

Schooling for Democracy: A Common School and a Common University?

A Response to “Schooling for Democracy”

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ABSTRACT

This short paper is a response to Nel Noddings’s article on schooling for democracy. Whilst agreeing with the basic premises of Noddings’s argument, it questions the possibility of parity between academic and vocational tracks given the inequitable social and educational contexts the two types of learning would have to coexist within. Drawing on the educational philosophies of John Dewey and R. H. Tawney, I argue that both the United States and the United Kingdom need to create educational systems that reduce the social distance between people rather than, as the current systems do, exacerbate them. This is an issue of hearts and minds as well as policies and practices. As Dewey pointed out a hundred years ago, what is required is education that results in “mutual regard of all citizens for all other citizens,” and the paper concludes that both countries are still far away from achieving this.

There is a danger that vocational education will be interpreted in theory and practice as trade education: as a means of securing technical efficiency in specialized future pursuits. Education would then become an instrument of perpetuating unchanged the existing industrial order of society, instead of operating as a means of its transformation. The desired transformation is not difficult to define in a formal way. It signifies a society in which every person shall be occupied in something which makes the lives of others better worth living, and which accordingly makes the ties which bind persons together more perceptible—which breaks down the barriers of distance between them. (Dewey, 1916/2001, p. 325)

However, vocational education has a long history of stigmatization—stereotyped and devalued as education that is desired by and more suitable for children of the working classes. As a result, in Britain, it has always approximated Dewey’s “narrow technical trade education for specialised callings, carried on under the control of others” (1916/2001, p. 325), a form of apprenticeship rather than education. Unsurprisingly, attempts to upgrade vocational education have failed because the British middle classes have never countenanced it as appropriate education for their own children (Tomlinson, 2005). Despite a great deal of rhetoric about high-status vocational routes, policies have always been directed at the lower, and indeed lowest, achieving young people (Wolf, 2002). Any sort of parity between vocational and academic education would require a transformation in both what vocational education constitutes and who engages in it. While Nel Noddings is

DEWY’S VISION FOR democratic vocational education has never been realized, although, as Nel Noddings’s article (2011) makes clear, there is a pressing need to revisit the arguments for and against vocational tracks in schooling. Her thoughtful, reflexive, and at times provocative piece raises fascinating and timely issues about both the nature and the place of vocational education, and more broadly about what constitutes democratic education. In the United Kingdom, as well as in the United States, concerns are currently being raised about the appropriateness of an academic education for all children and the need for vocational training for those who are seen to require more practical learning (Hurst, 2011, p. 1).

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suggesting a very different version of what has traditionally been seen to comprise vocational education, I am less sure how her new *schooling for democracy* would result in a socially diverse group of students undertaking vocational education.

Where I do concur with Noddings, and Mortimer Adler, whom she quotes, is that the same schooling for all translates into inequality and injustice. Throughout my academic career, I have taught teacher-training courses and a regular refrain, particularly from new teachers, is, “I treat all the children the same,” as if the recognition of difference is in some way discriminatory. However, the recognition of difference that I encourage teachers to focus on, and then work to address, is not that of perceived differences of ability and aptitude but rather of children’s very unequal and unfair educational starting points.

Recently, the UK education secretary, Michael Gove, told a Conservative Party Conference that “rich, thick kids do better educationally than poor, clever children before they even get to school.” He went on to assert that “unfortunately, despite the best efforts of our society, the situation is getting worse” (2010). Over the course of schooling, these privileged middle-class children consolidate and even increase their educational advantage over their less advantaged peers (Lareau, 2003). One consequence is that the expansion of university education across the globe over the last twenty years has mainly advantaged the middle classes. Middle-class young people, whose dispositions and inclinations would not normally lead them into a university education, are disproportionately taking up the additional places, rather than Gove’s “poor clever children.” This raises troubling questions about selectivity and different academic routes. We are not talking here of natural inclinations and intrinsic academic dispositions but rather the manufacture of academic advantage through the, often privately funded, inculcation of academic skills and competencies. For example, in the United Kingdom, private schools are almost entirely focused on high academic attainment—they are educational powerhouses for churning out as many As and A-stars at A level as possible, and with 23% of the money spent on schooling going to the 7% of the school population who attend private schools (Sibieta, Chowdry, & Muriel, 2008), they produce students who are well placed to monopolize places in our top universities.

The fact that Michael Gove highlighted, that children come to school with very different levels of cultural and economic resources, does result in differential treatment but not treatment that can in any way be seen to resemble schooling for democracy. Often material and cultural disadvantages are taken to be coterminous with lack of academic potential, while their converse, material and cultural privileges, are seen to indicate intrinsic academic ability. It is the middle and the upper classes who are perceived to have the intellectual potential. Noddings quotes Charles Eliot’s assertion that “there is no such thing among men as equality of nature, of capacity for training, or of intellectual power” (Eliot, 1908, p. 13). But what Eliot’s words gloss over is the extent to which intellectual power, because of the far greater cultural and economic assets of the privileged in society, is culturally and educationally accumulated in the middle and upper classes, not

because they are naturally more intelligent but because they have more resources to enable that accumulation.

Against such an inequitable wider social context, differential treatment on the basis of perceived ability can easily become a form of what Bourdieu and Passeron call “class racism” (1979), the process by which the middle class’s socially determined taste for legitimate culture is passed off as a marker of inherent moral and intellectual superiority, and by extension, the working class’s inherent inferiority. But as a sociologist, I know intelligence is a social construction. Lareau (2003) brilliantly brought this to life in her study of the concerted cultivation of children’s academic success in American middle-class homes. I believe it is only when we address this glaring inequality, which is too often taken as an unchangeable given, that tracking in the form of vocational and academic streams becomes a good idea. Without a prior change in what has become a British, as well as an American, mind-set, the vocational will continue to be what the poor, the minorities, and the working class do, while the middle and upper classes continue their monopoly of the best of the academic. Dewey was concerned that in the absence of “a truly democratic society,” vocational courses would fail to be “liberative of imagination or thinking power” (1916/2001, p. 266). We need to reach a situation that we are still very far from, where tracks can be chosen on the basis of interests and inclinations, not social class and perceived academic ability. Then, ideally both vocational and academic courses will be mixed in terms of social class and ethnicity.

Part of the problem is that educational systems are only as good as the societies they emerge out of. Capitalist, neoliberal societies beget capitalist neoliberal educational systems. As Noddings thoughtfully points out, the road forward is rarely behind us. Basil Bernstein (1970) asserted that “education cannot compensate for society,” but schools that aspire to be “incubators of democracy” have a moral duty to try. A key issue is what type of democracy we are aiming for. Democracy in the 21st-century United States and United Kingdom is a pale shadow of what it could be, especially for and from the perspective of large swathes of the population—in particular, the young, the disenfranchised, and the despondent.

Most current understanding of democracy promotes formal equality in the image of an educational level playing field. However, this is the equivalent of flattening the field of bumps before a small neighborhood team takes on a professional one. As Bourdieu pointed out: “The formal equity that governs the entire educational system is actually unjust, and, in any society that proclaims democratic ideals, it protects privileges all the better than would their open and obvious transmission” (2008, p. 36). There is little surprise then that in both the United States and the United Kingdom, social mobility has ground to a halt (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2009; OECD, 2010).

In order to find a strong and socially just understanding of democracy, I have gone back to R. H. Tawney, the political philosopher of the 1930s and 1940s whom I studied over 40 years ago as an undergraduate. For Tawney, schooling for democracy required not only a common school but also a common university:

There ought to be a system of higher education which aims at, even though it cannot attain, universal provision, which is accessible to all who care to use it, and which is maintained not in order to enable intellect to climb from one position to another, but to enable all to develop the faculties which, because they are the attributes of man [sic], are not the attributes of any particular class or profession of man. (1964, p. 77)

As Tawney asserted, no class is good enough to do its thinking for another. To guard against an upper-class practice that has since become pervasive in the United Kingdom, Tawney argued for a broadening of the conception of a university “to admit as genuine university students those who are not studying for the purpose of any profession except that of a reasonable and humane conduct of life” (1964, pp. 83–4). An influx of people who are at universities because they actually want to learn can only be an improvement on a contemporary status quo where—like Nel Noddings’s angry young man, who saw only one reason for going to college, that of making more money—many current students see graduating from college primarily as a means to a good job.

Like Noddings, I dispute the valuing of the academic over the vocational. There is nothing inherently good or true about intellectual inquiry. In fact, a great deal of intellectual inquiry in the area of education has been compromised, complicit with an inequitable status quo it should be challenging. The academy, both in the United States and in the United Kingdom, is increasingly about economic and political ends rather than educational means, and that is the result, in part, of an academic culture that too often lacks intellectual courage and integrity to challenge imposing agendas that have little to do with schooling for democracy. Both countries have signally failed in creating the educational system Dewey envisaged would result in “a society in which every person shall be occupied in something which makes the lives of others better worth living . . . and breaks down the barriers of distance between them” (1916/2001, p. 325).

As Noddings points out, current university policies and practices are deeply problematic, in the United Kingdom as well as in the United States. I have now taught for a long period at elite universities, and my experience has taught me that we need to be aware of the limitations of intellectual pathways, particularly when they result in homogeneous groups of students learning together. And too often they do result in the development of critical learning skills in the narrowest sense of the term, accompanied by a lack of social awareness and ignorance of the lives of others. We only have to reflect on the political and financial crises that have beset many Western countries in the 21st century to understand the consequences of the lack of the social and political intelligence that we all need in order to contribute to the common good and the making of the good society.

But widening, or even maintaining, current levels of access to what, in both countries, are polarized systems, is not the answer; steeply hierarchical higher education sectors are no way to democratize education. Working-class and minority students are clustered in those universities at the bottom of the rankings. In the United Kingdom, the decade of the 2000s may appear to be

a success story in the attempts to widen access to college for working-class students, but that access has overwhelmingly been to new universities. And just as many comprehensive schools in the United Kingdom were demonized as “bog-standard” for having large cohorts of working-class students, so have these new universities. The “massification” of the higher education sector (Trow, 2006) has resulted in the reproduction of the UK school system’s highly polarized and segregated hierarchy, with those new universities with sizable cohorts of working class students languishing at the bottom of the rankings, while the elite universities, with equally sizeable numbers of privately educated students, are perched at the pinnacle.

In neither country is there much evidence of Dewey’s “fellowship” or Tawney’s “learning from others” across social class lines. Rather, less advantaged and poor students become educational “outcasts on the inside” (Bourdieu, 2008): just as they have been for decades in the two countries’ schooling systems. Credential inflation has meant many of those working-class young people, who 20 years ago felt they needed to stay in school through their teenage years, now feel that a university education is essential if they are to get a good job. US President Barack Obama claimed in 2010 that “education is the economic issue of our time,” and my concern is that any prioritizing of the vocational over the academic that is not part of a much wider social justice agenda will become yet another way of economizing education.

Rather than accepting the current common-sense belief in intrinsic class differences of vocational versus academic dispositions, I want an intervention more in keeping with Bourdieu and Passeron’s rational pedagogy (1979) where, instead of postulating the formal equality of students, policies and practices take into account cultural inequalities between students. This, they assert, focuses on making the transmission of knowledge more successful and thereby truly democratizes education. For them, such a pedagogy has yet to be invented and is not to be confused with existing ones, which, having only psychological foundations, underpin and serve an educational system that fails to recognize social differences.

A revalorizing of vocational and working-class knowledge and a broadening out of what constitutes educational success beyond the narrowly academic are long overdue.

But that requires far more than the reestablishment of separate vocational and academic tracks. It needs a revaluing and respect for what those in the working class have traditionally done alongside a recognition of their potential to do very different things, if provided with adequate support. This is what Noddings is advocating when she evokes a Whitmanesque vision of democracy, but we don’t gain a sense of how this change in hearts and minds might be encouraged, let alone achieved.

I have written recently (Reay, 2011) of what a socially just education system looks like. I argued that in Finland, having an educational system in which virtually all children enroll in identical comprehensive schools, regardless of class background or personal abilities and characteristics, has resulted in schools and classrooms that are heterogeneous in terms of pupil differences and diverse in terms of educational needs and expectations

(Valljarvi, 2003). Yet, at the same time, schools are very similar in pupil profile to each other. The difference between schools is minuscule compared to those in countries like the United Kingdom and the United States. For example, in 2006 Finland had a tenth of the between-school variance found in the United Kingdom. It is this parity of value and esteem across schools that has led to a culture of educational inclusivity that is absent in the increasingly hierarchical and segregated systems in the United States and the United Kingdom. And that is the ethical conundrum—a highly individualized, strongly neoliberal country like either the United Kingdom or the United States would not be able to set up separate vocational and academic tracks, like a number of European countries have established, with reasonably similar parity of esteem. Rather, as in the past, immediately a hierarchy of worth would be established. A major problem in the United Kingdom has been that all the activities and practices associated with the working classes have automatically been assigned a lower value and deemed to be inferior (Skeggs, 2004). This, as I touched on earlier, is a question of hearts and minds as much as it is pedagogy and educational policy. As I have argued elsewhere (Reay, 2005), in the United Kingdom class seeps into every soul, creating divisions between people that are not nearly as pronounced in the Finnish context. That is why the Finns have managed to create an educational system where the commonalities among students are emphasized and the differences downplayed.

To achieve schooling for democracy, in the sense of creating a system where differences become relatively unimportant because there are not enormous inequalities between people and where the emphasis is on what students share, would be a massive—many would say impossible—undertaking in the UK context. It is not merely a question of totally rethinking and overhauling the educational system but more important, of changing the national psyche. And despite all the differences among British, and I would add Americans, what we appear to share across class, gender, and ethnicity is a deeply troubling propensity to tolerate intolerable levels of economic inequalities and the educational injustices they give rise to. In contrast, schooling for genuine democracy recognizes and addresses cultural and social inequalities among students and takes a central role in creating “a society permeated by mutual regard of all citizens for all other citizens” (Dewey, 1916/2001, p. 311). We are miles away from this. But, even more concerning, we are not even venturing along the road.

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