

GOING PUBLIC



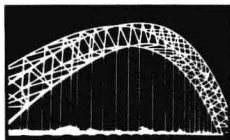
SCHOOLING FOR A
DIVERSE DEMOCRACY

Judith Rényi

GOING PUBLIC

Schooling for a Diverse Democracy

JUDITH RÉNYI



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"To P. J. (2 yrs old who sed write a poem for me in Portland Oregon)"
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This book is dedicated to my favorite English teacher, who once said, "Teachers must have three attributes: they must know the subjects they teach and must continue to learn more than they will ever teach all their lives long; they must know the tricks of the trade, which they will learn from other teachers; and they must have a good heart."

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A major report on *The Humanities in American Life* commissioned by the Rockefeller Foundation in 1980 urged significant improvements in public education to prepare young people for a vigorous and engaged participation in our society. The report called for a vision of language, literature, and history in the formation of citizens very different from what until then had prevailed in our schools. Under the inspired leadership of Dr. Alberta B. Arthurs, the foundation began working with thousands of urban and rural teachers in schools all over the country to develop new ways of approaching these subjects. Over the past decade I have been privileged to learn from these teachers and their students about the complexities of teaching and learning in difficult circumstances, the cultivation of the mind in settings destructive of individual dignity, and the persistence of noble causes in the midst of social turmoil. Despite the difficulties, the teachers and students have triumphed in demonstrating their desire to learn and to contribute new understandings to the humanities in the United States.

This book is dedicated to all those who took part in the continuing effort to understand what it might mean to “educate a diverse America”—indeed, what any one of those words might mean. The teachers and students in American schools taught me that ultimately it is they who will construct meaning for us all through the work they do in school.

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A NOTE ON USAGE

As various ethnic groups continue to define themselves, preferred usages to describe them change. If I have erred in designating “Native Americans” or any other group, I apologize. I have no wish to offend or irritate; if I have done so, it is neither out of malice nor arrogance, but the result of simple ignorance.

I use “he” and “she” alternately, whenever possible, when singular third-person pronouns are required by the syntax. I prefer this to “s/he” or “they” in singular contexts, since Miss O’Day, my third-grade teacher, would never have approved.

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I

AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Introduction



In the fall of 1989, as 2.3 million teachers and nearly 50 million students trudged off to public school, the president of the United States convened all of the country's governors in an unprecedented education summit at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. This was the university Thomas Jefferson had founded in his belief that a democratic society required an educated populace. The governors pledged to work together with the president to do something new and strong and important about public education. Among the goals they shared was a belief that every American should not only go to school, but stay there long enough to graduate from high school. This belief, shared widely by Americans today, represents a revolutionary idea about who needs schooling and how many of our children should earn high-school diplomas. Less than forty years ago it would never have occurred to most Americans that we should all spend so much time in school; today, a diploma for every single one of us seems both right and fitting.

This new idea about the place of schooling in the lives of all Americans has caused us to wring our hands over high drop-out rates, which continue to prevail in many school districts, especially those serving the poor and minorities. In some big-city and rural districts where poor and minority students constitute the majority, students drop out before graduation at rates of 20 to 40 percent. Americans seem generally agreed that this is a tragedy both for the students and for the society, whose capacity to find useful work for dropouts has vastly diminished. Salaries for dropouts between the ages of 18 and 24 average no more than \$6,000 a year.¹ The United States economy is no longer primarily an agricultural or a manufacturing one, each of which once required large numbers of unskilled laborers for whom schooling beyond the three Rs was unnecessary, but who could expect to support a family decently on the basis of unschooled labor alone. Today, fully one child in five is poor,² and the places where the unskilled poor are to be found offer few jobs of any kind. Success for a young person growing up in our failing cities or rural areas means leaving home, getting

out, finding one's way to other places where jobs are available, housing is decent, and schools show promise of helping later generations to become comfortably successful Americans in their turn.

America believes that the schools in places where poverty abounds are the transforming institutions that can turn around a child's chances of economic success. This belief, sometimes called "the civic religion," says that to get an education, get out, find a job, and do well in life is the American way out of poverty and hopelessness. When the poor become productive members of our society, America as a whole succeeds, because success is defined primarily in economic terms. We need all of our children to graduate from high school because we need their productivity to keep America strong, wealthy, and constantly growing and developing.

But too many of the poor and minority communities in our country continue to attend school erratically, learn little of use to them or to the rest of us, and end up as a drag on our economy. A number of remedies for the drop-out problem have been offered. One group, spearheaded by politicians and business leaders, wants us to design our schools with an eye to student success on tests that will allow us to measure our scholastic productivity against that of other industrialized nations and not find our students wanting. Advocates of international competitiveness want a more rigorous curriculum that stresses science and mathematics, English, history, and geography at its core, that sees these subjects as the basic or common curriculum for all students, and through that common knowledge forges a strong, unified nation. Advocates of such an education enlist the help of corporate executives to sponsor experiments in every congressional district that will take the lead in demonstrating model ways of changing schools to produce this educated populace. And they want schools to imitate the marketplace, competing for corporate money to redesign themselves and competing for students in a system where parents choose schools not only on the basis of residence, but on the basis of excellence and productivity as well.

All of these are laudable goals, witnessing a profound concern among our nation's elected and business leaders that all of our children and schools take part in the economic success of the nation and further its economic ends. These reform measures come at a time when schools nationwide have already begun to reexamine themselves to better serve their students. The belief, prevalent throughout the history of public schooling in America, that the fault or problem in educating the poor is the fault or problem of the poor themselves has yielded to a belief that it is just possible that some fault might lie with the system trying to educate them. That change, very recent

and new to the complex bureaucracies, politics, and big business of education in our country, has barely begun to make itself felt in schools and among teachers and the public, but it represents an unprecedented transformation of thinking. It has led to a movement in many school districts to “restructure,” meaning to invite teachers, administrators, and community members to assist in joint decision-making, and to alter dramatically the organization of work in schools. Like the education summit’s push for change, however, school restructuring efforts tend to focus primarily on economic and management issues; how much the teachers are paid and for what kind of work figures largely in discussions and meetings as a school sets about its effort to change.

The revolutionary idea that all students should graduate from high school has also opened up the possibility of reconceiving what and how we teach. Quietly, here and there, with stimulus from foundation and government grants, teachers have begun to change their thinking about what children know, how they learn, and therefore what the school needs to provide. This new work seeks to bring the content of America’s schools into closer alignment with America’s populace. Changing what and how we teach in order to educate all of our children is the subject of this book.

Until the early 1980s, the children of the poor and children of minorities were the problem. They suffered “deprivations,” “lacked” things necessary for school success, and came from “deviant” backgrounds. Those deprivations and deviations from the school norm needed, in the past, to be corrected or replaced with the healthier, more normal, more moral ways of knowing and behaving that school taught. In the past, the typical attitude toward the children of the poor was to look at them as bringing to the school either nothing of value or the wrong values, which needed to be remedied. But as ethnic pride among many Americans grew during the 1970s, new ideas about the values of different ethnic groups began to surface. Teachers began to see their students as offering much deserving of respect—knowledge, culture, language, and the capacity to learn. Teachers saw that when they accorded these attributes a place in school curricula instead of dismissing them as unworthy, children discovered connections between themselves and the world of learning.

Respecting the cultures of students of all kinds has profound implications for curriculum and instruction. Unlike the structural changes advocated by politicians, business leaders, managers, and bureaucrats, however, the revolution in school curricula has little to do with economic goals and purposes. This revolution has to do with the actual daily purposes and content of school—with what Americans know and what they ought to know,

with what Americans bring to school with them and what they ought to take with them when they leave at the age of seventeen. When we tamper with curriculum, we are touching on the very idea of America: what it has been, what it is, and what it ought to be. Curriculum embodies knowledge and values, morality, and the purposes of education, and the new ideas about curriculum go well beyond school as a place primarily of interest to the economic well-being of America. These ideas look at school as a place that defines us as Americans and suggests what we might become through our cultural and intellectual development. The new curriculum changes have caused a national uproar. Not everyone agrees that they have laudable goals.

The problem of what to teach in American public schools is the focus of this book. Many observers of education see no problem: they believe that we already know what to teach schoolchildren, and that we simply need to stiffen up accountability, which usually means some form of testing, to ensure that larger numbers of children will in fact learn the existing curriculum. A growing number of others, however, believe that many American children are ill-served by what is taught in school. Testing more often or changing the management of school buildings is not enough. The content of instruction must change if we are to succeed in educating everyone.

These two positions on the content of school have exploded into heated debates among educators, academics, and political figures. Since national media have given the debate some play over the last few years, the general public has also taken sides on the issue. It is not the case that much change has yet actually occurred in public-school classrooms. Our education system is a monolith not subject to easy adoption of new ideas. The challenge to traditional curricula in our public schools remains largely just a set of ideas about what children ought to learn that is not currently being taught very widely. Yet some states and locales have adopted legislative mandates that curricula become "multicultural," and many teachers and schools have begun to look about them to see what that might mean for their own settings.

This book seeks to probe the question of what we teach and what we ought to teach by providing a background for further discussion and development of the curriculum question. Many false assumptions about what has been taught in the past are made on both sides of the conflict. Many facile or merely ideological responses have been made to the challenges being brought to traditional curricula. I believe it is important to know as precisely as possible what actually has been taught in public schools and whether such teachings have been effective for children's intellectual development, before we can either review the current controversy about content or consider recommendations for the future.

The plan of this book enables us to look at the content of school history, literature, and language as these subjects developed from the beginnings of public schools in America 150 years ago to the present. With this history as background, we will be able to evaluate the curriculum wars being conducted in the name of American schoolchildren and then move on to a consideration of where we might go from here.

The revolutionary idea that we ought to educate all Americans gives rise to questions concerning how and what we offer all children in the name of education. Those questions, however, are being raised amidst salvos of attack and counterattack. I hope in the pages of this book to lead us to a quieter way of considering the issues, preparing for the future, and assisting all American children to do well in school and thereby to do well for themselves and for America.

The Making of a Revolution



We want all of our children to graduate from high school. We want our schools to consider the possibility that they are poorly organized to achieve this aim. But the question of who decides what is taught in school and the basis on which school values are determined is widely disputed. Many Americans believe that we already basically know what we want our children to know, we just have to devise better methods and structures for making sure all our children learn those things. New voices have been raised, however, that say some of the things worth knowing have never been taught in school. These are things relating to what children know already, and especially children of minorities and the poor, who have been less successfully schooled in the past than the middle class. These voices say that we will never achieve the goal of school success for everyone until and unless the knowledge the children bring with them is respected, and indeed taught to develop, in school. These voices have joined a national debate that has angered and even outraged many Americans of all colors and classes.

The anger and outrage, audible on all sides of the arguments about what to teach in our schools, comes from a recognition that the determination to help all children graduate from high school has crept up on us without having caused any major changes in what we teach. Many Americans believe that what we teach should not change, but simply be offered more strongly and cohesively so that more Americans can learn to participate in what makes us great as a nation. But many Americans, and particularly Americans of color who are distressed at their children's continuing school failure, believe that that failure has to do in part with school teachings that leave them out or despise them. These critics say that schools will never reduce the drop-out rate until they teach a curriculum more inclusive of all Americans. In order to achieve the goal of school completion for all, a curriculum revolution must take place that respects the children and their knowledge and includes that knowledge in the content of school. Yes, the multicultural-education advocates say, school needs to teach a stronger,