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Phi Nguyen
University of Missouri, phinguyen@mail.missouri.edu

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Cover Page Footnote

Thanks to Emily Crawford-Rossi for her feedback on earlier drafts of the article.

REMEMBERING THE 1918 INFLUENZA PANDEMIC: MISSOURI EDUCATION POLICY AND LESSONS FOR COVID-19

Phi Nguyen

University of Missouri

Abstract: Amid the disruptions of COVID-19 are opportunities to reimagine schooling and education. Taking a historical perspective, this article analyzes education policy following an earlier pandemic, the influenza pandemic of 1918-19, to explore if and how educational change might be possible. Drawing on primary source analysis of Missouri education policy, I argue that influenza-related policy talk was practically non-existent, and the talk that was present mainly focused on how the flu had disrupted, but not changed, school operations. Without policy talk advocating for change, policy action the years following the influenza pandemic continued along the lines of Progressive reforms that were already circulating prior. I conclude with implications of this historical analysis for responding to the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Large-scale efforts to improve teaching and learning have had a rather limited impact (McLaughlin, 2006; Hiebert, 2013). For the most part, the “grammar of schooling”—the “regular structures and rules that organize the work of instruction” (Tyack & Tobin, 1994, p. 454)—has remained the same over the past 100 years (Cuban, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic, however, has interrupted education-as-usual and has brought existing ideologies into a new light. The rhetoric of students “falling behind” (e.g., USA Today, 2020), on the one hand, rings of social efficiency and the discourses of A Nation At Risk and No Child Left Behind. On the other hand, children’s health and wellbeing are being centered as school closures and social isolation threaten their welfare. Furthermore, the pandemic has exacerbated already existing inequalities, not only in education but society writ large. Emerging from this crisis, therefore, have been conversations in public (e.g., Education Week, 2020) and academic (e.g., Fullan, 2020) spheres on how the COVID-19 pandemic might serve as an opportunity for schools to reimagine and transform the nature of education.

This paper adds to the discussion on crises as a potential catalyst to educational change by taking a historical perspective and analyzing education policy following an earlier pandemic, the influenza pandemic of 1918-19. Focusing on Missouri, I examine if and how the influenza pandemic shaped education policy. Here, it is important to distinguish between policy action, within the context of broader institutional trends, and policy talk. Tyack and Cuban (1995) noted that policy talk—framings about problems and solutions—and policy action—adoption of reforms—follow different timetables, which do not necessarily correspond. As distinct yet related concepts, both need to be considered as potentially shaped by the influenza pandemic. To do so, I analyzed education bills passed by the Missouri General Assembly and the Annual Report of the Public Schools of Missouri between 1917 and 1921 to understand the broader Missouri context, and then newspaper reports from *The Evening Missourian* to understand Columbia as an in-depth case. I also ground this analysis in its historical context, including the influence of World War I and Progressivism on education.

This paper argues that educational policy talk about influenza was practically non-existent, and the talk that was present mainly focused on how the flu disrupted, but not changed, school operations. Without policy talk advocating for change, policy action in the years following the 1918-19 influenza pandemic continued along the lines of Progressive reforms that were already circulating prior, including those related to consolidation of rural districts and, more broadly, social efficiency. Alongside, however, was another set of reforms that stemmed from broader Progressive concerns regarding children’s welfare, including compulsory education and children’s health. The latter was heightened with physical fitness concerns brought to bear by WWI. Exacerbated by the influenza pandemic, the need for physical education merged with health concerns to intensify the push for health and physical education. In short, without policy talk promoting change, the influenza pandemic did not significantly shape policy action; it might have accelerated reforms, but educational progress continued towards Progressivism. In hopes that

educational leaders respond to COVID-19 differently, as an opportunity to reimagine education, I conclude with lessons learned, drawn from this historical analysis of the 1918 influenza pandemic.

Historical Context

The Progressive Era

The influenza pandemic of 1918-19 struck at the heels of the Progressive Era, the period between 1890 and 1920. During this time, Progressive reformers, worried about increasing urbanization and industrialization, sought to correct a range of social problems. This included efforts to address government corruption, factory working conditions, child labor, living conditions in urban areas, and public health. In education, Progressivism sought to transform schools to meet the needs of changing society, though, not all reformers agreed on what this looked like. In general, historians have identified two broad strokes of Progressivism in education: “pedagogical progressives” sought to make education more responsive to children and local communities, while “administrative progressives” were concerned with efficiency and aligning schools to the economy (Rury, 2020).

For pedagogical progressives, including prominent scholars such as John Dewey and William Kilpatrick, the purpose of schooling was to prepare students to become contributing citizens in a democratic society. In addition to creating a politically informed citizenry, pedagogical progressives sought to cultivate in children democratic values and skills like tolerance, respect, and critical thinking (Rury, 2020). On the other hand, administrative progressives saw schooling as preparing students for their future roles in the labor market. With increasing specialization and division of labor, administrative progressives advocated for a differentiated curriculum that would prepare students for their unique role based on interests and ability. As a result, high schools increasingly offered vocational education courses, such as home economics and manual arts, that would prepare students for very different social roles. Such expanded and differentiated curricular offerings, however, would not have been made possible without new organizational forms. Focused on efficiency, administrative progressives sought to build school systems that were cost-effective. Such concerns spurred the school consolidation movement, which combined small districts to form larger units.

Progressivism in education was also shaped by reforms that addressed aspects of society outside schools. Child labor regulations, for example, often required school attendance for children’s employment or made employment impossible during periods of schooling (Katz, 1976). These child labor regulations helped to spur bureaucratic mechanisms that made enforcement of compulsory education laws possible during the early 20th century (Tyack, 1976). Reforms to address child labor and compulsory education were part of the broader “child saving” mandate that dominated Progressivism (Greer, 2015). This also included efforts to improve public health, as children often suffered from communicable diseases that spread easily due to unsanitary living conditions and poor nutrition. Early public health initiatives consisted of philanthropic organizations and women’s clubs providing school lunches and summer recreation programs (Allensworth et al., 1997). While these early efforts came from outside the schools, the impetus for health and social services eventually made their way inside.

The benefits of Progressivism, however, were not afforded to all students. Schools in the United States, and Missouri specifically, were segregated by race, with significant inequalities. Greater than 90% of African Americans lived in the South, where Black schools had shorter terms, lower teacher salaries, and fewer resources (Rury, 2020). The state of secondary education was particularly grim, with the number of Black high schools less than one tenth of those serving white students. Even when public schools were available for Black youth, administrative progressives’ call for curricular differentiation often relegated Black students to vocational education, with few opportunities for academic classes. Therefore, many of the reforms advocated by Progressives primarily benefited white students, and the schools they attended.

The Influenza Pandemic of 1918-19

The influenza pandemic of 1918-19 is the most severe pandemic in recent history, having killed more people than any other disease in a period of similar length (Crosby, 2003). Estimates suggest that one third of the world’s population were infected, with 50 million deaths worldwide and 675,000 in the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC, 2019). In Missouri, the 1918 mortality rate from influenza and pneumonia was 476.6 per 100,000 population, which more than doubled from the previous year (McKinsey et al., 2018). Unfortunately, the COVID-19 death toll in the United States has already surpassed the U.S. influenza death toll, and the pandemic cannot be said to be over.

The 1918 influenza pandemic occurred in three waves. The first outbreak was reported in March at Fort Riley, Kansas, only 120 miles west of the Missouri border (Barry, 2017). The U.S. was engaged in WWI during this time, so troop movements contributed to the global spread (Byerly, 2010). While thousands of military personnel contracted influenza during the first wave, the pandemic did not reach civilians until the second wave in the fall. Outbreaks emerged first at Boston's Commonwealth Pier on August 27, spreading then along the east coast (Ager et al., 2020). In Missouri, cases were first reported on September 27 at two Army schools in Kansas City (McKinsey et al., 2018).

Columbia quickly followed, with the mayor issuing a proclamation on October 5 that ordered all schools and public gatherings to close. Two days later on October 7, the *Evening Missourian* ("City and University Begin Fight," 1918a) reported Columbia's first cases. Though the mayor's order originally called for only one week of closures, it was extended indefinitely on October 12 as the influenza collected its first death in Columbia ("Orders Extended," 1918b). After five weeks of closure, schools finally reopened on November 11 ("To School Monday," 1918c), though approximately 20 percent of students did not come back due to fear of contracting the flu ("School Attendance Lowered," 1918d). With the exception of a few, most notably those in Chicago and New York City, most schools closed their doors to slow the spread of the virus. High absenteeism occurred elsewhere as well, for example, with as much as half of students not attending in Staten Island, New York and Davey, Nebraska (Ager et al., 2020).

The third wave of the influenza pandemic occurred during the winter and spring of 1919. On November 27, Columbia reissued city closures, though this time they were even more stringent ("Influenza Ban Renewed," 1918e). This second ban was lifted December 30 ("Schools to Reopen," 1918f). While there continued to be influenza cases in the early months of 1919, for the most part the pandemic had subsided in Columbia. By mid-February, attendance in Columbia schools was back to, and even exceeding the levels of the prior year ("School Children Healthy," 1919a). Elsewhere, the third wave subsided during the summer of 1919 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019).

Though the influenza pandemic of 1918-19 killed more people in a shorter time period than any other event in history, it is often referred to as the "forgotten pandemic." In part, it was overshadowed by World War I. The war lasted much longer, while "the disease moved too fast, arrived, flourished, and was gone...before many people had time to fully realize just how great was the danger" (Crosby, 2003, p. 321). For the most part then, people ignored influenza. The pandemic had even slipped the minds of famous authors of this era (Crosby, 2003), including Ernest Hemingway, a Kansas City *Star* reporter in 1917 and 1918 (McKinsey et al., 2018). Such disregard for the influenza pandemic, I argue, was also present in schooling and education. Despite the death of millions of people, and extended school closures, educational policy action did not significantly change, continuing in the direction of reforms that had already been in play prior to the pandemic.

Method

To understand how the influenza pandemic of 1918-19 shaped education, I investigated education policy between 1917 and 1921. I situated policy action following the influenza pandemic in its institutional trend, and compared policy action to policy talk to explore if and how talk about the flu shaped education reforms. Therefore, this paper takes a discourse perspective on policy talk. That is, I see policy talk as reflecting discourses—broader ideologies about education and its role in society—and that discourse and society exist in a dialectical relationship where discourse is simultaneously determined by and contributes to the continuity or change of social structures (Fairclough, 2015). And, because discourses compete for power, those reflected in policy talk have the potential to transform, or maintain, policy action. Uncovering the discourses reflected in policy talk, and how they materialize into policy action, reveals the ways the influenza epidemic of 1918-19 shaped education policy and practice.

The primary data sources for this paper include the Annual Reports of the Public Schools of the State of Missouri for the academic years ending in 1917-1921. These reports were compiled by the then-current Missouri State Superintendent of Public Schools. They give a brief snapshot, from the perspective of the State Superintendent, of the progress of Missouri public schools in fulfilling the purposes of education. These reports also often include summaries of the problems and general school conditions of every county from its respective County Superintendent. While the annual state reports provide an overview of Missouri schools in general, I also focus on Columbia Schools specifically as an in-depth case. In addition to analysis of the Boone County reports (Columbia is situated within Boone County) from the annual state reports, I also analyzed newspaper articles from *The Evening Missourian*. Founded by the University of Missouri, *The Evening Missourian* reported on the university and

Columbia, in addition to the larger Boone County and state. Using the Chronicling America database, I searched for articles from *The Evening Missourian* that included the keywords “school” and “flu” or “influenza” during the years 1918-1919.

Analysis of the state reports began with investigating policy talk related to the influenza. This was completed by using a keyword search for “flu,” “influenza,” “pandemic,” and “epidemic” and analyzing the relevant excerpts. Specifically, I considered whether the talk went beyond a description of disruptions incurred by the influenza (e.g., school closings), and, if so, how that sustained or challenged existing dominant ideologies, including those related to Progressivism. Analysis of policy action consisted of finding themes of important reforms and programs that dominated the Missouri state reports in two different time periods: 1917-1919 and 1919-1921. Starting my research in 1917 allowed me to consider if policy action after the crisis emerged from reforms that were already circulating beforehand. Thematic analysis of policy action was informed by the literature on Progressivism in education, though I also looked out for others.

Influenza-Related Policy Talk in Missouri 1919-1921

There was very little influenza-related policy talk in the 1919, 1920, and 1921 annual reports of the public schools of Missouri. Using a key word search, “flu,” “influenza” and/or “epidemic” (“pandemic” was not mentioned in any report) only came up 14 times in the 1919 report, three times in the 1920 report, and one time in the 1921 report. To illustrate how the influenza pandemic was described in the state annual reports, I describe the 1919 report in-depth. These key words were used six times in the State Superintendent’s report and eight times in six county reports. In the former, influenza was referenced in explaining school closings, lower attendance rates, lower participation at the Educational Exhibit at the State Fair, and a decrease in book sales during Reading Week.

Similarly, five county reports (the sixth, Texas County, will be described at the end of the section) referenced the influenza pandemic to explain that schools were improving in spite of the challenges incurred by the pandemic and WWI, including school closures, lower attendance, and shortage of teachers. The Vernon County Superintendent, for example, wrote that “In spite of the irregular attendance of last year due to the epidemic, and the scarcity of teachers for this year, the Vernon County schools were all able to open on schedule time” (State of Missouri, 1919, p. 156). Here, the influenza epidemic was framed as disrupting educational operations, and with the flu subsided, schooling could continue on schedule.

None of the Boone County reports 1919-1921, written by Superintendent Chas E. Northcutt, mentioned the influenza pandemic. The 1919 report, however, did suggest some crisis: “The educational outlook of Boone County is one of great improvement over the past few years. Even in this day of tumult the schools have a larger enrollment than ever before” (State of Missouri, 1919, p. 82). Though it is unclear what “tumult” Northcutt is referring to (most likely a combination of both the flu and WWI), as with the other county reports, events were positioned as obstacles to schooling that schools were still improving in spite of. Newspaper articles from *The Evening Missourian* provide further evidence that policy talk was primarily concerned with school operations. The only articles I found concerning both education and the flu were related to school closings/re-openings (“To School Monday,” 1918c; “Schools to Reopen,” 1918f) and attendance (“Influenza Ban Renewed” 1918d; “School Children Healthy,” 1919a).

While the reports, in general, overlooked the influenza, by either not talking about it or only attending to the disruptions, there were two exceptions. In the 1919 report (State of Missouri, 1919), the Texas County Superintendent stated that:

A desire seems to pervade the soul of almost everyone that something must be done to overcome the loss sustained last year by the repeated setbacks due to the prevalence of the influenza epidemic. The most progressive in the past are now doing more than ever to boost schools while many people who heretofore manifested only a lukewarm interest in the educational welfare of their children and who let their sympathies waver between other things and school work are squarely for the best in everything educationally. Verily the “Flu” has done some good. (p. 155)

Here, the Texas County Superintendent framed the influenza as an opportunity to improve education, as there was now public support “to overcome the loss sustained,” though it is unclear what “loss” was referred to. Unclear also is the direction of progress, though the use of the word “progressive” indicates that it might be towards the direction of Progressivism. Regardless of the direction, for the Texas County Superintendent, the pandemic seemed to accelerate the need for improving the “educational welfare” of children.

Similarly, in the 1920 report, the Stone County Superintendent stated that “the epidemic of influenza which swept our country and took so many tolls from Stone County has influenced the thoughtful to be more thoughtful, if

possible, and the Red Cross and State Tuberculosis Association found response in the minds of a good many grown-ups as well as boys and girls in this locality” (State of Missouri, 1920, p. 112). Despite the “tolls,” the Stone County report framed the flu as responsible for encouraging people to be more “thoughtful” and engaging in more health-related initiatives, like the Red Cross. Here, the 1920 Stone County report suggested that intensification of health efforts is related to the influenza epidemic, as, of course, the flu killed thousands of Missourians. However, this report was the only policy talk that directly connected health reforms to the influenza pandemic.

The almost complete absence of flu-related policy talk in the 1919-1921 Missouri reports suggests that the influenza pandemic did not have a significant impact, from the perspectives of those living at the time, on the nature of schooling. When referenced, the State Superintendent and most County Superintendents framed the flu only as an obstacle to school operations (e.g., attendance rates, teacher shortage). In other words, educational policy talk, with exception of the 1919 Texas County and 1920 Stone County reports, did not reflect discourses that connected the flu to potential educational change, but rather, discourses that sought to preserve the current state of affairs. In the following sections, I describe the reforms that dominated the 1919-1921 state reports—including health-related efforts like those reflected in the 1920 Stone County report—and trace them to a history of Progressivism that predated the pandemic.

Policy Action in Missouri 1919-1921

The main reforms, or policy action, that were described in the 1919-1921 Missouri state reports reflect Progressive ideals. For example, the influence of Progressivism is reflected in the 1919 Boone County report stating that

We hope that the future will not be dominated by traditions handed down from the academy of a decade ago, but will be dominated by 20th Century achievements. Our present day education has for its purpose to prepare folks for a life of service, and it is our desire to present the tools to the child necessary for the performance of this service (State of Missouri, 1919, p. 82).

Here, the Boone County Superintendent called not only for new ways of thinking, but drew upon Progressive ideals of education for contributing to the economy, and society more broadly (Rury, 2020). Noteworthy is also the language of “service.” World War I had just ended, and ideals of patriotism, duty, and service were mainstream. Together, this suggests that the language of the Boone County report invoked Progressive ideals of preparing students to become contributing citizens. Two ways Boone County did this was by providing vocational education and “comprehensive knowledge of society, dealing with groups, religious, political, economic, educational and social” (State of Missouri, 1919, p. 82). Knowledge of society and the ability to engage with people from different backgrounds align with pedagogical progressivism. Dewey argued that schools cultivated in students the skills necessary for participating in a democratic society, including tolerance and respect for others (Rury, 2020).

Vocational education seemed to be an important reform for Missouri schools, as the 1919 State Superintendent report, which was 32 pages in length, devoted four and a half pages to it. Similarly, five and half pages in the 1920 report and four pages in the 1921 report discussed issues of vocational education. The state department of education even had a division of vocational education! According to the State Superintendent, “the real purpose of vocational education should be, and is, to secure and maintain efficiency in doing the important work of the civilized world of today” (State of Missouri, 1920, 1921). Here, vocational education, including training in agriculture, home economics, and trade and industries, focused on efficiency and aligning schools with the “work of the civilized world of today”—in other words, the economy. With urbanization and increasing division of labor (Rury, 2020), such administrative progressive reforms became an important part of Missouri schooling.

Another example of administrative progressive reforms in Missouri post-influenza pandemic was the consolidation of small and rural schools. All three reports 1919-1921 had devoted sections to discuss consolidated schools or larger school units. For example, the State Superintendent described in the 1919 report the need for larger school units, stating:

My plan would be to establish these larger units and this would, first, decrease the number of teachers, thereby enabling the district to pay better salaries to the teachers employed; second, more nearly equalize the opportunities of the children; third, adjust the burdens of taxation; fourth, make closer supervision possible; fifth, strengthen the community spirit; sixth, make it possible to have at least a two-year high school in every district (State of Missouri, 1919, p. 15).

These goals clearly align with ideals of administrative progressives and creating more efficient school systems by consolidating small, rural schools and districts. Consolidation was happening in Columbia as well. For example, in

1919, Banks School District was made part of the Columbia School District (“To Sell Banks Schoolhouse,” 1919c). Beyond efficiency and school organization, the creation of larger school units would also “equalize the opportunities of the children.” Equality, however, seemed to be limited to geographical considerations and ensuring that “every child in Missouri should have equal opportunities regardless of whether he lives in the country or in town” (State of Missouri, 1919, p. 15). Given that Missouri schools at this time were segregated by race, it is unlikely that “every” child included Black children.

As a benefit of school consolidation, raising teacher salaries seemed to be particularly important. In fact, the Missouri General Assembly, in 1921, amended House Bill No. 348 to raise the maximum teacher salary. This, however, was a struggle that teachers in Columbia had fought for at least as far back as March 1919. Columbia teachers asked the district to increase salaries by 33.3% percent, but Superintendent McPherson reported that salaries were already at the maximum amount as state law fixes the maximum school levy (“Increased Salary Asked by Teachers,” 1919b). In the face of such financial conditions, Columbia teachers formed a local organization affiliated with the Missouri State Teachers Association and centered their efforts at the State Board of Equalization, which had the power to raise the level of tax assessment (Gafke, 1978). These efforts paid off; the State Board voted to increase the assessed valuation. This allowed for the Columbia school board to increase teachers’ salaries and establish the district’s first written salary schedule, which included minimum salary levels and periodic salary raises.

Progressive ideals focused on children and their welfare also penetrated schools. This manifested in two main, yet related ways: compulsory education laws and health programs. Both stem from broader debates about how children should be brought up and the quality of their lives, in part spurred by child labor reforms during the Progressive era (Katz, 1976). For Tyack (1976), the emergence of compulsory education was the result of a convergence of political and organizational interests. Politically, the primary purpose of education is to create citizens that know the common language and national history. Echoing Horace Mann and common schools, such rhetoric aligned with pedagogical progressive ideals for schooling as cultivating in students the skills and knowledge necessary for participating in democratic society (Rury, 2020). Tyack (1976), however, argues that this political interpretation of American compulsory education does not explain the enforcement of compulsory education as there was little state power prior to the 20th century. Increasing bureaucracy allowed for this shift. The logic of administrative progressivism resulted in new techniques for reporting attendance and getting truant students into schools (Tyack, 1976).

In Missouri, this confluence of pedagogical and administrative progressive ideals resulted in the passage of House Bill No. 54 in 1919. This new compulsory attendance law required that children ages seven to fourteen attend school, and that children ages fourteen to sixteen attend unless they were engaged in at least six hours of work a day. This law also gave each county a County Attendance Officer responsible for tracking attendance. For working children less than sixteen years old, Senate Bill No. 572, also passed in 1919, established part-time schools in districts with at least 25 employed children. These legislations seemed to have a great impact on student attendance, especially in the midst of lower enrollment numbers from the influenza. The Boone County Superintendent, for example, wrote in the 1920 report that “the Attendance Officer had to serve a few notices, which had the desired effect” (State of Missouri, 1920, p. 97).

Another concern for Progressive reformers was children’s health, especially in the midst of factory work and unsanitary living conditions from increasing urbanization. Such concerns manifested into, for example, nutritional health (Spring, 2018), physical education, and safe and modern school buildings. For Missouri’s State Superintendent, “a sound body which has been developed by the proper amount and sort of exercise is due each child in the state” as “many preventable diseases may be practically eradicated by proper and systematic exercise and drill which a physical director would be able to give” (State of Missouri, 1919, p. 19). Similar rhetoric was apparent in the 1920 and 1921 reports. Even if the flu was not explicitly mentioned, the influenza pandemic, arguably, had heightened the need for physical education and health programs.

This focus on health materialized into cleaner and safer classrooms, improved playgrounds, and school nurses. In Boone county, “the county physician and county nurse are visiting schools in this county and are greatly improving the health conditions of the school children...Sanitary conditions are being improved” (State of Missouri, 1920, p. 97). Early health efforts resulted in the Missouri General Assembly passing in 1921 House Bill No. 432 requiring instruction related to care and hygiene of teeth and House Bill No. 515 requiring physical education in all public schools. Physical education included periodical physical exams, instruction on hygiene and health habits, promotion of playground activities and athletics, and nurse services (State of Missouri, 1921).

In short, policy action in Missouri between 1919 and 1921, after the influenza epidemic, centered around Progressive reforms, including those related to vocational education, school consolidation, and children’s welfare. These reforms are well summarized in the introduction for *A Century of Missouri Schools (1821-1921)* published in the 1921 state report:

Look back one hundred years—see the Missouri school house—a rude, one-room log hut...Look again, it may be in the same place, stands the modern palatial high school building surrounded by a beautiful grove through which meander the permanent walks leading to comfortable rooms that kings would enjoy...where the gymnasium stimulates the growth of the physical body, where manual training gives light to the future mechanic. (State of Missouri, 1921, p. 34)

In this short excerpt, the author described that in one hundred years, the Missouri school house had transformed from a “one-room log hut” into a “modern” and “comfortable” high school with access to a gymnasium for physical health and manual training for vocational education. Such reforms would not have been made possible, however, without the consolidation of small, rural schools. In this section, I have argued that policy action in Missouri the years following the influenza pandemic of 1918-19 focused heavily on Progressive reforms. This, however, was not new, but rather emerged from a history of Progressivism in Missouri.

Tracing Policy Action in Missouri to 1917-1918 (and Earlier)

In this section, I trace education policy action in Missouri between the years 1919 and 1921 to before the influenza pandemic. Vocational education in Missouri, for example, predated the influenza pandemic. In fact, the emphasis on vocational education seemed to intensify with the war effort. The 1917 annual report described that “in the spring of 1917, upon the suggestion of the State Superintendent, many boys were dismissed from the schools in order to engage in farm work,” and that “the effect of the war on the schools will be to modify the curriculum, probably to change the length and the division of the school term and to emphasize the need of universal and of vocational education” (State of Missouri, 1917, p. 4). Such emphasis was also spurred by federal legislation, the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917, which provided aid to secondary schools for vocational education programs (Kaestle & Smith, 1982). In fact, The Missouri General Assembly passed in 1917 the Missouri Vocational Bill (House Bill No. 438) which accepted the requirements and benefits of the Smith-Hughes Act. This bill also conferred the administration of vocational education to the State Board of Education, which led to the creation of the division of vocational education. While vocational education gained popularity with the passage of the Smith-Hughes Act, it had already been an important part of Missouri schools. In Columbia, manual training was offered at the white high school in 1900, and a year later at Douglass (the black high school) in 1901 (Gafke, 1978). The high school curriculum was further expanded in 1913 with the addition of teacher training courses, commercial subjects (e.g., bookkeeping, typewriting, commercial arithmetic), home economics, and agriculture.

Consolidation of small, rural schools in Missouri, likewise, had a long history. Consolidation began earlier but was initially formalized in 1909 when each county was given a superintendent by an act of the Legislature (State of Missouri, 1921). Consolidation efforts increased with, for example, the passage of House Bill No. 564 in 1911 that provided for the transportation of school children at public expense (State of Missouri, 1911). Laws incentivizing consolidation continued to be passed up until the influenza pandemic, for example, with House Bill No. 666 in 1917 that provided aid for the elementary schools in consolidated school districts (State of Missouri, 1917).

School consolidation was integral to compulsory education laws. Though many states had passed compulsory attendance legislation by the mid-nineteenth century, these were largely unenforced (Katz, 1976). By the turn of the twentieth century, school systems, now much larger and more bureaucratically complex, had new techniques of control that made enforcement possible (Tyack, 1976). Indeed, Missouri had passed its compulsory law in 1905, but administrative enforcement did not come until later (Clay et al., 2012). Though the revised compulsory law in 1919 included an Attendance Officer for each county, it was not the first of its kind. House Bill No. 1105 in 1911 began strengthening enforcement by requiring district clerks to notify county superintendents of violators of the compulsory law (State of Missouri, 1911). Though the attendance bill in 1919 emerged at the heels of the influenza pandemic, when student attendance was low, the history of compulsory education in Missouri suggests that stricter enforcement fell within a broader institutional trend. Policy talk related to influenza and lower enrollment might have intensified calls for compulsory attendance but did not alter an already existing and successful movement for more bureaucracy and increased schooling.

Similarly, health and physical education, though exacerbated by the influenza, had emerged earlier. A focus on physical fitness was in part spurred by World War I, as “the operation of the selective draft law has emphasized the fact that a large part of our population are physically unfit. The schools must give a larger share of their attention toward physical education, not for the purpose of making soldiers, but for the purpose of making better citizens” (State of Missouri, 1917, p. 7). However, health-focused efforts long predated WWI, and even the Progressive Era.

In fact, the “modern school health era” began in 1850 when the Sanitary Commission of Massachusetts produced the Shattuck report, which spurred the development of school programs as a way to promote public health (Allensworth et al., 1997). By the turn of the century, nurses and “medical inspection” of children began to make their way into schools as a means of preventing communicable disease. During this time period, physical training was also introduced, often alongside instruction in hygiene.

In Columbia, physical education and health began in 1905 when the white high school building opened the district’s first gymnasium (Gafke, 1978). A required course in physical culture was also added for the school’s freshman and sophomore students, along with the hiring of a full-time teacher to coach athletics. In the elementary schools, a course in physiology was added in 1906, and then later replaced by a course in hygiene in 1909. A summer playground project was launched in 1908, and subsequently, in 1910, the district’s bond referendum requested money to enlarge the playground space at the remaining elementary schools. Around the same time, the board began to require annual medical exams for all students, and vaccinations for all students and staff. In 1910, the district hired its first school physician (Gafke, 1978).

Discussion

Alfred Crosby, a historian of the influenza pandemic of 1918-19, wrote that: the important and almost incomprehensible fact about Spanish influenza is that it killed millions upon millions of people in a year or less. Nothing else—no infection, no war, no famine—has ever killed so many people in as short a period. And yet it has never inspired awe, not in 1918 and not since, not among the citizens of any particular land and not among the citizens of the United States (Crosby, 2003, p. 311). Often called the “forgotten pandemic,” the influenza of 1918-19 has, for the most part, escaped the collective human memory. Such memory loss materialized in education policy as a dearth of policy talk about the influenza. And, the policy talk that was present mainly attended to the disruptions brought on by influenza, such as school closures and lower enrollment.

The discourses reflected in such narrow policy talk called for maintaining the status quo. Without policy talk to promote educational change, I argue, the influenza pandemic did not significantly shape education policy. Thus, policy action in the years following the pandemic centered on Progressive reforms such as vocational education and school consolidation. Even the reforms around compulsory education and physical and public health, which likely were heightened due to influenza-related concerns, are situated within a broader history of Progressivism. That is, influenza-related policy talk might have intensified calls for compulsory education and public health but did not alter an already existing and successful movement for increased schooling and school health programs. By comparing influenza-related policy talk to Progressive policy action, and situating that policy action within its institutional trend, I argue that the influenza pandemic of 1918-19 did not catalyze educational change, at least not in a direction different than if the pandemic did not occur.

A century later, another pandemic has wreaked havoc on schooling, and on society writ large. For educational policymakers and leaders interested in leveraging the COVID-19 pandemic to reimagine and transform schools, what lessons does the 1918 influenza pandemic afford? We must first consider the differences between the two. To begin with, school closures during the influenza pandemic were significantly shorter than current COVID-19 related closures. During the 1918-19 influenza pandemic, average closure length was only 36 days, and some schools even made up for missing days by extending the school year (Ager et al., 2020). By contrast, during the current COVID-19 pandemic, most schools shut down for much longer during the spring, and again in the fall and/or winter. The difference in length of school closures is significant as concerns for “learning loss” and “students falling behind” are, arguably, greater during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially with accountability and high-stakes testing as integral parts of 21st century schooling.

Second, technology has made virtual and remote learning options more available now than a century ago. This has not only spurred an international experiment in online learning, but, due to disparities in access, exacerbated existing educational inequalities. Indeed, Ager and colleagues (2020) suggest that “the lack of effective remote learning platforms in 1918-19 may have put students on roughly equal footing when they missed school, unlike today, when there is substantial heterogeneity in access to online resources and parental support” (p. 4). With increased attention to issues of equity, especially with the Black Lives Matter movement happening concurrently, policy talk concerned with COVID-19 and educational equality has already emerged. During the influenza of 1918-19, such policy talk was, for the most part, absent. This is, in part, because the influenza “ignored the difference between rural and urban, patrician and peasant, capitalist and proletarian, and struck them all down in similar

proportions” (Crosby, 2003, p. 323). Early research already suggests that this is not the case with COVID-19, but rather that certain students, particularly students of color, low-income students, and students learning English as a second language, have been disproportionately affected (Pier et al., 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

With these differences in mind, what lessons can we extrapolate from the influenza pandemic of 1918-19 to inform our responses to the current COVID-19 crisis? Most importantly, I argue, we cannot cast COVID-19 as another “forgotten pandemic.” In doing so, we risk perpetuating discourses that maintain the status quo. In other words, if we frame the COVID-19 pandemic as just a “disruption,” similar to the policy talk Missouri educational leaders used in reference to the flu, we contribute to preserving the grammar of schooling that dominated education prior to COVID-19. Instead, we need to explicitly attend to and confront the challenges and opportunities brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. This, at a minimum, includes addressing the inequities COVID-19 exacerbated, and not only how we might close those disparities but also how we might create a more resilient (or different) educational infrastructure that will mitigate future crises and improve education, especially for those historically marginalized. We must be careful, however, to not let discourses focused on “lost learning” dominate policy talk. This risks a return to, or worse, an intensification of accountability and high-stakes testing that have dominated American schooling the past two decades.

A second implication emerges from the finding that health-related reforms were likely intensified in the years following the 1918 influenza pandemic. This suggests that education policy was shaped by reforms from outside education. Progressive reforms addressing other aspects of society, including public health, penetrated schools and resulted in early forms of health education and programs, which were subsequently strengthened by physical fitness concerns from World War I and influenza-related concerns. It is likely that similar intensification will emerge as we respond to and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. Policy talk about students’ mental health and well-being are already being spotlighted with increasing school closures and social isolation. A century ago, a focus on health materialized into physical education and health services, such as school nurses and physical exams. What that will look like now will depend, in part, on the extent to which educators and policymakers remember (or forget) the lessons we have collectively learned during the crisis about the importance of students’ mental health and social relationships.

Finally, that policy action following the influenza pandemic fell within institutional trends suggests that policies are more likely to be successful if they maintain, or at least do not contra-indicate, already existing and successful reform efforts. Indeed, scholars have argued that a policy is more likely to be successful if it “accords with widespread and deeply held cultural values; if it somehow captures or responds to a “national mood;” and if its implicit prescription entails no radical redistribution of power or wealth (Stone, 1989). Then, using COVID-19 as an opportunity to reimagine schooling might require policymakers and educators to straddle the fine line between transformation and “returning to normal.” This might mean attributing new meanings to persistent features of the “grammar of schooling” to achieve new purposes, though this strategy might reinforce dominant ideologies, and subsequently make reform more difficult (Courtney & Mann, 2021). This compromised approach, however, is only necessary if new discourses and ideologies do not emerge in a post-pandemic world. Therefore, our best chances of spurring change, at the discursive and institutional levels, are if we remember and wrestle with the losses and opportunities of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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