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0521315158 - An Education of Value: The Purposes and Practices of Schools

Marvin Lazerson, Judith Block McLaughlin, Bruce McPherson and Stephen K. Bailey

Excerpt

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PART I

RECURRING PRIORITIES,
RECURRING TENSIONS

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I

THE EXPECTATIONS OF
SCHOOLING

WE have always expected so many contradictory things from our public schools. We have turned to public education to secure a common citizenship and a common morality in a pluralist society, but have often found that this common morality abuses our religious beliefs or ethnic values. We have expected public schools to enhance economic productivity and individual economic opportunity, but have complained that such an emphasis exacerbates individualism and materialism. We have believed that public schools should be cosmopolitan and should share in the nation's goals, but we have also insisted that the educational system be decentralized and that schools be responsive to local values. We have asked public school teachers to assume more tasks and to be responsible professionals, but we underpay them, devalue their work, and blame them for failing to achieve what may be impossible expectations.

Our expectations for education have led us to extend schooling to more and more people for longer periods of time. The commitment to popularization and the expansion of opportunity have crossed social class, racial, and gender lines. Laborers, artisans, farmers, manufacturers, and professionals, whites and nonwhites, immigrants and native-born, women and men have all, at various times, sought to expand schooling for themselves, for their children, and for the children of others.

Yet, the expectations themselves have also been the source of tension and conflict. Sometimes the hopes have been too grandiose, more than should legitimately be expected of any single institution. When the hopes fall short of fulfillment, as they inevitably have, the schools are then promptly condemned for "failing." Sometimes the expectations are contradictory – to eliminate class differences and to reinforce the social class structure, for example – and the result, inevitably, is conflict. Public education is both the source of America's

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most noble hopes and the repository of its greatest frustrations. Public education expresses our common purposes and our pluralism, our desire for equality and for excellence. Understanding those purposes in common and in conflict, and the ways they have and have not been implemented, is a necessary step in understanding how we can achieve an education of value for all.

EDUCATION: FOR WHOM?

Religion and politics were integral to the origins of public education. In the mid-nineteenth century, public schools had dual and interrelated purposes: to inculcate a sufficient level of Protestantism to assure public and private morality, and to teach a sufficient level of literacy to assure appropriate political choices in a republic.

From the beginning, schools had a special role in preparing the next generation for the responsibilities of citizenship. With large numbers of Americans entitled to a say in governing themselves, some schooling was necessary to ensure appropriate and reasoned choices. Thomas Jefferson captured the essential belief: For the republic to survive, he wrote, the diffusion of “knowledge more generally through the mass of people” was required. This theme was almost universally articulated; a self-governing people needed universal education.¹

Citizenship was inseparable from religion. Although Americans had rejected an established church, the majority nonetheless expected American society to be religious and Protestant. In relatively homogeneous Protestant communities, the goal of a common Christianity through schooling was easily achieved as communities reached a consensus on such issues as Bible reading, prayers, and holiday observances. In such communities, the district school could also act as the community’s major social center. The small white building, a nineteenth-century resident of Prairie View, Kansas, wrote, “was not only the schoolhouse, but the center – educational, social, dramatic, political, and religious – of a pioneer community of the prairie region of the West.” Public meetings, spelling bees, political debates, and social gatherings centered on the schoolhouse.²

Public schools, however, were never exclusively extensions of homogeneous local communities. The very idea of a *common* school was that it incorporated a varied clientele. In urban areas especially, ethnic and religious heterogeneity and racial and class divisions often made schools the focus of sharp political conflict. In New York City

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during the 1830s and 1840s, Catholics and Protestants clashed over what constituted an acceptable moral education, and over such questions as whether there should be nonsectarian Bible reading or whether each religious denomination should receive public funds for its own schools. Both sides agreed, however, that the essential purposes of education were moral. Later in the nineteenth century, Catholics of different nationalities created competing parochial schools, as East European Catholics often refused to send their children to the Irish Catholic school or to the local public school. The families believed that schools should defend ethnic cultures; where they did not, parents should send their children elsewhere. Throughout the century, white and black communities contested with one another and argued among themselves over the integration of the schools. In Boston in the 1840s, a coalition of white abolitionists and blacks demanded that black children be allowed to attend integrated schools, were denied their request by the Massachusetts Supreme Court, and then won their cause when the legislature outlawed segregated schools in 1855. In Ohio in the 1850s, state legislation required public financing of black schools, but local hostility from whites was often so great that few black schools were funded.³

In most of these conflicts, the contestants agreed on the importance of schooling. They combined to emphasize what schools ought to do. They disagreed on who should go to school and for what purposes. Although parents wanted their children to attend school, they did not expect to abdicate responsibility for what took place there, and many believed that the school should express their own particular values. Time and again, they and their children sought the right to participate in the choice of curriculum, to determine appropriate discipline, and to influence styles of teaching. But parents also felt ambivalent about this right, for they wanted the school to make life for their children a little better than it had been for them, and they were willing to cede power to the professionals who could promise such improvement.

Sometimes the conflicts were over the most basic rights of citizenship and opportunity in a democracy. Perhaps nowhere was this more apparent than in the struggles over the right of freed slaves to attend school. A Mississippi freedman spoke for many blacks: "If I . . . do nothing more while I live, I shall give my children a chance to go to school, for I considers education next best thing to liberty." The conviction that ignorance was its own bondage drew hundreds of

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thousands to the freedmen's schools. The struggle was difficult and courageous. W. E. B. Du Bois estimated that southern blacks, through voluntary contributions and taxes, paid for their schools and some of the whites' schools, in addition to the voluntary labor needed to organize, build, and maintain their schools.⁴

The hopes of southern blacks were tempered by two fundamental realities, however. Extreme poverty forced many to forgo schooling; next to the economic struggle to survive, any schooling was a luxury. The desire for education was also dangerous. A Virginia black made the point succinctly just after the Civil War: "There are not colored schools down in Surry county; they would kill anyone who would go down there and establish colored schools."⁵ Countless blacks, sometimes with white support, struggled against the realities of poverty and danger, for they and their opponents understood that gaining (or withholding) an education was important. On that, most Americans seem to agree.

THE CONDITIONS OF LEARNING

Americans have valued the right to go to school and, as the case of conflict over black schooling suggests, they have recognized the potential of education to disrupt the system of caste. For much of the nineteenth century, they were also fairly certain about what ought to be learned: the community's moral and religious code and basic literary skills in reading, writing, and computation. Most children never went beyond the elementary grades. Teachers presented the daily lesson; students recited passages from textbooks, worked at their desks, or listened to the teacher or to their classmates' recitations.

Teachers presumed that their students would assimilate the material they presented, usually by memorization. An account of an 1892 geography class in Boston is representative:

Teacher: With how many senses do we study geography?

Student: With three senses: sight, hearing, and touch.

The children were now told to turn to the maps of North America in their geographies. . . . When the map had been found each pupil placed his forefinger upon "Cape Farewell," and when the teacher said "Start" the pupils said in concert "Cape Farewell," and then ran their fingers down the map, calling out the names of each cape as it was touched. . . . When the books had been closed, they ran their fingers

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down the cover and named from memory the capes in their order from north to south.⁶

The presumption that all students would learn all material did not mean that there were never any distinctions made among pupils. Children were recognized as slow or fast learners, good with the books, or quick with their memories. However, the categories were vague. Establishing different levels of ability with precision was central neither to teaching nor to the curriculum. Because so few children would go on to advanced schooling, determining how much they could learn was of little consequence.

In the twentieth century, the organization of schooling and assumptions about how much schooling was necessary began to change. Shifts in the economy, technological transformations, heightened urban and industrial growth, and the surge of European immigrants intensified the search for institutions that were efficient, orderly, and more predictable. Growing school enrollments, the economic costs of mass education, and the heterogeneity of urban school populations led reformers to reexamine the organization of schooling and the conditions of learning. Age-graded classrooms established a time and place for each child. Centralized and standardized curricula introduced a stepladderlike approach to learning, making it clear when a child was being left behind. With the class expected to do each day's work, and, in so doing, to finish the year's curriculum, daily attendance assumed a new importance. At the same time, mass attendance brought into and kept in the schools youths who previously would have left. The rush to make efficient a bureaucratized, expensive, and mass institution forced to the surface questions about the efficiency of teaching and learning. What were the differences among children? How could they be measured? What kinds of curriculum and teaching were suitable for what kinds of students?

Nowhere were these questions more provocatively posed than in surveys in the first decades of the twentieth century, many directed at how well – or, more accurately, how poorly – children were doing in the schools. The most prominent survey, *Laggards in the Schools* (1908), by Leonard Ayres, concluded that “about one-sixth of all of the children are repeating [the same grade] and we are annually spending about \$27,000,000 in their wasteful process of repetition in our cities alone.” Ayres and others found that a significant percentage of elementary school children were performing well below

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what should have been expected of them. Uncertain about why the proportion of repeaters was so high, Ayres was cautious about laying blame, believing that illness, irregular attendance, late age of school entry, lax enforcement, or nonexistent compulsory attendance laws all played a part in contributing to the problem.⁷

Other commentators were less reticent than Ayres in designating the culprits: irrelevant curriculum, poor teaching, and inferior students. The U.S. Senate's Immigration Commission, for example, suggested that low levels of literacy among recent immigrants were due to the "inherent racial tendencies" of each group. The fact that the children of South and East European immigrants were often older than other students in the same grade meant that they were considered "retarded" in the jargon of the day, and thereby reinforced the Immigration Commission's racist assumptions that some nationality groups were less capable of learning than others. In fact, the commission's data did not substantiate its conclusions about the relationship between nationality, race, and education, and certainly not about the capacity to learn. Immigrants were achieving at about the same rates they always had; variables like length of time in the United States explained more about school achievement than did nationality.⁸ But the power of the argument that there were sharp, genetically determined limits to learning capacity proved immense, in part because of the growing status of intelligence (IQ) tests.

The debate about IQ tests was intense from the beginning. In France, Alfred Binet had developed the IQ test to identify children in need of special educational treatment. But he was cautious about his measure, writing in 1905, "The scale, properly speaking, does not permit the measure of the intelligence, because intellectual qualities are not superposable, and therefore cannot be measured as linear surfaces are measured." He urged users to remember that IQ was an average of multiple activities, cautioning that the numerical outcome, "if accepted arbitrarily, may give place to illusions." Binet insisted that his test provided no evidence for why children differed in their scores, and he warned against the perversion of IQ into a label that defined and categorized students: "It is really too easy to discover signs of backwardness in an individual when one is forewarned. This would be to operate as the graphologists did who, when Dreyfus was believed to be guilty, discovered in his handwriting signs of a traitor or a spy." Binet's fear, in today's terms, was of using his tests as a self-fulfilling prophecy.⁹

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In the United States, Binet's cautions were disregarded and his warnings were systematically rejected. American testers quickly assumed that IQ was a measure of intelligence and should be used to rank children on a scale from supernormal to subnormal. They also believed that IQ tests revealed innate capacities. As Stephen Jay Gould has noted, "American psychologists perverted Binet's intention and invented the hereditarian theory of IQ." They "developed a series of specious arguments confusing cultural differences with innate properties," and they assumed that "inherited IQ scores marked people and groups for an inevitable station in life."¹⁰

American psychologists and educators used IQ to reinforce tendencies toward group stereotyping about learning and to justify the differentiation of students within schools. Lewis Terman, the country's leading exponent of IQ and the creator of the Stanford-Binet test, outlined the essential argument:

The intelligence of the average negro is vastly inferior to that of the average white man. The available data indicate that the average mulatto occupies about a mid-position between pure negro and pure white. The intelligence of the American Indian has also been overrated, for mental tests indicate that it is not greatly superior to that of the average negro. Our Mexican population, which is largely of Indian extraction, makes little if any better showing. The immigrants who have recently come to us in such large numbers from Southern and South-eastern Europe are distinctly inferior mentally to the Nordic and Alpine strains we have received from Scandinavia, Germany, Great Britain, and France.¹¹

In practice, of course, schools did not treat IQ simply as a reflection of a group's capacity to learn. Most teachers evaluated their students on the basis of daily classroom performance. Nor were all who believed in the use of IQ tests racists. Many, like the sociologist and educator Horace Mann Bond, thought that IQ tests could be used to explore learning differences and to develop curriculum. But the hope that intelligence tests would be used primarily to enhance learning was undermined by the assumption that IQ measured inherent capacities. Try as some testers might to show that a battery of tests could be used to measure capacity (IQ) and levels of knowledge (achievement tests), which could then be used to determine which children needed more educational practice and exposure, the frequent practical effect of the tests was to lock youths into special curricula – special education classes, vocational programs, college-bound

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courses. The idea that science could be used to evaluate learning and to extend equality of opportunity gave way before the notion that scientific measurement would highlight the limits of learning.

The new emphasis on measuring capabilities that emerged in the 1920s propelled the issue of ability grouping to the fore. The issue was not entirely new. Nineteenth-century educational reformers had believed that students would learn more if they were grouped into grades rather than simply gathered together, as they were, in one-room schoolhouses. As a major innovation, the Quincy School, which opened in Boston in 1848, contained twelve classrooms, each with a separate teacher teaching a separate grade. The students were divided by proficiency, and as Boston's future superintendent of schools wrote, "all in the same class attend to precisely the same branches of study." By 1870, most large American cities had established graded schools based primarily on the age of the student. The new system allowed for the "division of labor in educational matters." "The teacher's time and talents being concentrated upon certain work, it becomes easier by repetition, and therefore, is likely to be performed more efficiently." With graded schools came pressure for uniform courses of study, standardized examinations, specialized teacher training, methods of evaluating teaching, timetables, and a host of other school-wide and system-wide attributes.

The post–World War I debate over the relationship between ability grouping and learning was thus continuous with earlier concerns. But in the 1920s and 1930s, it was fueled by the coincidence of three conditions. First, the surge of interest in ability grouping was based upon a mass elementary and secondary educational system. Especially as students continued through high school, the issue of how to distinguish among them became prominent. Second, ability grouping drew upon the assumption that there ought to be a close relationship between what one learned in school and what one needed for occupational success outside of school. The curriculum ought to be varied because economic roles varied. And third, grouping depended upon the new instruments for measuring ability.

The impact of measurement was profound; its scientific imprimatur fulfilled the powerful need to justify educational reform on scientific grounds. A New York City superintendent of schools articulated in 1922 what was rapidly becoming orthodoxy among American educators: "We stand on the threshold of a new era in which we will increasingly group our pupils on the basis of both intelligence and

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accomplishment quotients and of necessity, provide differentiated curricula, varied modes of instruction, and flexible promotion to meet the crying needs of our children.”¹²

During the 1920s, grouping by ability grew by leaps and bounds. In 1926, the U.S. Bureau of Education reported that thirty-seven out of forty cities with populations of over 100,000 used ability grouping in some or all elementary grades, and a slightly lower percentage did so in junior and senior high schools. By 1930, ability grouping was being hailed as a major advance in school organization and teaching.¹³

The justifications for grouping varied, but they tended to fall into two categories: administrative and pedagogical efficiency and adherence to democratic precepts. Ability grouping would allow schools and teachers to develop differentiated curricula and pedagogical styles appropriate to students' learning capacities. It would enhance learning for the slow as well as the fast learner. But because separating students, especially young ones, by capability seemed to undermine the widespread belief that education should be available to all, with all students learning roughly the same things in roughly the same ways, ability grouping required a more sweeping justification than administrative and pedagogical efficiency. An alternative philosophy of democratic education was necessary: Individuals had different capacities and interests, and a truly democratic education would accede to those differences by providing educational experiences congruent with them. A democratic education was one in which students learned different things in different ways. The conditions of learning were best provided in schools that offered a varied curriculum and varied teaching styles.

In practice, school systems blended uniformity and variety. Public elementary schools were, on the whole, common in the sense that they were neighborhood schools; all who chose to could attend. The most important forms of segregation were racial and class. The use of district boundaries to enforce racial segregation and the costs of residential housing meant that neighborhood schools often reflected class and racial divisions. Within elementary classrooms, excessive and highly formalized differentiation by ability groups was limited. Parents and many educators resisted tracking of young children. An East European immigrant mother put the case as succinctly as possible: “You can't put my Tony in the dumbbell school.”¹⁴

By the 1930s, the question of who would learn how much with