Change without Difference: School Restructuring in Historical Perspective

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In this article, Jesse Goodman examines the current “third wave” school restructuring movement and its attempt to reform U.S. schools based on the perceived needs of the information age. Goodman places this school reform movement in historical context and explores the way it emerged from the interrelated fields of educational technology, instructional design, and systems theory. Goodman argues that four core principles that underlie the third wave school restructuring movement — social functionalism, efficiency and productivity, individualism, and expertism — will likely reinforce existing school practices and values instead of substantively transforming teaching and learning in U.S. classrooms.

During the past decade, the oratory of school reform has projected the idea that our schools must be fundamentally transformed. As Linda Darling-Hammond (1992) states, educators have been called upon to “rethink how schools are designed, how school systems operate, how teaching and learning are pursued, and what goals for schooling are sought” (p. 1). Although there is a diversity of voices within this conversation (see, for example, Elmore, 1990; Lewis, 1989; Murphy, 1991; Villa, Thousand, Stainback, & Stainback, 1992), perhaps the loudest has come from a group of instructional and systems designers and educational technologists (e.g., Banathy, 1991; Branson, 1989, 1991; Molenda, 1992; Mory & Salisbury, 1992; Perelman, 1987; Reigeluth, 1987) who have argued that reforming schools is no longer enough. As we begin the next century, schools must undergo what these individuals refer to as a “third wave” restructuring. These restructuralists note that the “first wave” of school reform was in response to this country’s rural, farm-based society; the “second wave” school system was established for the industrial age; and now a “third wave” of school change is needed for the coming “information/technology age.”

1 It is important to note that other educators have used this “wave” metaphor in discussions of school reform. For example, “first wave” reform is often associated with state governments’ efforts to improve

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