The Teachers' Muddle

by Charles L. Glenn

Everyone seems to want to get in a whack at the public schools for causing America's problems. A few years ago they were blamed for the competitive weaknesses of the economy—though we haven't heard many people giving them credit for its strong performance since! Lately they have been condemned for their failure to prevent violence, though young people are far safer in school than on the streets.

Not all of the criticisms of American public education are as mindless as these. Thoughtful commentators such as E. D. Hirsch, Jr. and William Kirk Kilpatrick have shown how poorly many schools meet the need of impoverished children. These commentators have also rightly criticized many schools for failing to guide children of all social classes toward a coherent sense of right and wrong. Addressing these and other ills of public education will require reforms more radical than any tried so far. It will also mean rethinking some of our most basic practices, and none is more badly in need of reconsideration than the preparation of teachers.

Teachers are often unfairly blamed for the educational incoherence targeted by critics such as Hirsch in *The Schools We Need: And Why We Don't Have Them* (1996) and Kilpatrick in *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong* (1992). It would be fairer to place the responsibility upon those of us who think and write about the purposes of education, and upon our predecessors. Teachers and those preparing to teach receive very confused signals about what is expected of them. I am not referring to disagreements about specific content—though, as Hirsch shows, there is vast confusion in that respect as well—but to conflicting messages about the fundamental mission of public schools in a liberal democracy.

The conflict over mission involves a prior question that is fundamental: should schools seek to influence the character of their pupils, or should they limit themselves to developing skills and knowledge in a value-free manner? This question would have seemed the proverbial "no-brainer" for many centuries. It was simply assumed that schools taught far more than academic skills and knowledge. Many would have argued that character formation was their primary task.

Under a republican form of government in which "the people" (or some portion of them) were the final source of political authority, this concern was especially pressing. As Montesquieu pointed out in *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), "there need not be much integrity for a monarchical or despotic government to maintain or sustain itself. . . . But in a popular state there must be an additional spring, which is virtue." For this reason, "it is in republican government that the full power of education is needed. . . . One can define this virtue as love of the laws and the homeland. This love, requiring a continual preference of the public interest over one's own, produces all the individual virtues. . . . in a republic, everything depends on establishing this love, and education should attend to inspiring it."

4-B *(1937), by Louise Emerson Rönnebeck*

The American founding generation agreed. Benjamin Rush urged, in 1786, that "our schools of learning, by producing one general and uniform system of education, will render the mass of the people more homogeneous and thereby fit them more easily for uniform and peaceable government." Thomas Jefferson wrote, the same year, that schools were the most important instrument of society for "ameliorating the condition, protecting the virtue, and advancing the happiness of man." The 1790s brought a spate of proposals to create a national system of education. A generation later, Horace Mann pointed out that "it may be an easy thing to make a Republic, but it is a very laborious thing to make Republicans. . . . But if . . . a Republic be devoid of intelligence, it will only the more closely resemble an obscene giant . . . whose brain has been developed only in the region of the appetites and passions, and not in the organs of reason and conscience. . . . Such a republic, with all its noble capacities for beneficence, will rush with the speed of a whirlwind to an ignominious end."

But there is also a strong countertradition that the state should not be allowed to interfere with matters of conscience through control over religion and education. Indeed, proposals to give government—which is to say the state or national government—a strong role went nowhere until the middle of this century. Local control through what at one time were more than 100,000 elected school boards placed decisions close to parents and other concerned citizens. Slowly and inexorably, however, state governments began to assert control over what was taught, and by whom. By the 1970s, local control had grown largely meaningless in a public education system that strove for uniformity. The official role of the federal government in education is still very limited, but the carrots and sticks that it employs have a profound impact, especially on schools that serve poor children.

Resistance to government control of education has continued because critics believe that giving government the power to shape the beliefs and attitudes of children is, over the long term, a threat to freedom. Such critics share with the promoters of a strong

The Wages of Teaching

Annual median salaries of elementary and secondary teachers in constant 1998 dollars

Year	Salary
1971	$34,113
1975	$31,581
1981	$28,576
1983	$31,122
1987	$34,893
1989	$34,668
1993	$34,947
1995	$35,134
1998	$35,099

Teacher salaries fell in real terms between 1971 and 1981, but have risen slightly since. Swelling school enrollments and the growing proportion of teachers age 45 and over (median salary: $41,661) may point to rising pay in the future.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, The Condition of Education, 1999.

state role a high estimation of the power of schooling to counter the influence of family and society on the developing child. They agree that schools and teachers are a crucial factor in preserving or transforming culture and social life. In *On Liberty* (1859), John Stuart Mill spoke for those who urged that government should not be entrusted with a monopoly on schooling, while conceding it the role of ensuring that schooling was available to all:

> The objections which are urged with reason against State education do not apply to the enforcement of education by the State, but to the State's taking upon itself to direct that education, which is a totally different thing. . . . All that has been said of the importance of individuality of character, and diversity in opinions and modes of conduct, involves, as of the same unspeakable importance, diversity of education. A general State education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another; and as the mould in which it casts them is that which pleases the predominant power in the government . . . in proportion as it is efficient and successful, it establishes a despotism over the mind, leading by natural tendency to one over the body. An education established and controlled by the State should only exist, if it exist at all, as one among many competing experiments, carried on for the purpose of example and stimulus, to keep the others up to a certain standard of excellence.

Educational policy and practice in the United States, after half a century of increased government interference, seem to be moving in a contrary direction, toward the position Mill suggested nearly 150 years ago: "many competing experiments" in the form of magnet schools, charter schools, and (at least in a modest way) publicly funded private and religious schools. This openness to many different ways of educating is coupled with a growing stress on outcomes measured by standardized tests. In effect, policymakers are saying to educators, "So long as you get to the goals that we set, you are free to choose what road you take."

Parents, in turn, are showing themselves increasingly picky about the schools to which they entrust their children. And something like a million American children are being schooled at home by parents who have not found any school to their liking.

There seem to be two reasons for the new openness to diversity in American education. The first is that parents are themselves better educated and more demanding as "con-

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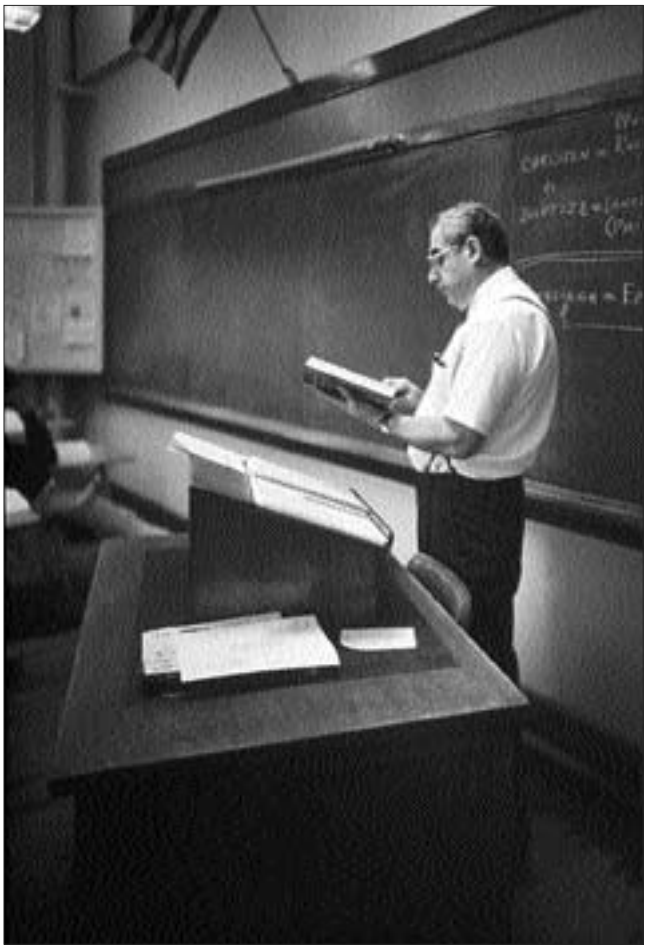
sumers" of schooling for their children. In increasing numbers, they are not willing simply to accept whatever is provided by the nearest public school. The second reason is the growing body of evidence, notably in the Rand Corporation's *High Schools with Character* (1990), that schools with a distinctive character, including faith-based schools, are more effective than schools reflecting a lowest common denominator of values.

For teachers, these two developments mean that they will be held accountable for measurable results, and may well find themselves working in schools offering a distinctive approach to education. They will need to adapt to these expectations. If fortunate or enterprising, they may find themselves in schools that match their own convictions about education—if they have any. If they do not have any clear ideas about the goals of education, they are likely to find themselves in schools as incoherent as they are, schools that do not have strong parent constituencies and are difficult and unsatisfying places in which to work.



Robert Gaudio, English Teacher, Hazleton Senior High School, Hazleton, Pa. *(1992), by Judith Joy Ross*

What do I mean by "convictions"? Not beliefs about the comparative merits of phonics and whole language as methods of reading instruction, or whether English or the home language of immigrant children should be used to teach them to read. Those are issues that can be resolved over time by research, which frequently points to some sort of mixed model. Nor am I referring to strictly religious beliefs about, for example, the means of salvation. There is, instead, a middle ground of ways of understanding what is necessary to a flourishing life, and parents seem to choose schools (or choose to home-school) on the basis of their concerns in this domain.

Here is a primary source of the confusion of teachers today. School reformers celebrate distinctive approaches to education, and parents seek them, but the norms of the profession continue to insist that all teachers (and schools) are interchangeable, and that neither should "impose their values." But good teaching is all about urging those we teach to accept what we believe to be true and worthy of their acceptance. Bad teaching imposes values, too, and schools that are incoherent are not neutral or "value free." Cynicism, indifference to truth, disinclination to carry out tasks thoroughly, and disrespect for others—all of these can be learned in school.

Only schools with a distinctive character

to which staff and parents alike are committed can shape the character of pupils in positive ways. This is one reason why Catholic schools now enroll many non-Catholics, and some Evangelical schools serve pupils from non-Evangelical families. Parents in these cases perceive that a school centered on a religious ethos, even if it is not their own ethos, is more likely to reflect their own convictions about the good life they want for their children than a school without such a common ground. Motivated pupils, a relatively safe and undistracted environment, and a size that allows the pupils and adults to know one another well more than offsets, for these parents, the material advantages that public schools, with their computer labs and highly credentialed teachers, usually enjoy. Shared values and clarity about goals offer a distinct advantage to faith-based schools. According to a study by Susan P. Choy for the National Center for Education Statistics, 71 percent of teachers in small (fewer than 150 pupils) private schools agree that "colleagues share beliefs and values about central mission of school," compared with 41 percent of those in small public schools. In large schools, with more than 750 pupils, both numbers drop, to 49 percent in private schools and only 26 percent in public schools.

Teachers who want to work in schools that are built on a shared understanding of education—and increasingly these will be the schools in demand by parents and supported by public policy—need to have thought carefully about their own convictions as to how to promote character and worthy life goals in their pupils. Unfortunately, many teachers have been made tentative and confused about such matters by their own schooling, and by college or graduate school teacher-training programs. They have been told that public schools should be "value neutral," and have taken that to mean that they should seek to give the impression that they have no fixed convictions about any matter on which Americans disagree. Even more damaging, they may let their pupils assume that they have no understanding of the nature of a good and honorable life, which would serve to anchor such convictions.

It would be impossible as well as wrong for government to impose a single model of character formation upon every school, and to insist that teachers share or at least express an official worldview in their classrooms. There is room for a variety of approaches capable of nurturing decent human beings who are responsible citizens. Perhaps it would help, however, to illustrate with contrasting models described in two of the oldest descriptions of education in the Western tradition, and by the most influential 20th-century thinker about education, John Dewey (1859–1952).

In the fifth book of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, Moses tells the people of Israel:

> See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations. . . . Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them. . . . These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. (Deuteronomy 4:5–6, 9; 6:6–7)

This way of understanding education sees it as the transmission of a tradition that provides authoritative guidance about the behavior, including daily habits, and the attitudes that sustain an ideal of life and of community. Continuing in this tradition signifies "wisdom and understanding," since it requires inner conviction as well as external compliance.

The second account is a famous parable from Plato's *Republic*. Socrates offers "an image of our nature in its education and want of education":

> Behold! human beings living in an underground cave, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the cave; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets. . . . And do you see men passing along the wall carrying all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals made of wood and stone and various materials, which appear over the wall? Some of them are talking, others silent.
>
> You have shown me a strange image [Glaucon replies], and they are strange prisoners.
>
> Like ourselves, I replied; and they see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave?

"Like ourselves," Socrates says; that is, we are also prisoners of the illusions he has been describing. Education is the process by which one is forced to look toward the light, and then is led unwillingly up the path out of the cave to stand in the light of day, and at last look toward the sun itself. "Will he not fancy that the shadows which he formerly saw are truer than the objects which are now shown to him?" Of course, and this is why the educator is called literally to disillusion pupils from what parents and society have taught.

Plato's understanding of education is fundamentally different from that expressed in Deuteronomy. While they have in common a social goal, that of developing and sustaining the virtues required by a particular society, the biblical strategy involves binding the individual to a tradition of norms and loyalties shared generation after generation. Plato's strategy involves liberation from the prevailing understanding of reality in the interest of transforming, rather than preserving, the social and political order. The teacher inducts his pupil into a higher wisdom that serves as the basis for a total reconstruction of society, including the most intimate relationships. Anything that stands in its way is self-condemned as ignorance and prejudice.

While John Dewey's account is informed by an entirely different metaphysic and anthropology, he shares Plato's concept of education as movement away from inherited habits and understandings. "Growth itself," he wrote in *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1920), "is the only moral 'end.'" Everything that promotes the growth of the child into a person who continues to grow through new experiences of shared problem solving is good education. "'Growth,'" Dewey wrote a few years later, "is not enough; we must also specify the direction in which growth takes place, the end towards which it tends. . . . Does this form of growth create conditions for further growth, or does it set up conditions that shut off the person who has grown in this particular direction from the occasions, stimuli, and opportunities for continuing growth in new directions?" In other words, "truth" resides in the search itself. Dewey contrasts his position with that of "reactionaries [who] claim that the main, if not the sole, business of education is transmission of the cultural heritage."

The educational goals described in Deuteronomy are consistent with the practice of many schools, whether religious or not, that give priority to helping pupils to master the knowledge and the moral precepts that previous generations have found

important. These schools teach history and languages (even "dead" languages) and the great literature of their cultural heritage, as well as traditional virtues.

Schools that follow the model suggested by Plato try to teach a fundamentally different way of understanding the world, one that requires rejection of much in the tradition and much of what children have been told by their parents. This is education for personal and social transformation, described brilliantly in Rousseau's *Émile* (1762) and attempted by various totalitarian regimes, starting with the French Revolution and culminating in the efforts to create the "new Soviet man" during 70 years of communist education. A less sinister form of transformative education is provided in mission schools that enroll children from non-Christian homes with the goal of instilling a new understanding of reality in their charges.

Dewey's emphasis on growth has had an enormous influence upon American classrooms, and not only in schools that describe themselves as progressive. In this spirit, educators invoke the slogan, "Teach the child, not the subject." They talk of "critical thinking" as more important than mastery of facts about history or society. And they urge that skills such as reading or accurate spelling not be taught until they are "developmentally appropriate." For many middle-class children who benefit from enriching home experiences, such an emphasis on self-direction and cooperative learning based upon group projects can mean happy school days. For children from homes that are not rich in "cultural capital," a series of nondirective classrooms can result in a grievously inadequate education.

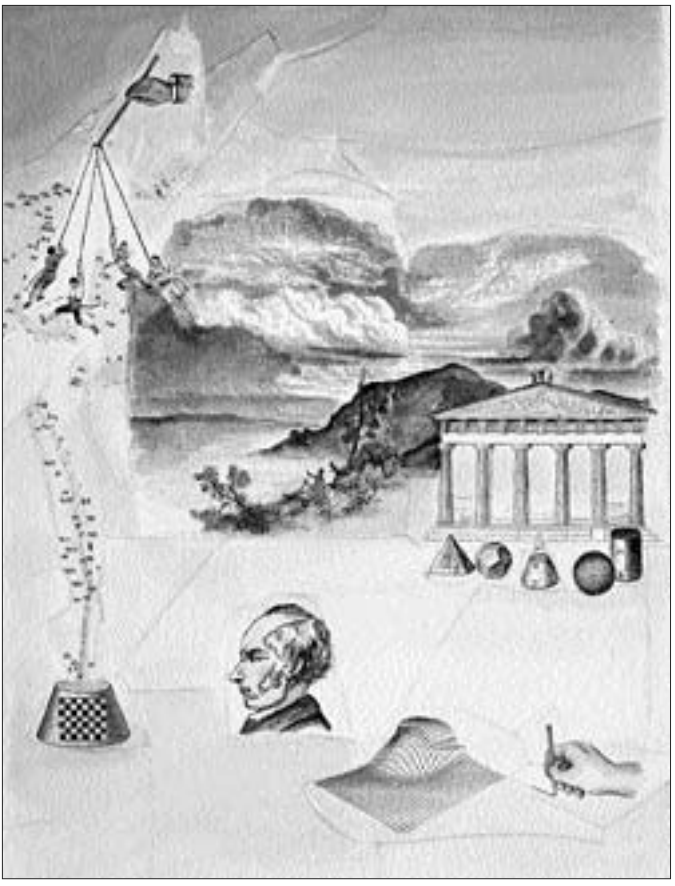
Each of these differing views of education could shape a coherent school, though some of us will prefer one and some the other. The trouble is that seemingly contradictory elements from each are often mixed together in the orientation that future teachers are given to the nature of their vocation.

They are told that they will have to cover the content that increasingly is specified in state curriculum frameworks, though this is often presented as an unwelcome interference with their creativity as teachers and with the real interests and needs of their future pupils. Much of this content, inevitably, is "conservative," in the sense that it reflects the accumulated wisdom of society about what is important to know.

Future teachers are also told that it is part of the mission of the public school to take the leading role in the transformation of society, by convincing pupils that the beliefs of their parents and of their communities of faith or tradition about the roles of men and women, about sexual orientations and practices, and about a host of other sensitive matters are simply wrong. In Plato's sense, teachers are to disillusion their pupils about what they think they know and what meaning to attach to it.

They are also told that their primary concern should be with the pupil's own needs and interests, and that curriculum mandates should not be allowed to interfere with the natural unfolding of individuals. Such preachments are not only of recent vintage. They were given definitive expression in a book published nearly 75 years ago, *Foundations of Method*, by William Heard Kilpatrick (no relation to William Kirk Kilpatrick). Summarizing the book recently, Hirsch discerned "the identification of correct pedagogy with liberal, democratic American ideals; the dubious claim that it was basing itself on the most advanced scientific research; the insistence upon the individuality of the child and the autonomy of the teacher; the disparagement of mere subject matter and of other nations' educational methods; the admonition to teach children rather than subjects; the claim that knowledge is changing so fast that no specific subject matter should be required in the curriculum; the attack on rote learning; the attack on tests and even report cards; the claim that following the project method would develop critical-thinking skills. Kilpatrick's book even celebrated the whole-language over the phonics approach to reading instruction."

Implementing any one of these approaches consistently requires choices that essentially exclude the others. This is not to say



Possibilities and Pragmatics *(1990), by Vivian Torrence*

that teachers who are seeking to transmit a tradition of knowledge and virtue are not free to criticize aspects of that tradition, or that they should be so enamored of the subject matter that they forget the pupil. Nor is it to suggest that those who follow a "child-centered" approach have no concern at all with the needs of society. But teachers who are unclear about their primary goals and how they will seek to reach them are likely to fall into a hopeless muddle of half-attempts and self-contradictions.

Teacher preparation that fails to grapple with the goals of education, by showing how the selection of classroom method and curricula follows from the choice of goals, not the other way around, is a formula for incoherent and ineffectual education. That is, unfortunately, a confusion that "educators" have imposed upon teachers. Sometimes it seems that only the essentially negative virtue of "tolerance" is allowed a role in public schools—which is often a cloak for undermining traditional values. But foreswearing any intention of influencing the habits, attitudes, and settled dispositions of pupils shows a fundamental lack of respect for their potential as human beings, and for the noble vocation of teaching.

If we are entering, as it appears, an era of many competing educational experiments, teachers and school administrators must be made aware of an essential truth: different ways of understanding the goals of education have different implications for the classroom and curriculum. Before this can happen, however, we need to recognize that the competing goals of education themselves reflect different philosophical, even theological, choices about how we understand the nature of reality itself.