

Public Education, Alternative Schools, and Democracy

BY RON MILLER

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The cultural turbulence of the 1960s and early 1970s sparked the beginning of a vibrant new movement for “alternative” education. A flurry of passionate and visionary books by A.S. Neill, John Holt, Herbert Kohl, Jonathan Kozol, and other outspoken critics inspired thousands of people to think differently about the nature and purpose of education. By 1972 hundreds of “free schools” and experimental public school programs were founded, and within a few years more, the growing homeschooling movement offered another alternative to families. Public education, which had been revered by generations of Americans as a pillar of our democratic society, was now seen by many as a threat to democracy.

The roots of this disillusionment went deeper than 1960s protest movements, however. Although most Americans had supported the institution of public schooling, they have argued over its goals from the very beginning, and every generation has seen massive efforts to reform schools in some way. We have never been entirely satisfied with public education because different elements of society expect education to serve purposes that are in conflict with each other, and public schools have been weakened by the compromises that have been required.

There are as many possible educational agendas as there are economic, religious, ethnic, geographic, and philosophical factions in

this complex and sprawling country. The primary problem for mass public education is that it cannot reconcile them all. One scholar, Sanford W. Reitman, showed how schools are helplessly buffeted back and forth between competing ideologies. Underlying these different agendas are three major purposes: (1) We want our schools to promote democracy, but (2) we also want them to support a competitive economic system, while (3) we also want them to inculcate moral values and civic virtues. In more organic societies, such as premodern or indigenous cultures, these realms of politics, economics, and morality are in substantial harmony, and a coherent education emerges quite naturally in the daily life of a community (as Native American educator Gregory Cajete has nicely described). But in modern industrial/scientific cultures, particularly the restless and rootless culture of the United States, there are deep seated tensions between these spheres, and to the extent that an educational approach embraces one of them, the others are diminished. People with different educational ideals struggle to establish one or another purpose above the others.

Let’s look at these three purposes more closely, starting with education for democracy. The statesmen who founded the American republic two centuries ago all agreed that a nation ruled by its people, rather than by a monarch or an aristocracy, needed to educate its people to govern wisely. The most eloquent advocate of popular democracy and an education to support it was Thomas Jefferson. He envisioned a system of publicly funded schools available equally to all citizens, in which they

would learn to think reasonably and critically about the issues and concerns facing the community at large so that they could participate in its affairs. This view of education was a radical break from Jefferson's own experience; as the privileged son of a landowner, he received a classical education from private tutors while the vast majority of his contemporaries were expected to learn trades and leave governing to their betters.

Jefferson introduced a theory of democratic education that, while never fully practiced, has inspired generations of school reformers including Horace Mann and John Dewey. Democratic educators believe that the mission of public schooling is to alleviate the effects of social class; in a democratic society, *all* children, not only those from privileged backgrounds, should be educated to exercise their rights of citizenship. Today, democratic educators continue to struggle on behalf of populations chronically denied their rights and traditionally excluded from meaningful participation in the governing of society. One of the leading advocates of this position in recent years (and one of the most passionate voices of educational dissent since the 1960s) has been Jonathan Kozol, whose 1991 book *Savage Inequalities* poignantly documented how far we still are from the Jeffersonian ideal.

A major reason for this failure is that public education is also expected to serve a second purpose — the promotion of economic growth in a fundamentally competitive and hierarchical system of production. For all the virtues of free enterprise — personal freedom and responsibility, initiative, creativity, and so forth — there is no denying that fierce competition inevitably produces big winners (enormously wealthy families and exclusive communities, robber barons and corporate raiders) and demoralized losers (a disempowered working class and an impoverished underclass), and to a large extent the winners enjoy as much control over social policy as did the aristocracy in Jefferson's day. When we ask schools, as Bill Clinton explicitly did a few years back, to serve "one high standard: Are our children learning what they need to know to compete and win in the global economy?", we are asking them to sabotage the goal of democratic education, because for every child who competes and wins, there are others who will compete and lose. No matter how well they do in school, few children can expect to become investment bankers or CEOs, because modern capitalist soci-

ety requires far more technicians and service workers than high level professionals. Unfortunately, public schooling has been saddled with this purpose ever since state school systems were organized in the 1830s by Horace Mann and his colleagues. Although these distinguished gentlemen claimed to share Jefferson's democratic ideals, they were of the generation that developed large scale industrial capitalism (roads, canals, factories, railroads, and inventions of all kinds were emerging dra-

matically at this time), which Jefferson nervously anticipated as being hostile to the local, small scale democracy he advocated. Almost all the "common school" founders were political leaders in the Whig party, which represented the interests of the early industrialists, and they assured the factory owners that public schooling would produce a steady supply of able workers and contented citizens who would respect the values of free enterprise. For the last 165 years, the schools have been under constant pressure to deliver on this promise.

A third goal of public education has been moral and civic discipline. From the McGuffey Readers to William Bennett's crusade for virtue and religious conservatives' various campaigns, schooling has been seen as a powerful instrument for improving public morality — as this is defined by the nation's self-appointed moral guardians. Formal schooling in America has its roots in the tough Calvinist theology of the New England colonies, and even though Horace Mann represented a more liberal religious culture emerging in the nineteenth century, he still emphasized the

vital need to maintain Protestant virtues; he was a stern moralist who believed that the state should enforce standards of private conduct (along with education he was actively involved in the temperance [alcohol prohibition] movement of his time). Like many Americans of his time, he was a Protestant "nativist" who saw the rise of Irish Catholic immigration as a threat to the established culture. Moral discipline thus became strongly linked to cultural uniformity — the Americanization of immigrants. The historical literature clearly shows that Catholics found early public schools to be hostile to their beliefs, and as a still small minority, they chose to build their own schools rather than fight the system (this was a significant early wave of educational dissent).

All of these purposes rest on a primary assumption that

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modern society can be guided by some shared understanding of the common good, that we can find one model of education (what historian David Tyack, in a classic study, called the “one best system”) that addresses the diverse and complex interests, values, and problems of our culture. Public schooling has traditionally been an effort to cast a unified ideological net over the whole of society in order to rein in its excesses and eccentricities (however these might be defined). We argue over which ideology is best for this purpose, but we have historically accepted the underlying assumption that some ideology needs to be instilled. Mann was an effective founder of public schools because he tried to include all three major ideologies in his model of education. As John Taylor Gatto has emphasized in his critique of public schooling, Mann and his colleagues borrowed from Prussia the idea that schooling could and should serve the interests of the state above all else.

However, there is a fourth understanding of the purpose of education, a dissident tradition that thoroughly opposes Mann’s vision. This tradition argues that education is most fundamentally about nourishing *the quality of life* of the growing human being rather than placing young people in any ideological mold; it holds that no educational model should be established as public policy and thus imposed on all families and all children indiscriminately. Over the years, this minority tradition has been called “romantic,” “progressive,” “child-centered,” “humanistic,” and “holistic” education. It has been expressed by members of the Transcendentalist movement (Emerson and Alcott observed Mann’s efforts close up and strongly disapproved), by working class anarchists, by spiritual seekers such as Quakers or the followers of the philosopher/mystic Rudolf Steiner, and by the radicals of the 1960s who could not stomach the hypocrisy and violence of the Cold War, Vietnam, and the increasing power of the corporate state. When we speak of “alternative” schools, we are usually referring to educational approaches in this tradition.

Most of the people in this tradition are deeply, passionately committed to democracy—indeed, to radical democracy. Like Jefferson, they hold that democratic society must be rooted in face-to-face human contact rather than in abstract ideological schemes, in small communities rather than bureaucratic entities. Nevertheless, they understand that the local, small scale community life of Jefferson’s time has been usurped by the massive institutions of the state, the interests of corporate enterprise, and the distorting sensationalism of the mass media. Unlike liberal and progressive educators today who still adhere to Jefferson’s and Dewey’s idea that public schools should and can serve democratic values, most alternative educators do not trust massive school systems to teach democracy. They argue that young people can only practice democratic life when they are free from the controlling, hierarchical structures of public education. How all young people, regardless of gender, class, race, or ethnic background, would be guaranteed access to such learning outside a publicly funded system is a

complicated problem that we have not yet solved, but those who seek alternatives strongly believe that the system as it is established does not work either; public schooling itself perpetuates “savage inequalities.”

Alternative educators, in general, do not believe that economic growth or preparation for lucrative employment should be the central goals of education. On the contrary, many of them believe that the industrial economy’s obsession with material wealth, consumption, competition, and global triumph does not serve truly human needs at all. Alternative education, for the most part, promotes values that have come to be called “ecologically sustainable” — values such as simplicity and modesty, cooperation and caring, local community rooted in a sense of place, equitable distribution of resources rather than competition for personal success. Such values are fundamentally opposed to the standardization and competitiveness that have so completely saturated public schooling in recent years. For alternative educators, learning is not a commodity and growing is not a race; rather, education is a journey toward meaning, wholeness, and community.

The followers of this dissident tradition do not believe that it is the state’s business to impose moral and ethical values. As Stephen Arons has pointed out in his thoughtful critique of government schooling, *Short Route to Chaos*, the effort to impose moral consensus in a highly diverse and contentious society only results in greater conflict, mistrust, and potentially violence. Books are censored, academic freedom is compromised, and citizens argue angrily at school board meetings. Arons claims that because education is so intensely personal, touching the very core of our understanding of the world, our attitudes, feelings, values, and moral judgments, it must stand outside the sphere of state regulation and be protected as are other matters of conscience. There is room in our society, he says, for many paths of belief and faith. This is a major premise upon which alternative education is based. If we are to be a truly democratic society we must not control what people think; rather, we must try to encourage them to come to their beliefs and understanding of the world, and discuss their views with thoughtfulness and respect with people who think differently. This was Jefferson’s intention, as well as Dewey’s. But a standardized system of schooling, serving one dominant ideology, makes such dialogue impossible.

There are those who argue that education, especially public education, should simply be concerned with the academic “basics.” If we get rid of all other agendas, they claim, and simply provide young people with the three r’s and essential skills, then everyone can support public schools. The problem with this minimalist solution is that it ignores the multifaceted meaning of education. There is no knowledge, there are no intellectual “skills,” so nicely isolated from questions of value, purpose, and meaning. All education takes place in a cultural context, and education in complex modern cultures must select from many choices what it stands for and what it does

not. Alternative educators recognize this fact, and virtually all forms of alternative education are efforts to make learning relevant and meaningful to young people's lives. These forms of learning arise from actual experience rather than from some "one best system," and they serve diverse paths of growth rather than one ideology.

As more people reject the values of consumerism and competition, and question the wisdom of a mammoth technocratic social order that commodifies and standardizes everything it touches, they are withdrawing from public education and seeking alternatives that reflect their values and respect their children's distinctive patterns of learning and growth. They are finding ways to reclaim Jefferson's democratic vision in a world he would barely recognize. This may mean replacing public schooling with some other system of education, or, at the very least, finding ways to provide diverse alternatives within the existing system.

Alternative schools include a wide range of learning approaches, from the carefully structured environments of Waldorf and Montessori schools to explicitly democratic schools in which young people determine their own curricula and participate meaningfully in school decisions. Groups of educators and parents have successfully formed charter schools where they can provide an education consistent with their values, yet receive public funding (with some strings attached, such as the demand for standardized testing). Some of the free schools begun thirty years ago are still in existence, and have been joined by new ones as small groups of families come together to provide intimate, nurturing communities for their children. Of course, the most intimate and nurturing learning environment is the family itself, and homeschooling continues to thrive and grow across the country. In all of these environments, the live, authentic interaction between child and adult is valued over arbitrary standards and the contents of textbooks. Learning is meaningful and relevant to young people, and they become deeply engaged in projects, inquiries and studies of things in the world that earn their interest. Education

then becomes, as Dewey argued it should be, not a dulling preparation for some future life in the corporate economy, but life itself.

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