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## Criticizing the Schools: Then and Now

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**Abstract** Schools in many countries are facing intense and elevated levels of criticism, with much debate over whether the criticism is merited. Much of the criticism embodies a view that things used to be better years ago, when schools were not prey to the many defects they are alleged to show today. Recollections of the past may hide a mixed reality. In this article, criticisms of education from 1957 are compared with contemporary criticisms. Some issues have remained important across forty years, while a few new issues have emerged. Criticisms of forty years ago centered on the dominance of "professional educationists," progressivism, the life adjustment movement, the waning "spirit of competition," lax discipline, the lack of emphasis on classical and modern foreign languages, avoidance of science and math, the neglect of gifted children, the lack of training of children in moral and spiritual values, and low academic standards. Today's debates introduce the alleged test score declines, poor performance on international achievement comparisons, the supposed enormous increase in funding without positive results, the problem of high dropout rates, and the need to connect schooling and work. In addition, modern critics point to economic concerns, whether in terms of funding for education or in regard to the contribution of schooling to economic development.

Educators are facing intense and elevated levels of criticism. Scholars debate whether the criticism is merited. The "pages" of the *Education Policy Analysis Archives* have themselves been a site for this debate on a number of occasions (e.g., Vol 1 No. 2; Vol 4 No 10, and the exchange between Lawrence Stedman and David Berliner in Volume 4, numbers 1, 3 and 7). Much of the criticism embodies a view that things used to be better years ago, when schools were not prey to the many defects they are alleged

to show today. However, recollections of the past may be subject to a golden glow that hides a mixed reality.

A couple of years ago my colleague Hal May at The University of Manitoba retired after a long and productive career. Hal had amassed an impressive library of material in educational administration which he was busy trying to pass on to others--some to our Faculty library and other items to individuals he thought might make use of them. Among the pieces Hal gave me was a small pamphlet issued by the National Education Association in 1957. It was a Research Bulletin (Vol. XXXV, No. 4) from December, 1957, entitled "Ten Criticisms of Public Education." The authors were not identified, although the report lists Sam Lambert as director of research for the Association. The Research Bulletin was published three times per year for a subscription of \$3 per year. (Prices are one thing that has changed since 1957!)

The NEA publication began with these words:

Criticisms of public education in lay magazines and other publications have increased many fold in the past 10 years... . The initial step in counteracting destructive attacks and in utilizing valid criticisms for the improvement of public education is an objective appraisal of each criticism. (p.1)

The report authors selected ten published charges that appeared most frequently in a selection of 30 lay magazines from July 1954 to June 1957. For each of the ten, it gave a brief description of the charge and cited evidence and arguments to the contrary. Here are the ten charges that the NEA research group identified. Unlike the supposed list from the 1940s of 'ten worst problems of the schools' that Gerald Bracey debunked in the *Phi Delta Kappan* in 1994 (Bracey 1994), this list does have a documented source. Each statement of a criticism began with "some people say" or "critics say"; otherwise they are quoted exactly as written forty years ago.

1. ...the public schools are controlled or dominated by 'professional educationists' of schools of education, school superintendents, 'experts' in the state departments of education, 'specialists' in the US Office of Education, and the national organizations of educationists.
2. ...John Dewey and 'progressive education' have taken over the public schools and that this philosophy of education is the chief cause of the crisis in education.
3. ...the life adjustment education movement is replacing intellectual training with soft social programs in most public- school systems.
4. ...the spirit of competition, an important incentive for learning, has been eliminated by the 100 percent annual promotion policy and the multiple-standard report card.
5. ...lax discipline in the public school is contributing to the increase of juvenile delinquency.
6. ... the teaching of classical and modern foreign languages is disappearing from the secondary schools.

7. ...high-school students, even the bright ones, are avoiding science and mathematics; fewer students are taking these courses now than 20 or 30 years ago.
8. ...the public schools are neglecting the gifted children because they are geared to teaching the average child.
9. ...the public schools are neglecting the training of children in moral and spiritual values.
10. ...the academic standards of schools of education are low: their programs of study are of questionable value, and the intellectual qualities of their students are the poorest in the universities.

The report went on to try to show how each of the charges was unjustified--not that the public schools were perfect, but that the issues were complex and the situation not nearly as bad as the critics were claiming. The report cited a range of data--for example, scores on college entrance tests--as well as studies by such luminaries as Lewis Terman, Robert Thorndike and James Bryant Conant. Many of the responses in the NEA report seemed similar to those being made today in reply to many of the same criticisms--that achievement levels were better than the media reported, that schools were trying to respond to extremely diverse student needs, that the serious problems were relatively few in number, that schools did stress moral values, that teacher education programs did attempt to impart appropriate skills, and so on.

Struck by the degree to which criticism of the schools seems unchanged from forty years ago, I decided to look more closely at how the criticisms and responses of 1957 actually did compare with those of 1997. To do this I reviewed some recent sources: the work of Diane Ravitch (1985, 1995; see Apple, 1996, for a review); Chester Finn (1991); E.D. Hirsch (1987); John Chubb and Terry Moe (1990). I also reviewed the work of some of the best known defenders of public schools, such as Gerald Bracey (1994, 1997), Richard Jaeger (1992) and David Berliner (in Berliner and Biddle, 1995) to see what they took to be the main criticisms being made. I made a similar review of Canadian sources--critics such as Mark Holmes (1992) and Andrew Nikiforuk (1993) as well as defenders such as Maude Barlow and Heather- Jane Robertson (1994). Finally, I examined a number of government and interest group reports on education in both countries, since these often embody criticisms of the current state of the schools.

Looking more carefully at the nature of the criticism of schools and the responses to it raised two issues. First, while some of the criticisms of schools being made today are very similar to those of 1957, others are new. The similarities and differences raise questions about the origins of criticism of schools. Second, reading criticism of schools over several decades raises questions about the nature of the debate over education, and especially the role of evidence. If the same issues surface again and again, does evidence matter? Does the debate itself matter? Is anybody listening? Without claiming to have any answers to these questions, I offer the following observations.

## **Criticism Then and Now**

Certainly some of the criticisms on the 1957 list are still current. For example, reforms to governance in England and New Zealand were justified in part on the basis of excessive influence by professional educators; what is now called "provider capture." Teacher unions are often accused today of having undue influence and stifling reform because of self-interest. Another variant on this theme has to do with the supposedly baneful influence of school district bureaucracies, as argued by Chubb and Moe, or as a motive for the Chicago reforms of a few years ago. School-based management in some of its variants is also defended as moving authority to parents and/or teachers in the school, where real knowledge about problems and solutions is thought to reside.

Other points on the NEA list also continue to resonate in current debates. Progressivism remains a point of attack for many, such as Diane Ravitch (1985) in the U.S.A. or Mark Holmes (1992) in Canada, who argue that the move to child-centered education has resulted in lower standards. A number of critics--such as Diane Ravitch and E. D. Hirsch--are strong proponents of a purer academic mission for the school and less focus on "soft social programs". Despite strong evidence that retention in grade is ineffective, social promotion remains a controversial issue, and retention is still frequently supported by parents and teachers (Oakes, 1992). While the phrase "juvenile delinquency" has gone out of use, concerns about levels of violence in and around schools are high. *A Nation at Risk* cited low rates of enrolment in foreign languages, science and mathematics as very serious concerns, and concern about science and mathematics achievement has continued to be a prominent issue, taken up in many policy reviews and reform programs. Recent Canadian curriculum reforms have included greater time allocations for these subjects. Attention to the gifted also remains an issue. The U.S. Department of Education has recently issued reports dealing with this issue (Department of Education, 1996) and with the importance of science and mathematics (Department of Education, 1997). Finally, debate about teacher education continues, with many efforts in the U.S.A. on this front such as the work of the Holmes Group and efforts to create various state or national standards and licensing vehicles. Several provincial governments in Canada have also identified teacher education as a reform issue (though their proposals tend to be rather vague as to what the problems are). England also made dramatic changes in teacher education, moving much of the activity away from post-secondary institutions and placing it under the control of schools.

## **How Consistent Is Criticism of Schools?**

In many respects, then, the issues of 1957 are also the issues of 1997, suggesting that criticism is eternal--and perhaps, by implication, not very meaningful. Those who think that the golden age was forty years ago (when they were young?) would surely be disappointed by the NEA's report. One suspects that the NEA authors little thought that their research would be as relevant in 1997 as it was four decades ago. have made the same point; Bracey and Berliner (in Berliner and Biddle, 1995) have both cited many earlier instances of criticism of schools going back to the early years of this century.

But that continuity is not the full story either. The debate in 1997 also includes some issues that were not on the agenda four decades ago. These include, most prominently, alleged test score declines, poor performance on international achievement comparisons, the supposed enormous increase in funding without positive results, the problem of high dropout rates, and the need for a stronger link between schooling and

work. These issues feature prominently in current debates and are absent or muted in the 1957 NEA list.

The criticisms of the 1990s also have some very different preoccupations from those of the past, even when some of the specific manifestations are the same. Economic concerns, whether in terms of funding for education or in regard to the contribution of schooling to economic development, are central today and were much less so, it appears, forty years ago. Arguments for more language study or science education seemed then to be framed in terms of an image of the classically educated person; today they are framed in terms of the need for economic competitiveness.

The Argentinian writer Jorge Borges once wrote a story ("Pierre Menard") about a man in Argentina in the 1930s who had written a book that was word for word the same as *Don Quixote*. Borges wrote in the story that the two texts are "verbally identical but the second is almost infinitely richer." When Cervantes wrote such and such a phrase in the Spain of the sixteenth century, it had one meaning whereas when it was written in Buenos Aires in the 1930s it clearly carried associations from Nietzsche or William James or Bertrand Russell, who of course could not have influenced Cervantes! Borges was anticipating, perhaps, the postmodern view that a text takes on a new meaning when read in a new context. It does seem that concerns about such matters as the state of the gifted or the importance of values education can have quite a different significance in the current climate of economic insecurity and fear.

## Diverse Critics

Lists of criticisms also distract us from the important observation that the critics are not all of one view. Some attack schools as being insufficiently traditional, while others regard them as insufficiently modern. Some think that schools should emphasize traditional academic pursuits while others seek a greater focus on specific workplace skills. Various commentators on the changes in education in England under Margaret Thatcher, for example, all note that the Conservatives themselves did not agree in their analyses of what was wrong with schools and what should be done to improve them (Lawton, 1994). Some were free-enterprisers who advocated market-based solutions while others were traditionalists who wanted a return to supposedly successful policies of an earlier era. Similarly, traditionalist critics such as E.D. Hirsch have quite a different analysis than do those focused on the economy, such as Marc Tucker or Willard Daggett. Are Christian conservatives really expressing a similar view to the National Governors' Association when each talks about the problems of standards in education?

Schools have also been subject to criticism from the left, or from non-conservative positions. For example, schools have been criticized for promoting or sustaining inequality, for failing to pay enough attention to diversity, and for inadequate concern for issues of social justice. A powerful example that affected my own early perceptions of schooling was work done in Toronto arguing that students from particular ethnic or economic backgrounds were being tracked into low-achievement programs.

In fact, many of the present defenders of schooling spent substantial earlier portions of their careers criticizing schools (Power, 1992). Many of the critics of neo-conservative education policies, who now defend schools as vital to maintaining equity, were themselves at one time highly critical of schools for failing to address social and economic inequities. In fact, there continues to be a vocal group of commentators who focus on the failure of schools to address problems of poverty and racism, although

their voices are often lost in the much louder criticisms over standards and morals. Perhaps lists of criticisms actually hide a great deal of variability in the critics' analyses of schools. If so, such lists do not help us think clearly about the situation of and prospects for schools.

## **The Nature of Debate and the Role of Evidence**

A second concern that grows out of an historical look at the debate over schooling has to do with the role of evidence in shaping our thinking.

The 1957 NEA report marshaled a considerable amount of empirical data in its attempt to refute charges against the schools. But the 1997 debate is much more evidence intensive. Not everyone relies on empirical evidence, of course. Where criticism of schools arises primarily from a religious or other value orientation, empirical data may play a much smaller role. But in reading the work of the critics and defenders of schooling, one cannot but be struck by the wide-ranging use of data. To take just one example, the debate about whether or not achievement levels in the United States have actually declined has featured many sophisticated competing analyses of several different data sources (e.g., Bracey, 1997; Stedman, 1996, 1997). Similarly, the argument about the impact of resources on achievement has involved a great deal of analysis of a large number of studies (Hanushek, 1994, 1997, also see the review by Gintis, 1995; Burtless, 1996).

All the evidence, however, does not seem to have resolved the arguments. In fact, more extensive evidence can have the effect of contributing to even more cynicism, as some people find the seemingly endless argument about the numbers reminiscent of the old saw that there exist prevaricators of three types: "liars, damn liars, and statisticians." Teachers and policy-makers may wonder whether research can ever inform policy and practice since even with much more evidence, the disagreement remains as heated as ever. Does research help? Does it matter? Does anyone really care about the data, since the same conclusions seem to be repeated by the same actors whatever evidence may be adduced? The role of evidence in resolving policy debates is a much-examined question (e.g., Anderson & Biddle, 1991; Stone, 1988). The consensus of current opinion would seem to be that evidence is only one factor in such matters--that issues of values and ideology are at least as important as evidence and may well shape what people are able or willing to see as evidence in the first place.

But we should not be too discouraged by this analysis. Empirical evidence may not answer all the questions for us, but it can help us answer some of them and think more deeply and more clearly about others. The ability of physically disabled students to learn in regular classrooms is no longer debated, largely because of conclusive evidence. In Canada, French Immersion programs (in which Anglophone students do almost all their schooling in French) were hotly debated in the 1970s and 1980s, but have been shown to be successful in developing academic skills in both languages.

Other issues are more controversial and thus less likely to be resolved by evidence. But here, too, over time evidence helps frame the debate. So, while debate continues about the value of tracking and streaming, the disproportionate placement of minorities in less challenging streams is agreed to be an aspect of the debate that requires attention. While arguments rage about comparative achievement levels, there is broad agreement that the simple tests of years ago are inadequate to assess the things that really matter. There may be no agreement on the importance of additional funding in promoting achievement, but there is growing acceptance that gross disparities in funding

across schools and districts are undesirable. In almost every area of education policy, ideas have changed at least in part because of evidence.

Moreover, the search for evidence is itself a valuable activity, and one which reinforces the best ideals of education. Indeed, evidence-based arguments about policies are one of the main ways in which a society can learn, and so are especially important to encourage (Lindblom, 1990; Majone, 1989). The fact that critics and defenders of schools alike feel that it is vital to marshal evidence to support their position can be regarded as a step forward--a recognition that dogma is not enough and that there is at least the possibility of subjecting disparate ideas to a test whose legitimacy is widely upheld. For much of human history, disputes in viewpoint have been resolved through isolation or through violence--we avoid or conquer those who disagree. Debate, even if it is acrimonious, can be seen as an important human achievement. In another context, Nicholas Burbules and Suzanne Rice (1991) have written eloquently about the importance of "dialogue across difference." Nobody should be surprised that fundamental differences in values are not quickly resolved through evidence, but we should all be pleased that evidence is seen to be important and at least in principle accepted as a basis for bridging differences.

## **Conclusion**

Schools will always be the subject of intense criticism for at least two reasons. First, society's goals for schools are extremely ambitious. In an important sense, schooling is about perfection. We hope that our schools can do everything--shape young people who are thoughtful, productive, articulate, considerate, knowledgeable, patriotic, worldly, idealistic, realistic, challenging, accepting, critical, loyal. We expect our schools to teach our children knowledge, skills, and values, but also to overcome the same social problems that we as adults have been unable to solve--to reduce poverty, to build the economy, to save the environment, to include the excluded, to look after oneself and care for others, to overcome materialism.

Second, people do not agree about which of these goals are most important or about how any given goal is best accomplished. Some want to stress individual excellence and others, social equity. Some emphasize traditional academic learning and others want to focus on the emerging needs of the economy. Some may value most patriotism and loyalty while others give priority to independent thought and critical thinking. It is no accident that most lists of goals for schools contain a large number of items that are not always mutually consistent. And the growing diversity in our society, coupled with the growing recognition of the importance of diversity, makes the challenge steadily greater as we struggle to develop a common institution that is also able to accommodate difference (Levin & Riffel, 1994; Riffel, Levin & Young, 1996).

Schools cannot achieve all the things we want from them, and they cannot satisfy all the expectations we have of them. They will inevitably be the objects of criticism. And the more important our goals for schools are, the more intense the criticism is likely to be. The paradox here is that criticism is actually a sign of respect. I've had occasion to remind school administrators that the increased willingness of parents to challenge school policies and practices is an indication of the success of education. After all, we hope that schools will help people learn to define, articulate and work for what they hold to be important. We should be pleased when they do so, even if it makes our lives harder. If people thought schools unimportant, they would not take the time to argue about their achievements and shortcomings.

Rather than frustration and despair over criticism, then, we might benefit from seeing criticism as an opportunity--a chance to create discussion about things that are important, to help us achieve the vital educational task of learning to live together even with all our differences. Certainly criticisms can be unfair, mischievous, or even malevolent. Defenders of public schools should continue to speak out and to bring to bear arguments and evidence in support of their views. But we will all benefit insofar as we can see debate as having the potential to move us in a desirable direction.

What do we learn, then, from looking at criticisms of education today and forty years ago? We learn that some issues remain important and new issues emerge. We learn that our ability to define, understand and debate issues is imperfect. We learn that the schools probably face an impossible task. But we also learn that people care about education, that evidence and reason can make a difference, and that the struggle for better education remains a vital enterprise.

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