is a book that educators and policymakers alike would benefit from engaging with—not necessarily for its solutions, but for its insights into why change in education remains persistently elusive.

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About the Reviewer



Eric Jabal is a school leader, practitioner, and researcher with experience in international, bilingual, and independent schools in Canada and internationally. Passionate about how school structures, pedagogy, and leadership influence teaching, learning, and student engagement, he actively contributes to educational leadership networks, school accreditation bodies, and curriculum development teams. Eric holds a PhD in Educational Administration from OISE-University of Toronto.

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