

# Schooling for Democracy

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## ABSTRACT

There is a widespread movement today to prepare all students for college, and it is promoted in the name of democracy. I argue here that such a move actually puts our democracy at risk by forcing students into programs that do not interest them and depriving them of courses at which they might succeed. We risk losing the vision of democracy that respects every form of honest work and cultivates a deep appreciation of interdependence.

**S**HOULD ALL CHILDREN go to college? There are those who insist that the current dedication to preparing all students for college is inspired by democratic ideals. I will argue here that such a move actually puts our democracy at risk. We risk losing what might be called the Whitmanesque vision of democracy—a democracy that respects every form of honest work, includes people from every economic and social class, and cultivates a deep understanding of interdependence.

## Conflicting Views on Democracy and Education

One view, made popular by Mortimer Adler, holds that democracy requires equal education for all children through high school, and by *equal* Adler meant *the same*. He wrote:

*We should have a one-track system of schooling, not a system with two or more tracks, only one of which goes straight ahead while the others shunt the young off onto sidetracks not headed toward the goals our society opens for all (1982, p. 5).*

Adler's objections to tracking have been echoed by many educational researchers and writers today, although some—perhaps most—do not advocate the specific one-track curriculum he prescribed. In the discussion that follows it will be important to distinguish between two senses of *tracks* and *tracking*. In one sense, when we talk about tracks, we refer to different programs such as academic (or college preparatory), vocational/industrial, and commercial. I will offer a strong defense for this form of tracking. In a second sense, we refer to the practice of assigning students to classes composed by ability groups. I won't say much about this form of tracking here, but I will suggest that, if the first form were

wisely designed and implemented, the second form could be reasonably recast in terms of interest rather than ability.

Current writers who oppose tracking (both forms) make a powerful argument, and it is almost frightening to suggest that they may be mistaken (Nieto, 1999; Oakes, 1995; Spring, 2000). I argue that the idea of providing different programs (or tracks) for different talents and interests is a good one, fully compatible with social justice. It is the implementation of the idea that has gone badly wrong. I agree wholeheartedly with the opponents of tracking who claim that poor and minority students have been shoved into dead-end courses and, thus, deprived of anything close to equal opportunity. But different programs need not differ in quality, and forcing everyone—regardless of interest or talent—into one program is hardly democratic.

The concern that I want to explore in some depth was well expressed early in the twentieth century by Charles Eliot, when he was president of Harvard. He warned:

*If democracy means to try to make all children equal or all men equal, it means to fight nature, and in that fight democracy is sure to be defeated. There is no such thing among men as equality of nature, of capacity for training, or of intellectual power. (National Society for the Promotion of Industrial Education, 1908, p. 13)*

The point that I want to emphasize builds on Eliot's comment that "democracy is sure to be defeated." The comment is

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particularly interesting because Eliot's defense of different tracks and electives represented a sharp turnaround from his earlier advocacy of the classical education recommended by the Committee of Ten (which he had chaired). During the period from about 1890 to 1910, there were strong voices urging that high school education be extended to all children. This seemed necessary to many for two reasons: first, the enormous influx of immigrants created a need for increased citizenship education and second, the nation was moving away from an agricultural economy toward one based on industry. To produce good citizens and workers the country needed to expand education. But there were equally strong voices warning that many children were simply not capable of the academic work that defined high schools—classical academies—of the time.

Both groups were right. Democracy demanded the extension of secondary schooling to all children and most children were at that time incapable or uninterested in the traditional secondary education. What was to be done? The answer was ingenious: the comprehensive high school was created. The public was persuaded that this new school would offer useful courses that would help graduates to get jobs in the new industrial society and not just studies for future professors, preachers, and enlightened housewives. The comprehensive high school, denigrated by traditionalists then and now, made American education a model for the world. High school education grew rapidly. By 1970, the high school graduation rate had climbed to more than 75% from its 1900 mark of 6%. This was a remarkable achievement.

Complaints against the comprehensive high school never disappeared, but they were stronger in some years than others. In the period following World War II, the objections raised against progressive education (and the comprehensive high school) reached a high point. Echoing the Committee of Ten, Arthur Bestor claimed that all students should follow the sort of program laid down by the Committee, and he made his recommendations with reference to the demands of democracy. He vigorously denied that intellectual capacity was somehow lacking or diminished at lower economic levels (Angus & Mirel, 1999; Kliebard, 1995). The purpose of the school, he insisted, was to promote intellectual growth. Everything else should be subordinated to this goal. As we have noted, Mortimer Adler argued anew for the same claim thirty years later.

Without denying that intellectual growth is an important aim of education, we might respond to Bestor and Adler that other aims are equally important and that the achievement of intellectual goals is closely related to—perhaps even dependent on—the achievement of these other aims. Further, we might object to defining intellectual content as Bestor and Adler did—as a set of traditionally defined subjects long thought to be central to college preparation. Notice that we may agree with Bestor and today's opponents of tracking that intellectual capacity is not confined to one socioeconomic group, race, ethnicity, or gender, but still insist that talents and interests differ across individuals. And we might also insist that the *intellectual* should not be narrowly defined in terms of traditional subjects such as algebra or history. So much hinges on this that we must address it directly if briefly.

## Confusion Over the Intellectual

John Dewey made it clear repeatedly that no subject is inherently more intellectual than another (1916), and I have also made that argument in several places (Noddings, 1992, 2003, 2007). If we identify the intellectual with thinking, the algebra taught in schools is not inherently more intellectual than cooking or motorcycle repair. Calvin Woodward made the argument even before Dewey, referring to young workers in a forging-shop as “young Vulcans, bare-armed, leather-aproned with many a drop of an honest sweat . . . They are using their brains and hands” (Kliebard, 1999).

Today, Mike Rose has reminded us that thinking and doing are mutually supportive, tightly connected activities. No useful activity or preparation for an occupation involving hands-on work need be simply manual labor; such work can be taught and learned intelligently, and classroom discussion can move beyond specific doings to matters of citizenship, mutual respect, and prospects for a satisfying personal life (Rose, 1995, 2005). Rose connected his discussion to the meaning of democracy and the centrality of respect in a growing, evolving democracy. In such a democracy—we might call it *Whitmanesque*—honest workers are worthy of respect. One should not need a college degree to earn respect (Dewey, 1927, p. 184).

We should note, however, that Rose has recently expressed concern that his appreciative appraisal of the *mind at work* might be used to launch a renewed effort to direct minority and low-SES students away from college preparatory courses and into vocational programs. I share that concern, and I'll say more about it a bit later. But I have an even greater concern and that centers on the high school dropout rate. We may comfort ourselves by bragging that we now prepare all students for college, but we lose a huge number before high school graduation. Keep in mind also that my enthusiasm for vocational education rests on two essential premises: first, that we will get to work seriously in creating rich and relevant vocational programs and, second, that we will provide extensive counseling and mentoring services so that students can make intelligent choices of program. If those premises are denied or ignored, I might unhappily join my antitracking colleagues and do my best to stuff algebra into everyone. Well, no, as an old math teacher, I probably couldn't go that far. But I would roll up my sleeves and work with enlightened math educators to create a college-acceptable substitute for traditional algebra (Hersh & John-Steiner, 2011; Jacobs, 1970).

Whatever we devise by way of courses and programs, our products should be intellectually rich, and we should make it clear that the truly intellectual is closely related to the moral. In contrast to both those who identify the intellectual with some form of pure thinking and those who sharply separate the intellectual from the moral, Matthew Crawford insisted that the two are intimately connected:

*Any discipline that deals with an authoritative, independent reality requires honesty and humility. I believe this is especially so of the stochastic arts that fix things, such as doctoring and wrenching, in which we are not the makers of the things we tend. (2009, p. 100)*

In describing the intellectual dimension of a good mechanic's work, Crawford sees a set of virtues that connect that worker to the moral world of reality. The motorcycle mechanic must identify possible alternatives in his recommendations for repair, consider his client's resources and the purposes for which the client intends to use the motorcycle, and report honestly on his analysis.

Miles Horton, too, in his work at Highlander School, saw the connection between the intellectual and the moral. Working, hiking, thinking, Horton struggled with the ideas of communism and socialism. He struggled with pacifism and its limits in advancing the good. He was clearly a well-read intellectual, but he built his life and work with working-class people and, like Paulo Freire, he believed that social justice must be achieved "with people from the bottom, who could change society from the bottom" (1998, p. 44).

It is worth mentioning also that the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce claimed a moral base for intellectual-scientific work. A scientist must be dedicated to the truth if he or she is to find it, and science requires commitment to continued inquiry. Thus, genuine intellectual inquiry rests on a moral foundation. One does not shut out objections to one's own position but renews inquiry in an attempt to resolve the problem and get at the truth (Thompson, 1963).

Some might argue that there are lines of work—in the financial world, for example—that do not seem to rest on a moral base and yet require vigorous mental activity. But, clearly, any work that has possible effects on the well-being of others has a moral dimension. We can recognize the mental acuity of financial wizards who betray or ignore the welfare of others, but we should hesitate to label their machinations as intellectual. Perhaps it is a matter of linguistic choice. Should we think of Professor Moriarty as a wicked intellectual or as a mental genius whose intellectual development was impaired?

In that spirit, we should admit that there are respectable thinkers who argue strongly that the intellectual is often rightly detached from the moral and even from empirical reality. The mathematician G. H. Hardy is said to have declared (bragged?), "I have never done anything 'useful'" (Newman, 1956, p. 2026). Hardy (knowing that his proclaimed uselessness was nonsense in the eyes of the world) described himself as a maker of patterns composed of ideas. The patterns, he said, must be *beautiful*, and the significance of a mathematical theorem lies not in its practical consequences but in its beauty and seriousness. For Hardy, the *intellectual* cannot be identified with the trivial even if the trivial is called *algebra*. This reminds us that the intellectual has an aesthetic dimension. When there are no obvious real-world or human consequences of the work in question, judgment of its value focuses on its effects on the field of study and/or its beauty.

Some scientific work, separated from the empirical world, would pass both Peirce's moral test (truth is scrupulously pursued) and Hardy's aesthetic test (the results are beautiful and advance the field), but induce moral consternation when connected to the real world. Consider the moral agonies of Einstein, Oppenheimer, and other scientists involved in the development of the atomic bomb.

We should also recognize that intellectual work varies with respect to the objects it treats. Some intellectual work is done

entirely with ideas and symbols; it does not require the body's physical participation. Other intellectual work demands the cooperation of mind and body. Traditionally, we have made the mistake of thinking that only the first sort of activity is properly called intellectual. Far worse, however, we have wrongly supposed that any sort of activity done at a desk (or computer work station) is necessarily more intellectual than work done with the hands and body in motion. In fact, much white-collar work performed in cubicles is routine, sometimes mind-numbing (Crawford, 2009).

It is probably correct, however, that subjects, activities, and occupations offer a range of potential intellectual challenge. Usually, we consider as intellectuals those people who enter a field that requires devotion to thinking and working with ideas and symbols. Such work is not always directed at a specific, useful outcome. It involves a substantial amount of play, and it grants ardent participants considerable delight. Hardy was being honest (if incorrect) when he said that he had never done anything useful. As educators, we should help students to understand that intellectual work (work with ideas) does indeed offer intrinsic rewards, but we need not elevate this work above all other forms of work that require varying participation of the intellect.

We must also admit that some jobs are essentially mindless and even demeaning. Digging ditches, cleaning toilets, scrubbing pots, picking beans all day, every day, are not jobs likely to engage the intellect. Utopian writers have long recognized the difficulty of reconciling economic justice and respect with the demeaning, boring nature of some necessary work. Writers as different as Edward Bellamy and B. F. Skinner have explored the idea of utopian societies in which such work is shared by everyone so that no one person need spend his or her full work week in hard, dirty, mindless labor (Bellamy, 1897/1960; Skinner, 1948/1962). Others have suggested that people who do this undesirable but necessary work should be paid correspondingly more for their sacrifice or that employers be compensated for hiring more low-wage workers (Phelps, 1997).

As we plan for the future of secondary schooling, we should abandon the notion that vocational and commercial education are intellectually inferior to traditional academic subjects. Some students—for a variety of reasons, all of which should be examined sympathetically—will land in the jobs no one would choose, but the outcome should not be an accepted result of what we provide in schools. Every course offered by our schools should be rich in intellectual, moral, and aesthetic content (Noddings, 2007).

## Economic Concerns

Today, the most frequently heard argument for a single, traditional track does not emphasize the intellectual content, but I've spent some on it because it has been so important in the past and may be revived in the future. Instead, the main argument for preparing all students for college is economic. It is claimed that individuals who earn college degrees can expect higher lifetime earnings than those who do not, and that the nation needs more college graduates if it is to remain competitive in the world economy. The first claim is generally true, but there are many exceptions. Recent studies have shown that, given the high cost of college, it takes many years

before some graduates begin to show even a small edge in lifetime earnings, and some never do. On the second, it is not at all clear that increasing the number of college graduates will automatically increase our national competitiveness. Instead, we need to educate people well for the work they will do.

It is foolish to suppose that our economic competitiveness depends on the number of college graduates we produce. We have learned recently that China is suffering from an overload of college graduates, and many young Chinese are unable to find work commensurate with their education. It seems likely, too, that the lower rate of unemployment among college graduates in the United States is due at least in part to their acceptance of jobs that do not require a college education.

In many of the most prosperous European countries, high-quality vocational education and training (VET) are deemed essential:

*Countries with strong VET systems have a different conception about learning for jobs. They make a distinction between a calling or occupation and learning the specific skills needed to weld or solve banking problems or manage the IT system in a corporation . . . Work is related to active citizenship and thus education and training needed for work are seen as the joint responsibility of the government and what are called nicely the “social partners” (employers and labor unions). (Hoffman, 2010, p. 1)*

American educators and policymakers should renew the conversation about “callings,” finding work that is satisfying in itself, and the connections among intellectual, moral, social, and aesthetic ideals.

In a recent letter to the editor, an angry man complained that he could no longer compare his income with professional workers. Now, he wrote, he could barely stay even with police and firemen. He ended his bitter comments with this question: Why did I go to college? Apparently, he saw only one reason for going to college—to make more money—and he is not alone in this thinking. We encourage it in our schools today.

The present emphasis on preparing everyone for college may also have an entirely different sort of economic motivation; it may not be driven entirely by a mistaken democratic commitment to social justice. Good vocational education is far more expensive than the usual college preparatory course of study. It requires more space, expensive equipment, smaller classes, a specially trained faculty, and a commitment to add new equipment regularly. It is far less expensive to place all students in regular academic courses whether or not such placement suits them. Even if we provide extra help to assist students in passing these courses, we are still ignoring their present and long-term interests. We feel justified in claiming that we have provided equal opportunity when in fact we have hurt many students doubly: We have forced them into studies at which they do not do well, and we have deprived them of courses at which they might succeed. As a result, many do not graduate from high school, and even those who do may wind up in jobs by default instead of by choice. They may well believe that they are doing this work because they are not good enough for anything else.

## Toward Democratic Equal Opportunity

It is reasonable to put aside claims that children are intellectually deprived if they do not receive a college preparatory education. On the contrary, we should recognize that many students today are indeed intellectually short-changed by the academic program forced on them. Many students suffer algebra courses that bear little resemblance to the algebra that might make it possible to study further mathematics. These unfortunate students—and their number seems to be increasing—have *algebra* listed on their transcripts, but they have learned so little that they must start all over in community college. It is not necessarily the case that their teachers are at fault. Indeed, many teachers present weak courses because they do not want their students to fail, and they know that the students would in fact fail more rigorous courses. Thus, they concentrate on teaching well-defined skills and facts—material Whitehead (1929/1969) called “inert ideas”—and omit the material essential to understanding. The intellectual is washed out.

We are now at a point very like the one educators and policymakers faced in 1900. Should we prepare all children for college? Why? When a similar question was raised in 1900 about high school attendance, advocates had good answers to the question. How are we answering it? One answer (heard from our current president and at least one past president) is that we should be first in the world in the production of college graduates. Why? We should press this question and invite vigorous debate. For example, do we really need more scientists? At present, we hold many young PhDs in near servitude for years because there is no room for them in either the academic or the industrial hierarchy. The frequently voiced intention to be number one has become a peculiar American mania. We would do better to concentrate on the *quality* of our graduates at every level.

I think we should respond to the current question in much the same way that Eliot and others argued in the early 20th century. They endorsed secondary education, but they redefined it. I am not arguing against postsecondary education—only against defining it in terms of a traditional college education. Further, those who can profit from *postsecondary* education must first complete *secondary* education, and many more might do so if they were given an opportunity to study material relevant to their interests and talents. Schools today claim to offer equal opportunity by forcing all students, regardless of interests, into the same curriculum. This does not meet a democratic criterion for equal opportunity. In a genuine democracy, choice is fundamental, and democratic education should provide opportunities for intelligent, guided choice.

Some thoughtful critics of the approach I suggest object that teenagers are too young to make decisions that may affect their futures dramatically. However, I am not suggesting that young students be allowed to do as they please without guidance. And, in agreement with colleagues who wish to end tracking, I am opposed to *assigning* youngsters to tracks. The choice must be made collaboratively: counselors sharing what is revealed by tests, grades, former teachers’ comments, and records; students sharing their hopes and dreams for the future. By *counselors* here

I mean teachers, parents, and community mentors, as well as professional counselors; such counseling should begin early and be continuous. Moreover, if a student insists on enrolling in the college-preparatory program despite a poor prognosis, he or she should be allowed to do so. Every effort should be made to find a program suited to the student's talents, interests, and willingness to persevere. John Dewey spoke on the need for this forward-looking, reflective process:

*To find out what one is fitted to do and to secure an opportunity to do it is the key to happiness. Nothing is more tragic than failure to discover one's true business in life, or to find that one has drifted or been forced by circumstances into an uncongenial calling. (1916, p. 308)*

A choice made at the level of high school should, of course, be reversible. These days, middle-aged workers often change their professions, and teenagers should certainly be supported in doing so. We should rethink the idea that all high school students must graduate in four years. The point is not simply to go straight forward to a better-paying job but, more important, to find work with which one can feel productive and reasonably content.

Charles Eliot feared that democracy would be the loser if we insisted on forcing all students into the same college-preparatory curriculum. He was right. By doing this, we ensure that either the courses will become weaker or many children will fail them. This is not because many children are incapable of good thinking or because teachers have low expectations for them. People are different, and we all do our best thinking in areas that interest us. Intellectual challenges can be introduced into any well-taught subject. Instead of working toward creating rich, relevant, and intellectually challenging courses in every program, we have endorsed the notion that a subject is automatically intellectually rich if it has regularly appeared in the traditional curriculum. When children do poorly with that curriculum, they may feel like failures, and when they fall into occupations by default, they may believe it is because they were not good enough for something better. That is the risk to democracy we invite by insisting that equal opportunity means the same curriculum for all.

John Gardner put it clearly in *Excellence*. He too extolled the value of continued education, but he argued that this “does not mean sending everyone to college” (1961, p. 97):

*But scaling down of our emphasis on college education is only part of the answer. Another important part of the answer must be a greatly increased emphasis upon individual differences, upon many kinds of talent, upon the immensely varied ways in which individual potentialities may be realized. (1961, p. 99)*

Schooling consonant with genuine democracy not only recognizes differences. It respects and appreciates those differences. Walt Whitman saw all this clearly. In his beautiful “Song for Occupations,” he expressed admiration and even awe at the enormous variety of work being done around him. In lines ringing

with a celebration of “ordinary” people, he wrote, “the sum of all known value and respect I add up in you whoever you are,” and then after praising old institutions, the Union, and the Constitution, he wrote:

*I do not say they are not grand and good—for they are,  
I am this day just as much in love with them as you,  
But I am eternally in love with you and with all my fellows upon the earth. (1982, p. 93)*

Whitman reminds us here that democracy is not entirely defined by principles and processes. It is fundamentally, as Dewey said, a mode of associated living (1916, p. 87).

As we think about shaping our schools to promote genuine democracy, we might consider vocational schools similar to those in Germany and the Scandinavian countries. They have been highly effective, but there are two possible drawbacks to this arrangement: One is the practice of assigning students to these programs instead of allowing guided choice as I've suggested here. Another is that placing young people in separate buildings, often miles apart, undermines the possibility of making the school-place into a living democracy. Democracy is more than a set of practices, as Dewey and Whitman pointed out. The very best, small comprehensive high schools in 20th-century America provided real opportunities for students from different programs to act together in music, art, clubs, athletics, and student government. It is probably impractical to build and maintain such schools today. We can get ideas from many times and places, however, without trying to reproduce exactly what others have done. The road forward is rarely behind us. The question for us is how to create schools that will serve as incubators of democracy.

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