

Schooling for Democracy

Students need to understand that going to college is not the only valuable path they can pursue. Once they learn to respect other choices, they are on their way to participating in the kind of democracy Dewey envisioned, in which people from all walks of life work together for the common good.

By Nel Noddings



CURRENT efforts at school reform — ostensibly designed to increase equality of outcomes — may actually be undermining our democracy by undervaluing the wide range of talents required in 21st-century America. I contend that, instead of insisting on more and more standardization, we should be increasing variety, flexibility, and choice in what we offer in our schools.

A REALITY CHECK

Many policy makers today argue that all students should have a standard curriculum that will prepare them for “college or work.” There is little debate about how preparation for these very different futures might also differ. Instead, more and more schools (and even some whole states) now require all secondary students to take traditional academic programs. The idea is to combat “the soft bigotry of low expectations” and prepare all students for college.

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The irony here is that, where such bigotry existed, it still exists. But now it has been transformed into the bigotry of phony academic courses. Students are enrolled in, say, algebra, but the course they actually experience has only a vague resemblance to real algebra. When kids complete such courses, they have “algebra” on their transcripts, but they often have to take *pre-algebra* in a community college. They have not “had” algebra; they’ve gone through a pseudo-algebra course. Why? Because “these kids can’t handle a real algebra course.”

Sometimes there is bigotry involved in this kind of response, but often it is simply the truth. Lots of kids are neither prepared for nor interested in academic courses in mathematics. In trying too hard to keep such students from failing, conscientious teachers deliver a course largely devoid of genuine mathematics. A few imaginative, energetic teachers manage to pull some unprepared youngsters up to a respectable level of performance, but even the best teachers often sacrifice the quality of their courses to spare their students the experience of failure.

But it is this system — not the teachers — that is failing our kids. An enlightened school would spend time finding out what the students *are* interested in and providing relevant courses. Kids who are forced

into “rigorous” academic courses are doubly cheated: they do poorly in the required courses, and they are deprived of courses in which they might do well.

Do I seem to be defending tracking? Certainly, I’m not defending tracking as it has been implemented over the last century, but I enthusiastically endorse the concept. Schools should provide a variety of programs to address different needs, talents, and interests. Indeed, the comprehensive high school introduced in the early 20th century — for all its faults — made it possible to increase high school attendance from about 7% at the beginning of the century to well over 50% by mid-century. This was an unparalleled achievement in schooling.

Unfortunately, differentiated programs — that is, tracks — were conceived hierarchically; the “best” was the academic track, others were thought to be “lower,” and the vocational track was judged to be “lowest” of all. To make matters worse, students were tested or evaluated on the basis of elementary school grades and were then *assigned* to the tracks. Thus, much to our shame, students who had demonstrable talent in mechanics or business were shunted into courses that were often poorly conceived, poorly taught, and largely held in contempt. This way of treating kids had to end, but the answer should not have been the one we have chosen: force everyone into the track once deemed “best.”

I do not claim that all vocational courses have been of low quality. Many have been excellent.¹ It is clear also that most of the goals we now hold for values and attitudes can be included in vocational as well as academic courses. The courses to be eliminated or drastically improved are those that have been regarded as dead ends, as dumping grounds for students thought to be incapable of academic work.

Think how different it would be if students, with guidance and encouragement, could choose their own tracks and switch tracks if they felt they needed to. Think what school might be like if every course were challenging and well taught. The last two years of high school in a vocational/commercial track could be very much like two years of community college preparation for an occupation. Too many students now drop out (or are pushed out) of high school, and some who complete academic courses are not really prepared for college. Even some who complete college find themselves in jobs that do not require a college education, do not interest them, or both.

These observations lead us to another encounter with reality. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, most of the job openings in the next decade

will be in occupations that do *not* require a college education. Although it is true that fields in the “knowledge world” are growing rapidly, the actual number of jobs in those areas is still far lower than the number needed in the service sector. In fact, it is predicted that there will be about five times as many jobs in the service sector that do not require a college education as there will be in the rapidly growing area of technology. Among the occupations offering the greatest number of jobs today are retail sales clerks, cashiers, office clerks, janitors and cleaners, food preparation workers, laborers and material movers, and waiters and waitresses.

High school students should be well informed about the job situation. They should also learn something about opportunities in the trades and in tech jobs that require some postsecondary training. If what is now mainly confined to postsecondary training could be offered in high school, that would be even better. Kids would have good reason to stay in school, and they would graduate ready for decent jobs.

Critics of this plan object that high schoolers are not mature enough to make crucial decisions about their occupational futures. Suppose a boy chooses a vocational track, loses interest, and decides that he would like to go to college. Critics of differentiated courses react to the possibility as if the boy’s future is now hopelessly lost. The practical, ethical solution to this problem is to allow him to switch tracks. The decision might require as much as an extra year or two of high school, but that should be widely accepted. He is not being held back by punitive retention policies but by his own desire to gain more preparation. There is nothing sacred about the custom of finishing high school in exactly four years. We should also keep in mind that flexibility is a quality to be cultivated in the work force. Many people today change jobs often, and some make major moves across occupations. We can help young people prepare for the changing workplace by encouraging responsible choice and promoting the desire to continue to learn.

UNDERMINING DEMOCRACY

The idea that forcing everyone into a standard academic curriculum promotes democracy is highly questionable. It is not the idea of democracy celebrated by John Dewey and Walt Whitman. Dewey told us that democracy is “more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience.”² People from all walks of life, from all occupations, must work togeth-

er for the common good. We must find ways to communicate effectively with one another.

We live in an interdependent society. In many of my talks, I have recommended that teachers take their middle school students on a field trip around their own town or city. What do they see people doing? The students should return to the school with a lengthy list of occupations upon which we all depend. Then let the students hear at least part of Whitman's "Song for Occupations" — a lovely, ringing affirmation of everyday life and the people who live it.³ After hearing the poem, students might try writing their own (much shorter) songs to occupations. Whitman reminds readers of what it should mean to live in a democracy, of how we should value one another.

Too often in our schools today, kids hear the message (spoken or implied) that they should "go to college or be nothing." According to a recent front-page article in the *New York Times*, several urban school districts in the South have now proudly eliminated their programs that are not college preparatory.⁴ They are determined to prepare all of their students for college, even though they are having a hard time getting many of their students through high school. Advocates of universal college attendance contend that a college degree is necessary for admission to the middle class. If that were so, 75% of our current citizens would now be living below the middle class. The crucially important goal for today's urban secondary schools should be to keep kids in school until they get a diploma. With that diploma in hand, they may feel confident enough to pursue some form of postsecondary training — possibly, but not necessarily, college.

The message "Go to college" is sent with good intentions; it is meant to inform students that they can all "make it" if they work hard. But it is a nasty, anti-democratic message. It undervalues large numbers of our citizens who do work on which we all depend. Those kids who do not want to go to college are demeaned. Many who force themselves into college, though their talents lie elsewhere, will quickly drop out, and those who go to college and succeed may not appreciate the work and intelligence of those who do not go.⁵ Indeed, they may complete college with the notion that those who did not go had the opportunity and blew it. Their lower place on the economic ladder is, therefore, deserved. With an adequate education for democratic life, these privileged young people would understand that we live in a thoroughly interdependent society and that no person who works full time at an honest job should live in poverty. Instead of concentrating on this message, we divide our

kids into winners and losers and pretend that, by "preparing" them all for college, we can make them all winners. We are on the wrong track.

In our efforts to prepare students for life in a democracy, we put great emphasis on learning facts about voting, our institutions of government, and the history of our nation, but we do little to help them appreciate the sort of democracy envisioned by Whitman and described by Dewey. Dewey wanted us to perfect the arts of communication that sustain a democratic mode of associated living. If we can do this, he wrote, "democracy will come into its own, for democracy is a name for a life of free and enriching communion. It had its seer in Walt Whitman. It will have its consummation when free social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of full and moving communication."⁶

Dewey had in mind the full range of communicative arts — poetry, music, fine arts, literature, language, dance — and he tried to show how these can work with and contribute to social inquiry. If we were to take his recommendations seriously, we would stop stuffing facts into our students and give them time to investigate social/political issues, share their findings with classmates, and express themselves through the artistic mode of their choice. And notice that these activities can be done in vocational, commercial, or academic classes.⁷

Another move we should make to restore interest in democratic life is to expand the range of topics explored in each course. Many of us have discussed teaching the "whole child" at the elementary school level, but we rarely consider what this might look like at the high school level.⁸ Our teaching at that level should help students understand that there is more to life than earning and spending money. Adolescents need to explore and discuss such great existential topics as faith, immortality, happiness, love, character, suffering, and morality. By expanding the disciplines from within — yes, even math — we can address some of these topics.

Adolescents also need to consider important personal and social issues. We can hardly expect them to become critical thinkers if they are not invited to discuss controversial issues. Consider these: If young people join the military and engage in combat, might they lose their moral identity? How does this happen? Why are we so influenced by advertising? Why, even though we do not believe the message, does advertising work? Are the days of gender discrimination over? Should women continue to enter the "caring" professions? Why are those professions so poorly paid? Is re-

ligion a force for good or evil in the world? Why are outspoken atheist writers now so often on the best-seller lists? Do we have moral obligations to nonhuman animals? What are they? All of these questions and many others are central to the maintenance and enhancement of democratic life in the 21st century. They should be vigorously discussed in our high schools, for the young people in our schools will live the remainder of their lives in this new century.

There are also questions of everyday life that need to be addressed. What does it mean to make a home? Why should people be homeless? What do people suffer in exile? What is the meaning of friendship? How is it expressed? What do parents owe their children? What practices are considered best for parenting in a postindustrial society?⁹

The underlying idea of the comprehensive high school is worth preserving, analyzing, revising, and extending. The idea is to educate all adolescents, regardless of their eventual occupations, for life in a democratic society. We may — and I argue that we should — provide different courses to meet different needs and interests, but we should also bring students from different programs together in student government and in a wide range of extracurricular activities. Today, we give far too little attention to the possible contributions of extracurricular activities. In some cities, we provide magnet schools or schools that serve particular occupational interests, but this practice overlooks the importance of encouraging students with widely varying interests and talents to *work together* in governing their school, launching projects, and developing attitudes toward the healthy use of leisure time. And in doing so, we overlook the central idea of democracy as a mode of associated living.

Within each program, teachers and students should strive for excellence, but excellence should not be defined in terms of grade-point average or the number of Advanced Placement courses taken. Excellence is rightly defined in the context of particular endeavors, but it should be appreciated across the entire society. John Gardner had it right when he said:

An excellent plumber is infinitely more admirable than an incompetent philosopher. The society that scorns excellence in plumbing because plumbing is a humble activity and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy. Neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water.¹⁰

Gardner pointed out that there are many opportunities for postsecondary training and that “the young

person who does not go on to college should be enabled to look forward to just as active a period of growth and learning . . . as does the college youngster.”¹¹ But Gardner did not see it as the responsibility of secondary schools to prevent the hopeless feeling of failure that many students today experience in our high schools. Instead, he suggested, “What they must be helped to recognize is that there are many kinds of further learning outside of formal high school and college programs. The fact that they have not succeeded in high school simply means that they must continue their learning in other kinds of situations.”¹²

But youngsters who fail repeatedly in their school years are likely to reject opportunities for further learning. The task for us is to provide the variety of programs that will give the most kids a chance of achieving success, if not excellence. This will not be accomplished by forcing all students into academic programs regarded as prestigious. The current corruption of these courses is the very possibility that worried Gardner and should worry us all. It is shoddiness in an “exalted activity.” Not only should we admire excellent plumbers in our adult society, we must also respect the students who will become plumbers and offer them genuine educational opportunities. Not everyone needs to go to college, but everyone needs and deserves a genuine education.

1. See Mike Rose, *Possible Lives: The Promise of Public Education in America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995); see also W. Norton Grubb, ed., *Education Through Occupations in American High Schools*, 2 vols. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1995).

2. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), p. 87.

3. Walt Whitman, *Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982).

4. See Sara Rimer, “Urban Schools Aiming Higher Than Diploma,” *New York Times*, 17 January 2008, pp. A-1, 22.

5. On the intelligence of workers, see Mike Rose, *The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker* (New York: Penguin, 2005). See also Mike Rose, “Intelligence, Knowledge, and the Hand/Brain Divide,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, May 2008, pp. 632-39.

6. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: Henry Holt, 1927), p. 184.

7. See Nel Noddings, *When School Reform Goes Wrong* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007).

8. See the September 2005 special issue of *Educational Leadership* devoted to The Whole Child.

9. These questions are discussed in Nel Noddings, *Critical Lessons: What Our Schools Should Teach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

10. John W. Gardner, *Excellence* (1961; reprint, New York: Norton, 1984), p. 102.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, p. 103.



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