


Education Review Reseñas Educativas
Resenhas Educativas

March 26, 2025

ISSN 1094-5296

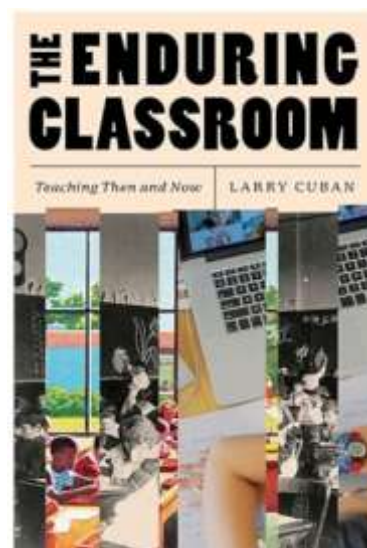
Cuban, L. (2023). *The enduring classroom: Teaching then and now*. The University of Chicago Press.

Pp. 119

ISBN: 978-0-226-82883-1

**Reviewed by Connie Schaffer
University of Nebraska at Omaha
United States**

Let us begin with the simple task of envisioning a classroom with a teacher and their students. For most adults in America, where education has been compulsory for a century, this is a simple task. The specific context of the classroom you imagine is irrelevant. You might recall a classroom from your own past elementary or secondary education experience, picture a modern classroom equipped with the latest technology, or envision a classroom in a rural, urban, or suburban community. It could be a small private or large public school classroom or a science lab or lecture hall. The classroom could have many or few students, and the teacher might be a seasoned professional or a novice.



Now let us introduce a bit of complexity into this exercise: describe the teaching occurring in your imagined classroom. If we were to share our descriptions, we might anticipate significant variation in the classrooms and teaching we described. Larry Cuban would predict otherwise.

In *The Enduring Classroom: Teaching Then and Now*, Larry Cuban presents a compelling case that despite social changes, technological innovations, numerous educational reform movements, and a global pandemic, teaching in American classrooms has remained “robustly constant over decades” (p. 32). He frames his argument by methodically posing and answering a question in each of the book’s six chapters. This short yet pithy book includes historical and empirical research, photographs, observations, and personal anecdotes that support Cuban’s premise that the age-graded educational system and the policy and practices built around it or what he refers to as the “grammar of schooling” (p. 38) have preserved teacher-centered instruction and that teaching today closely resembles teaching of the past.

The classroom you imagined, or one closely resembling it, is likely depicted in one of several black and white photographs featured in the early chapters of *The Enduring Classroom*. Similarly, the teaching you described probably aligns with one of

the anecdotes Cuban shares. Drawing from his years of experience as a secondary classroom teacher, school superintendent, university teacher educator, and historian of education, Cuban outlines how teaching has undergone incremental changes despite more dramatic social shifts in the United States such as progressivism, mass immigration, and the civil rights movement.

While readers engaged in improving learning, enhancing the professional preparation and experiences of teachers, or addressing ongoing debates about education reform may find these chapters interesting, the book's more novel and thought-provoking insights emerge later. In subsequent chapters, Cuban analyzes the widespread and abiding classroom practices that inspire the title of his book by delving into the tensions and forces that make instructional practices resistant to change.

Instructional Tension

Without advocating for one type of instruction over another, Cuban examines the coexistence of traditional teacher-centered practices and progressive student-centered approaches. Teacher-centered practices often involve fixed classroom layouts, instructor-led discourse, and reliance on textbooks or curriculum guides. In contrast, student-centered pedagogy emphasizes flexible classroom arrangements, shared discourse between teachers and students (often working in small groups), and instructional materials shaped by student interests and teacher expertise. While student-centered methods have been adopted to varying degrees, they have not fundamentally altered classroom practices.

Cuban explains why this is so. At the grassroots level, teachers frequently struggle to implement the student-centered instructional approaches they learned in their pre-service training. Once they find themselves outside the university and inside a K-12 classroom, the demands of preparing materials and activities to support multiple content areas (in elementary schools) or providing individualized feedback to hundreds of students (in secondary schools) often push teachers back toward teacher-centered practices. Beyond teachers, other stakeholders—policy leaders, politicians, parents, and taxpayers—often perceive student-centered methods as less rigorous and more prone to classroom misbehavior. To maintain academic rigor and order, these groups support policies that implicitly or explicitly favor teacher-centered approaches.

According to Cuban, “What has resulted from the past and current struggles between educational progressives committed to the tradition of student-centered instruction and the conservatives bound to teacher-centered instruction is a slow growth of hybrid teaching practices.” The hybrids have effectually “tamped down any public fuss that might have occurred over different conceptions of ‘good’ teaching . . . and became nests where progressive instruction occupied space withing the dominant teacher-centered traction of classroom practices” (p. 58).

Structural Forces

Unlike many education pundits who take a strong stance for or against education reform movements, Cuban focuses on two primary structural forces that impede change: America's adherence to age-graded schools and the “grammar of schooling”

(p. 38). Cuban does so by drawing from his past scholarship in describing these barriers (Tyack & Cuban, 1995) and provides contemporary phenomena (e.g., the emergence of charter schools and the COVID-19 pandemic) to support his argument.

The age-graded school system, introduced in the mid-1800s as a reform, has become the bedrock of American education. It was likely reflected in the classroom you just imagined. Despite its longevity (nearly two centuries) and ubiquity (90% of all graduates attended age-graded schools, according to Cuban), this system constrains reform efforts. Even charter schools designed with “the charge to innovate in both organization and instruction have replicated the traditional age-graded arrangement” (p. 85).

The other force, the grammar of schooling, operates in much the same way as the grammar of a language. It is largely invisible and goes unnoticed; yet it shapes how schools function and is reflected in institutional structures, policies, and practices; for example, kindergarten readiness policies based on age, state-mandated curricula and learning outcomes framed by age-graded levels, standardized achievement tests that report grade-level proficiency rates, and college entrance criteria. When reforms challenge these established patterns, they are often perceived as deviant or not representative of “real” schooling.

Together, age-graded schools and the grammar of schooling exert constant pressure that limits education reform. Cuban’s argument is that “The unintended (an ironic) consequence of frequent and earnest calls for radical change in instruction involving nontraditional certifications of teachers and administrators, more charter schools, innovative reading and math programs, ‘authentic assessment,’ and ‘personalized’ learning through digital software is that they all assume that such changes will occur within the traditional school organization. When versions of these reforms appear in classrooms, they often end up preserving the age-graded structure and freezing the classroom patterns” (p. 40).

Cuban includes examples of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic that seem to underscore the resilience of these structures. According to Cuban, “the age-graded organization and its grammar of schooling chugged along unperturbed” despite the global crisis (p. 78). However, written during the waning days of the pandemic, *The Enduring Classroom* includes limited research related to instructional modifications made during the pandemic, and the endurance and full impact of those changes remains unknown.

What Endures

Ultimately, Cuban presents an enduring paradox: education reform often reinforces stability. His reflections suggest that the forces promoting both change and continuity will continue to shape American classrooms for the foreseeable future.

Reference

Tyack, D., & Cuban, L. (1995). *Tinkering toward Utopia*. Harvard University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjz83cb>



About the Reviewer

Dr. Connie Schaffer is a professor in the Teacher Education Department and currently serves as the Director of the Center for Faculty Excellence at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Schaffer earned her post-secondary degrees from Kansas State University (BS) and the University of Nebraska at Omaha (MS and EdD).



Education Review/ Reseñas Educativas/ Resenhas Educativas is supported by the Scholarly Communications Group at the Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation, Arizona State University. Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*. Readers are free to copy, display, distribute, and adapt this article, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and *Education Review*, the changes are identified, and the same license applies to the derivative work. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>.



Disclaimer: The views or opinions presented in book reviews are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of *Education Review*.