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## THE FUNCTION OF SCHOOLING: The Missing Question in Current Educational Discourse

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Why do we have schools? Why should Johnny or Mary or even Susie spend hours upon hours in buildings that look like factories but are called “schools?” On the surface it seems like such an innocent question; such a simple question with an equally simple answer. A question so rudimentary that most individuals currently “concerned” about our schools seem not to have noticed it, or perhaps they feel that the answer is so obvious it would be a waste of time discussing it. Most high school graduates can quickly tell us that the purpose of recent educational reforms have been designed to help young people such as themselves get jobs when they grow up. If this young person watches the evening news occasionally, she might also add that the function of schools and the recent wave of reforms is to help us (that is, the U.S.A.) insure our competitive edge against other countries.

I would like to take just a moment to suggest that we might benefit from re-opening the debate about the purpose of schooling in our society. Instead of advocating for this or that particular reform, I would like to argue that what is really needed during these complex times is for us, as NSRF Coaches and Facilitators, to re-cast the context within which we debate what should happen in our schools. Rather than situate this discourse within a purely marketplace context, as has been the case for the several decades, I propose that we begin to look at the education we want for our children within a democratic framework. Let me begin by taking us back to the turn of the century, a time when the notion of the “public school” took on new dimensions.

Although public schools in the United States gradually increased in numbers throughout the 19th century, they exploded across our country (particularly in our cities) due to the massive surge of immigrants that came to live in this land at that time. Thousands of people came to toil in our sweat shop factories and the coal mines that produced the energy needed to run an electrified society. With these immigrants came their children, and there was the problem. For several years the prevailing thought was to put these “little beggars” to work along side their parents. Eventually, the cruelty of this existence led to legal prohibitions against this practice, and schools became the solution to the problem of what to do with these children, more of whom were coming onto our shores and being born each day.

As schools were rapidly built to keep up with the population explosion taking place in our cities, a debate about the function of these schools began to emerge that, until recently, continued and, at times, thrived in our society. On one side of the issue were those who argued that schools should teach children what they would need to know in order to be “good workers.” After all, the reason “we” let these children into our country was because we needed the labor of their parents. It only seemed reasonable that schools should educate these children enough so that they could be even more productive workers than their



East Side Public Schools, A Class in the Condemned Essex Market School, ca. 1890. Photo used with permission from the Museum of the City of New York, Jacob A. Riis Collection

elders. Many schools were built with the expectation that there would be, thus, a “positive return” (a more productive work force) on the taxpayer’s investment. In particular, it seemed important to teach these children how to speak English; to read, write, add, subtract, multiply, and divide; and to follow directions. In addition, there was a call to inform these “dullards,” as they were sometimes called, what it means to be “an American.” Often called “civics,” this course of study was designed to minimize the value of their traditional ethnic heritages, and teach these children the innate superiority of “our” (masculine, Northern Euro-American) cultural traditions, values, and most importantly governmental and economic institutions. The argument was to drill children until this information and these skills were thoroughly memorized. Sound familiar?

On the other side of this debate stood those such

as John Dewey who warned of the dangers embedded in this narrow educational vision. These individuals argued that public schools should be established in order to help these children of immigrants learn what it means to live in a democracy. Since most immigrants came from societies that were more or less totalitarian and since these people were often used to living relatively “powerless lives” (they were often the victims of economic, social, and ethnic oppression), we needed schools that would teach these children how to participate thoughtfully, responsibly, and actively to participate in our democracy. It is important to note that these educators did not take the democracy that was currently being practiced in our society for granted. To the contrary, they saw room for significant improvements, and suggested that a truly democratic society never assumes that its democracy is complete. For example, Dewey argued that our so-

ciety should create a society based not only upon a “political democracy,” but also a “social democracy.” That is, democracy should be thought of as a way of life rather than just the participation of a minority of citizens in a ritual of voting that occurred every couple of years.

Throughout this century, the ideas of Dewey and his colleagues were often overshadowed by those who saw schools as sites for vocational training. However, within the last three decades this “marketplace” rationale has so completely dominated the public discourse that the notion of schooling for democracy has completely vanished from public consideration. Both Democrats and Republicans seem to only disagree on minor details of educational reform. The fundamental purpose for schools seems to be taken for granted, regardless of one’s political and social values. Americans have been willing to stand by, as if in a trance, while those in power conduct ideological surgery on our schools—cutting them away completely from any consideration of the relationship between democracy and education and graphing them permanently onto corporate and military interests.

Perhaps this surgery has occurred because we have heard much about economic globalism during the last decade; however, if we continue to move in our current direction, it is our democracy, not our economy, that will be in grave peril. One does not have to be a sociologist to recognize that our brand of democracy requires little participation or thoughtfulness on the part of the average individual, and yet the level of even this limited participation is dangerously low.

Our national leaders get elected to office in much the same way that soap finds its way into our homes—through slick advertising. We live in an age of “sound-bite” politics. Instead of engaging in discourses about substantive issues, the focus often degenerates into little more than “name calling.” Finding out if someone has slept with someone other than his or her spouse takes on greater significance than one’s visions and ideas for the country and the world in which we live. The quality of the political discussions among our population is worrisome to anyone who treasures democratic values.

Although many people blame the politicians or the press for this sorry state of affairs, it is us, the people of this country, who must take ultimate responsibility.

Slick advertising, mud slinging, sound-bites all work because as a nation of citizens, we allow ourselves to be swayed by these substitutes for substantive dialogue. Censorship, racial fears and hatred, poverty, and homelessness are increasing at alarming rates, while values of compassion and tolerance for diversity seem to be fading away in many sectors of our society.

The efforts to reform schools in the context of a marketplace rationale have resulted in many proposals such as legislating high stakes/standardized tests, creating corporate-run Charter Schools, requiring more homework, establishing longer school years, emphasizing math and technological sciences, and creating student voucher systems. At the same time, we continue to see children bored and alienated from their educations and teachers who are burned-out by all the paperwork required to “insure” Johnny has memorized his daily lessons.

What might school reform proposals look like if the goal was not tied to merely helping children get jobs or to successfully “out-compete” other cultures, but rather to make our country a more democratic society? What might schools look like if they stopped merely trying to raise children’s test scores on a single (standardized) test that is often given in an atmosphere of anxiety and fear, and instead dedicated themselves to creating educational experiences that would help students become thoughtful, caring, and active participants in the creation of a democratic culture?

Obviously, the answers to these questions would generate different images, ideas, and proposals based upon different ideological commitments. I am not suggesting that schooling for democracy would take on one particular form. There is no blueprint being offered. What I am suggesting is that if we, as Coaches and Facilitators, began to discuss the type of education needed to live in a dynamic and compassionate democracy, then I think we would find more viable solutions to the problems that our schools currently face. Who knows, perhaps we would once again begin to discuss, as the founders of our nation did long ago, what living in a democracy means.

**For comments or conversation about this article, Jesse and the NSRF may be reached at [goodmanj@indiana.edu](mailto:goodmanj@indiana.edu) and [nsrf@nsrfharmony.org](mailto:nsrf@nsrfharmony.org). We also invite comments on our [Facebook page](#).**