

American Education: A Force for Democracy and Integration?

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At its inception, the United States of America was a society unlike any other. Its citizens were expected to take an active role in the legislative process, voting directly for their House representative, and indirectly for their Senators, vice president and president.¹ Furthermore, although restricted by current standards, the franchise was broad for the time, with no restrictions regarding social class, property ownership or birth rank – every free white man could vote. Therefore, unlike countries such as England, which restricted the franchise severely for elections to the lower house, and had an inheritance-based system in the upper house, the United States needed a knowledgeable citizenry, one that could vote intelligently and thoughtfully for the new republic's legislatures.

At the same time, and equally important, was the need for the new republic to establish an identity, a way of making the new national motto, *e pluribus unum* – from many, one – a reality. Education was seen as the mechanism to create that *unum*, promoting the principles of democracy, and paving the way for the pursuits of life, liberty, and happiness. Through education, the diverse citizenry could become a single, integrated nation, one in which every member was capable of acting in an enlightened fashion for the good of all.

In the two hundred and thirty years since the Declaration of Independence was signed, education has continued to be called upon for these two functions: establishing and enabling democratic principles, and integrating the diverse and disparate constituencies of the United States. The question, then, is whether education has been

¹ The Seventeenth Amendment to the Constitution, ratified on April 8, 1913, provided for direct election to the Senate as well.

successful in these dual goals of promoting democracy and integration. In this paper, I will argue that education has succeeded in one of these goals, integration, albeit only partially. American education has frequently met its goal of integration, although that integration has, for the most part, focused on assimilation of immigrants and minorities into the dominant culture rather than the more two-way process the word integration might imply. I will argue that American education has not met its goal of instilling the values of a democratic and pluralistic society, although it has frequently succeeded in creating the illusion of a meritocratic society where every person has the possibility of progressing according to his or her talents, education and effort. American education, therefore, has frequently used the mask of democracy in education to hide a system in which the lower class and minority students are disproportionately likely to perform poorly in school, and upper and middle class whites are likely to perform better.

The New Republic: 1776 to 1830

The first argument that education was necessary for a democratic and pluralistic society came with the creation of the United States. Although education had existed in the land that would become the United States, and in fact the first mandatory education act was passed in colonial times,² it was not until the difficulties involved in dealing with Shay's Rebellion and the weaknesses in the Articles of Confederation came to light that the founders realized that a strong federal government, and with it a strong national identity, was needed. With this realization came the first thoughts of education as a way

² The Ole Deluder Satan Act was passed by the Puritans in Massachusetts in 1647. For the Puritans, however, education was a way to instill the values they felt appropriate for themselves and their children, keeping Satan at bay (class notes 9/18/06).

of forging that national identity. Therefore, in 1779, Thomas Jefferson proposed a bill for free schools in Virginia because

Citizens must choose leaders wisely, defeat ambition and corruption in politics, and protect liberty by keeping a vigilant eye on government. All citizens should have a chance not only to vote but to be elected. The government needs wise and honest laws, Jefferson argued, and thus it needs educated and virtuous lawmakers. In a republic, these men must be chosen “without regard to wealth, birth or other accidental condition.” Because there are many people who cannot afford a good education, Jefferson argued, all should share the cost, in order to foster the best possible representative government.³

In this bill, Jefferson proposed free elementary schools for all children, twenty regional academies for selected students and support at William and Mary College for the ten best needy academy graduates.⁴ In 1786, Benjamin Rush proposed a similar idea in Pennsylvania, calling for a state-supported university in Philadelphia, four colleges around the state, and free schools in every town.⁵ Although Jefferson’s and Rush’s idea of universal free education did not pass at the time, it laid the groundwork for future ideas of the importance of universal education.

Despite the failure to pass of these laws, however, there were two mechanisms through which education did act to create a common culture across the United States. The first were the blue-backed spellers created by Noah Webster. These spellers contained lists of words written with new spellings that simplified the language at the same time as they differentiated it from that used in England, creating American solidarity (spellings such as color instead of colour, while instead of whilst, or gray instead of grey). The second were the McGuffey Readers, written by the Reverend

³ Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), p. 6.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 8.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 9.

Williams Holmes McGuffey. These books were wildly popular, second in sales only to the Bible, and “. . . offered some semblance of a common curriculum in America’s tens of thousands of ungraded schools . . . includ[ing] excerpts from the Bible such as the Sermon on the Mount, speeches by Patrick Henry as well as Hamlet’s soliloquy, and selections by American writers including Washington Irving and William Cullen Bryant.”⁶ (Reese 30). But the readers were designed for more than academic instruction; they explicitly taught moral and religious values, instilling the idea that hard work, discipline and ethical behavior would lead to self-respect, public honor and economic success.⁷ Therefore, the widespread use of these books provided a common curriculum for American students, and were the beginnings of an educational system that created common values integral to the nascent nation.

The Common School Era: 1830-1900

In the 1830’s and 1840’s the idea that schools should be available to all children was again broached in the North. The foremost advocate for these schools, Horace Mann, saw schools as the solution to the difficulties of moral education and of reducing poverty. In an era where most jobs did not require a high academic background, education tended to focus on character, rather than intellectual pursuits. Without a state-sponsored church to monitor moral behavior, or the repressive controls of despotic nations, Mann promoted the Common Schools as a mechanism to teach the young self-

⁶ William J. Reese, *America’s Public Schools: From the Common Schools to “No Child Left Behind”* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), p. 30

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 31.

control and moral restraint.⁸ The schools, said Mann and other reformers, would serve as an “antidote to crime, the defense of republicanism, and a bulwark against atheism, socialism, and alien ideologies that threatened private property and public morals.”⁹ Education in the Common Schools, therefore, would assure that students acquired an understanding of the morals of the dominant class, promoting assimilation to the majority view of American society.

Schools were also the key to economic advancement. Education, Mann said, was the “great equalizer,” with the potential to demolish distinctions between groups of people, enabling society to escape from the trap of redistribution of wealth as the only mechanism for advancement – education would allow for the creation of more wealth, facilitating the advancement of the poor while allowing the affluent to retain their wealth.¹⁰ This idea, in turn, promoted the idea that education in a democratic society would provide for the possibility of advancement based on merit, not exclusively on the wealth or social standing of one’s parents. Mann’s idea, therefore, was that education for all would promote the democratic ideal of freedom to choose one’s own life course, although this idea would not be realized in its entirety, if at all.

Immigration was a serious concern at this time. Eleven million immigrants entered the United States between 1870 and 1900. These immigrants were different from previous immigrants – Eastern and Southern Europeans, who often lived in ethnic or religious enclaves. Many were afraid that these diverse people would not assimilate into the dominant culture, and so schools became an important mechanism for assimilation; as

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 22; *Ibid*, p. 42.

⁹ Reese, *America’s Public Schools*, p. 42.

¹⁰ Lawrence Cremin, ed. *The Republic and the School: Horace Mann on the Education of Free Men* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1959), p. 87-89.

an anti-Catholic minister stated in 1890, “‘Children go into’ the schools . . . ‘English, Scottish, Irish, German, Danish, Norwegian, Italian, French, – and all come out American.’”¹¹ Children learned English and American customs and values, “integrating” them into the dominant culture.

In the South, education in this time period was very different. Education was limited to affluent whites; the sparseness of settlements made schools logistically difficult, and fear of government intrusion and “cultural imposition from the North” kept education from poor whites. As for the black slaves, the idea of education for them was an anathema to the white planters – education, and especially literacy, might provide the slaves with ideas and means for escape or rebellion, and thus must be avoided at all costs.¹² In fact, education of slaves was punishable by imprisonment.¹³ The South, therefore, used education (or the withholding of education) in a similar way to the North: to promote the society that they wished to build. Unlike the North, which was attempting to advance democracy for all, providing an education for the affluent planter class while withholding it from poor whites and blacks preserved the status quo of slave and master, inculcating children with the dominant mores of the pre-Civil War Southern society.

After the Civil War, schools were started in the South. The freedmen were extremely interested in education as a method of advancement, but while whites could no longer prevent their participation in the enterprise, they did limit it, both financially and pedagogically, in an argument that played out in the African American community. Although many African Americans advocated an academic curriculum for black children,

¹¹ Reese, *America's Public Schools*, p. 50-51.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹³ Class notes 10/9/06.

the system that prevailed was that advocated for by Booker T. Washington and other like-minded individuals. This group championed advancement through manual labor, believing that whites would eventually see their value and the barriers between white and black would disappear.

Washington attended the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, a training school created by Samuel Chapman Armstrong, a white man who promoted education for blacks, but did not believe that they should have political power as they still required the caretaking and oversight of the white race, saying that “. . . the white race was mentally and morally strong, and the black race was mentally capable but morally feeble.”¹⁴ At the Hampton Institute, and later at Tuskegee, prospective teachers were trained to “. . . embody, accept and preach an ethic of hard toil or ‘the dignity of labor,’” characteristics the school leaders wanted the teachers to inculcate in their students all over the South.¹⁵ The focus in these two institutions, therefore, was on the long hours of physical labor in which the students participated before receiving any academic instruction; literacy and other academic subjects were much less important than preparing students for the labor force; therefore, although the South was providing schools for African American children, these schools were still designed to preserve the dominant culture, in this case the culture of black labor. Furthermore, a visitor to Hampton, Henry M. Turner, criticized the school as teaching subservience:

They are either in the whole ex-slave-holders themselves, or are pandering to the spirit of slavery. The graduates they send out cannot be called educated by any means, for they have not near the learning given by a respectable grammar school Besides, I think colored children are

¹⁴ James Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), p. 39

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 34

taught to remember, ‘You are Negroes,’ and as such, ‘your place is behind’”¹⁶

This is not to say, however, that all African Americans supported Booker T. Washington and his ideas. His most vocal opponent, W.E.B. DuBois saw that asking blacks to give up political power, civil rights and higher education helped to preserve the dominant class’s desire to continue the current system. Without an academic curriculum, there would be no possibility for black children to advance:

. . . a program is being made out that will land the boy at the time he becomes self-conscious and aware of his own possibilities in an educational *impasse*. He cannot go on in the public schools even if he should move to a place where there are good public schools because he is too old. Even if he has done the work in twice the time that a student is supposed to it has been work of a kind that will not admit him to a northern high school. No matter, then, how gifted the boy may be he is absolutely estopped from a higher education. This is not only unfair to the boy but it is grossly unfair to the Negro race.¹⁷

In other words, Washington’s system of focusing on promotion of economics at the expense of education kept the social system functioning smoothly, and he felt that the system would ultimately promote democracy because it would lead to whites’ recognition of blacks’ worthiness. Instead, however, the system did the opposite, lulling blacks into complacency as they worked toward changes did not occur on their own, and thus Washington’s methods served to preserve the dominant culture for a while longer.

The Progressive Era and Industrialization: 1900-1960

The Progressive Era was a time of great change in American education. Educators, beginning with John Dewey, were focused on the idea that the child mattered

¹⁶ *Ibid* 64

¹⁷ W.E.B. DuBois, ‘Negro Education,’ *Writings: The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade, The Souls of Black Folk, Dusk of Dawn, Essays* (New York: The Library of America, 1986), p. 871.

– it was his or her connection with knowledge that made it real. It was not enough to simply dictate what students should learn; instead, the educator needed to connect the child to the school and to the curriculum. Dewey's vision of school was a place in which students would participate in a hands-on fashion, experiencing a variety of activities, but the goal was not simply technical prowess. Instead, the students would use an activity such as an exploration of cotton to learn a variety of subjects, such as science (comparing cotton to wool) and history (discovering how difficult it is to gin the cotton leads to understanding of why the children's ancestors wore wool instead of cotton).¹⁸ John Dewey's new educational ideas were centered around a classroom in which children would be active participants, exploring the world around them, guided by a teacher, rather than the traditional model of schooling where they were required to memorize facts given by the teacher. As opposed to that traditional schooling, which was set up to teach a large group of children the same information, Dewey's ideal school would individualize instruction, where possible, and students would learn at their own rates. In other words, the traditional method of schooling was centered on the teacher and the textbook, whereas Dewey's method focused on the individual student.¹⁹ Dewey envisioned the teacher's role as guiding the student in enriching his knowledge and abilities in areas of interest. For example, Dewey cited a child who made a drawing of a tree which was fairly unrealistic. The teacher encouraged the child to observe actual trees, guiding him

¹⁸ Martin Dworkin, ed., *Dewey on Education: Selections* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1959), p. 43-45.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 51-52.

into making other, more accurate drawings which reflected the child's new knowledge of trees.²⁰

Others soon took up the call, looking for education that would pique children's interests, and progressive educators began advocating systems that would provide an education based around the individual needs of children. One popular idea, William Heard Kilpatrick's project based method, for example, used children's purposes and interests as the basis for the curriculum – children would learn by solving problems related to their lives.²¹

In a country that was undergoing a good deal of change in the wake of another large influx of immigrants and the changes that industrialization brought to the culture of the cities, people began to look for stability, which they found in the ideals of social efficiency, in “. . . a science of exact measurement and precise standards in the interest of maintaining a predictable and orderly world.”²² Herbert Spencer applied Darwin's ideas of evolution in a different way, developing a theory of Social Darwinism which applied the idea of survival of the fittest to human culture and society. Edward A. Ross, an American sociologist, was a vocal opponent of Social Darwinism, who, like Dewey, believed that the change in social structure had to be considered in the educational system used to teach children; but, unlike Dewey, Ross “saw an opportunity to exercise a direct and desirable form of social control.”²³ This idea of social control via schooling was coupled with the industrial ideas of efficiency to create the social efficiency curriculum

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 56-57.

²¹ Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum*, p. 140-141.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 77.

²³ *Ibid.*, 81.

movement.²⁴ John Franklin Bobbitt was perhaps the embodiment of an educational reformer who believed in the ideas of social efficiency. He applied social efficiency both in logistical terms (i.e., in scheduling which ensured that the entire building was being used, “shifting students from classrooms to other indoor space, such as the auditorium, and to the playground in systematic fashion”²⁵), and in curricular terms, differentiating the curriculum so as to educate each student according to his or her need.²⁶

These two modes of thought – progressivism based on the needs of the child and the industrialization of schools – together led to major changes in the pedagogy and structure of schooling. First, the schools in the cities became graded, and this innovation quickly spread to rural areas – from 1910 to 1960, the number of one room schools in the United States declined from 200,000 to 20,000.²⁷ Progressive reformers introduced differentiated curricula that would make high school truly democratic by being more closely aligned with “real” life, better serving the interests of boys and girls in a way useful for all social classes; because students would be more engaged, these curricula would increase enrollment.²⁸ Differentiated curricula were more democratic because students would spend their time and effort on subjects appropriate to their abilities. One of the most well known of these reformers, Edward L. Thorndike, for example, opined that “not more than a third of the secondary student population should study algebra and

²⁴ These ideas come largely from the work of Frederick Winslow Taylor, who used a “system of scientific management” in factories to promote increased production at lower costs, designed to “insure an honest day’s work” (Taylor, *American Society of Mechanical Engineers*, 1895, cited in Kliebard, p. 81). Taylor believed that “[t]he key, really, to performing any complex task was to break it down into its most elementary components, each part so simple that it would not tax the ability of the worker, and, thereby, error would be reduced and production increased” (Kliebard, p. 83).

²⁵ Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum*, p. 84.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

²⁷ David Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 25.

²⁸ Angus and Mirel, *The Rise and Fall*, p. 18.

geometry since, in the first place, they were not suited for those subjects and, in the second, they could occupy their time much more efficiently by studying those subjects that would fit them more directly for what their lives had in store.”²⁹

How would educators know where each child belonged? In World War I, Robert M. Yerkes promoted testing to place all recruits appropriately; after the war these tests were adapted for use in the schools.³⁰ The tests, however, were based on the dominant culture, inaccessible to recent immigrants and those living in poverty – the army alpha test, for example, included multiple choice questions such as

Crisco is a: patent medicine, disinfectant, toothpaste, food product
Christy Mathewson is famous as a: writer, artist, baseball player,
comedian³¹

School tests were similarly biased, and thus students were classified based not on intelligence or genuine ability, but on cultural background, minority status, and class. Tracking, therefore, has not served the purposes of democracy; it has, in fact, retarded its growth:

. . . tracking separates students along socioeconomic lines, separating rich from poor, whites from nonwhites . . . the end result is that poor and minority children are found far more often than others in the bottom tracks. And once there, they are likely to suffer far more negative consequences of schooling than are their more fortunate peers.³²

Tracking, and differentiated curricula, therefore, although promoted as democratic practices that would advance students on a meritorious basis were anything but, acting

²⁹ Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum*, p. 94.

³⁰ Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), p. 223-224.

³¹ Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, p. 230.

³² Jeannie Oakes, *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 40.

instead to preserve the status quo, keeping children of the poor in the lower classes and more affluent children in the middle and upper classes.

Immigration and assimilation were still issues at this point in time. Julia Richman, a teacher, principal and superintendent in New York's lower east side, said that immigrants "must be made to understand what it is we are trying to do for the children" and "must be made to realize that in forsaking the land of their birth, they were also forsaking the customs and the traditions of that land; and they must be made to realize an obligation, in adopting a new country, to adopt the language and customs of that country."³³ Integration mattered, but only insofar as students could be assimilated into the majority culture, leaving their "other" culture at home.

ESEA to NCLB: 1960 to the Present

The 1960's were a time of major social unrest and upheaval in the United States. Sputnik's launch, Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech, desegregation, the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Dr. King and Robert Kennedy, the Vietnam War, and many other events made for a tumultuous decade. On the education front, the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* marked the first large entry of the federal government into education. This law was enacted as part of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty with the express purpose of providing additional funding for the education of poor and minority children, and although there has been considerable controversy over

³³ Tyack, *The One Best System*, p. 237.

the effectiveness of that money in improving education,³⁴ there have been no attempts by either legislatures or educators to stop or reduce funding for schools.

This is not to say that there have been no changes. The *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* has been renewed a number of times since 1965, and each time the parameters change, attempting to get closer to the goal of improved education for poor and minority students. The most recent renewal of that act, the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, may actually be on the beginning track towards creating a democratic education system. This law requires that almost every third to eighth grader be tested in reading, mathematics and science every year, and that by the year 2014 every one of those children must be making Adequate Yearly Progress in these subjects. In a departure from past practices, scores are disaggregated, indicating not only a school's overall progress, but that of its minority groups, English language learners, special education students and students living in poverty. This system is far from perfect – it enables states to set their own standards, for example, encouraging some to set unreasonably low standards that their poorer districts are likely to meet while their more affluent districts surpass them, and many states have set minimalist AYP targets, seemingly hoping that the law will change at its reauthorization next year – but its very requirement that *all* students succeed indicate some progress towards a real education for a democracy.

Schools continue their function as tools for integration to society. Today's society is more multi-cultural by nature, more willing to acknowledge the existence of

³⁴ Major players in this debate are James Coleman who found that schools have no effect on student performance; rather, children are impacted by their peers and home environment. On the other side, Ronald Edmonds and Lawrence Lezotte have found that schools with student bodies that would lead Coleman to predict failure have actually been effective – they find that schools can matter.

other cultures, and frequently, if awkwardly, trying to fit them into a changing society.³⁵ Similar to the attempt to inculcate democracy through education, however, we are improving in our efforts, but we have not yet reached the goal. Students now study black history and women's history, but for the most part, they do so in February and March, months dedicated to the study of those topics. Black History Month and Women's History Month are wonderful improvements on the few to no mentions that African Americans and women had in American history and other subjects before their creation, but they are not enough – student are still learning about African Americans and women as outside of the mainstream of American history.

We have come a long way in forming a national identity through education for integration, from a society that looked solely to bring students into the dominant culture to one that is starting to value the languages, cultures and religions that immigrant and minority children practice at home. It is not always evident in practice, but the language of inclusion has become familiar, and even comfortable in some respects, although not always; hopefully this language will continue to grow into deeds and practices, so that we can become the pluralistic society that we like to believe that we are.

From the very first, the United States was established as a place where life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness were unalienable rights. For many years, we have touted our schools as providing such democratic rights, but as this paper argues, saying that education is democratic does not make it so. Tracking, IQ testing, project-based learning, restriction of schooling and segregated schooling in the South, and other practices, were,

³⁵ For example, in recent years, replacing “Merry Christmas” with “Happy Holidays” in December has become commonplace as people try to avoid offending those who do not celebrate Christmas, but there was backlash against this when Jerry Falwell’s “Friend or Foe” campaign last December threatened to boycott major retailers for instructing their salespeople to wish shoppers a “Happy holiday” instead of a “Merry Christmas” (“Good Will Took a Holiday, Whatever You Call It,” *The New York Times*, 12/18/05)

in most cases, advertised as methods for providing democracy in the schools, but in reality served to restrict the democracy of our society. Events of recent years, however, give reason for hope as the federal government has enacted laws that place emphasis on the need for every student to receive a high quality education. These laws have been or partially successful at best, but they are an improvement on what came before – the eyes of the nation are now focused on the progress of our poor and minority students as never before, and that puts us on the road to dealing with an issue that we were too easily able to ignore in years past. The goal now needs to be determining how to find solutions to the problems that we have illuminated – providing opportunities for every child to learn according to his or her merits; such a system will lead to the democracy we have been striving to reach.