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Anti-Intellectualism in U.S. Schools

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Abstract:

In this essay we present an argument about the relationship between schools' intellectual mission and their role in advancing social justice. In providing an argument of this sort, we claim neither to present a comprehensive review of literature nor to analyze specific educational policies. Rather, we bring together findings about certain features of schools in the United States that we believe contribute to their anti-intellectualism. This examination allows us to tell a story about schools that we think needs to be told; and it also elaborates a frame of reference from which to reconsider schools' mission and practice. Reframing these bases of schooling may be a necessary prelude to educational policies that promote both intellectual and egalitarian outcomes.

Anti-intellectualism

Schools in the United States claim to have an academic mission; but despite this claim, they are neither particularly successful at--nor interested in--cultivating intellect. This criticism of schools is similar on the surface to the conservative view of contemporary schools: that they are not "accountable" and, as a result, fail to furnish the political economy (i.e., business and government) with the sorts of workers that it needs in order to stay "competitive."

But that critique is quite different from the one we plan to elaborate in this essay. In our view schools do not fail the political economy by poorly accomplishing their academic mission.

Rather, they serve the political economy precisely because they ignore the core part of that mission, the nurture of intellect.

Our view of how schools serve the political economy is similar in some ways to the analysis of critical theorists like Bourdieu and Passeron, Apple, and Giroux. We use some of this analysis to elucidate our argument; however, we differ on several points. First, we do not reject the substance of the Western literary canon, even though we recognize its instrumental role in expanding the prerogatives of upper classes and thwarting those of lower classes. Second, though we see that school success serves as a kind of cultural capital, we do not believe that supposed high-status knowledge per se forms the basis of this capital. In our view, public schools do a poor job of conveying high-status knowledge even to the children of middle and upper classes, even when those children demonstrate unusual aptitude for such learning. Finally, we do not believe that the immediate mission of schools is to transform society. Instead, we believe that schools should cultivate the intellect of all children. Since intellect entails critique, we believe that the intellectual activity of many such children will impel them to question the structural elements of society that condition the oppression of some.

We can clarify the distinction between the conservative critique and the one presented here by comparing what the conservatives typically imply by the term "literacy" with what we mean by the term "intellect." Conservatives use "literacy" to mean competence in basic skills (such as reading and math computation) and technological skills. By contrast, the informed reasoning that we term "intellect," depends on a broader interpretation of literacy. The type of literacy that informs intellect is expansive, enabling individuals to define personal values within a cultural context. Eisner (1983, p. 50) captures this sense of literacy:

By literacy I mean the generic process of securing and expressing meaning within patterned forms of expression.... The virtue of these forms, what I call "forms of representation," is that each makes a particular form of experience possible. It is through that particularity of experience that meaning is secured and expressed. Without the necessary literacy, the meanings these forms contain cannot be experienced. Insofar as education as a process is concerned with the expansion and deepening of meaning, the neglect of these forms or inadequate attention to them will leave the students graduating from our schools semi-literate, unable to avail themselves of the meanings that might otherwise be theirs.

Informed by literacy of this type, intellect is also expansive in that it seeks greater understanding. Moreover, intellect is also inherently critical (see e.g., Paul, 1986). Like Hofstadter (1963, p. 25), we believe that intellect is .. "the critical, creative, and contemplative side of the mind ... intellect examines, ponders, wonders, theorizes, criticizes, imagines ... Intellect evaluates evaluations, and looks for the meanings of situations as a whole."

If intellect is by nature expansive and critical, then schools whose mission is to promote essential literacy for immediate, practical use would do well to ignore or even actively suppress intellect. According to this line of reasoning, such schools, and the educators who work in them, would be true to their mission if they were to debase the type of academic learning that nurtures intellect. We doubt, however, that any group of educators could very well take such a stance openly: it would mark them for the just scorn of the public. Common sense, after all, suggests that schools are places for learning; and "learning" appears to reference an intellectual mission. Consequently, even educators who favored a curriculum dedicated to long-term servitude in the basic skills could not publicly disparage schools' intellectual aims. Instead, these educators would endorse such aims while at the same time blaming others--children, parents, state agencies--for producing a climate that makes such goals difficult to accomplish.

But do schooling and the political economy whose interests it serves (and to whom, therefore, it must be held accountable) function to suppress intellect? To answer this question

one must construct a coherent argument that accounts for the relevant evidence. We identified three types of evidence that seemed most relevant to the question.

The first type of evidence derives from critical theories of sociology. These theories suggest that the mission of schools is to reproduce the economic and power relations of society in order to serve the interests of the ruling classes. By accepting this interpretation, one can explain schools' apparent interest in promoting academic learning: such learning functions as the medium through which the benefits of schooling (i.e., skills, knowledge, and credentials) are distributed differentially on the basis of students' class, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. If schools were to function in this way, as these critical theories suggest, empirical studies would reveal differential patterns of school performance and differential benefits of schooling in accordance with students' background characteristics. This finding would not, in itself, demonstrate schools' failure to foster intellect. Instead, it might reveal their efforts to suppress the intellect of most students while cultivating the intellect of an elite few. Later in this essay we will consider this possibility and the research that addresses it.

A second type of evidence that bears on the question of schools' academic mission concerns the academic characteristics of teachers. As the translators of the aims of schooling into daily practice, teachers have a determining influence on its outcomes. If, for example, teachers were to interpret the academic mission of schools as disciplined study of the liberal arts and sciences, they would do what was required to cultivate intellect. By contrast, if their interpretation were more narrow, conceiving academics as the collection of essential skills and facts, they would emphasize mastery of some discrete body of knowledge to the ultimate detriment of intellect. The conditions that dictate teachers' collective interpretation, are, in part, characteristics of teachers themselves. Their predisposition toward academic study doubtless has a substantial influence on their daily translation of its scope and method.

But even if research demonstrated that most teachers were not intellectuals and that schooling for most students did not cultivate the intellect, it would still be possible that schools valued intellect enough to cultivate it among an elite few. The third type of evidence suggests this possibility. It illustrates schools' approach to the education of academically gifted students, those whose aptitudes make them most amenable to an intellectual education.

If this evidence confirmed that such students receive an education that nurtures their capacities for critical reasoning and inquiry, then we might conclude that schools do, at least in some cases, cultivate intellect. This finding would suggest that schooling in the United States is not fundamentally anti-intellectual in character and intent. In fact, it might indicate just the opposite: that schools so value intellect that they guard its supply, distributing it sparingly to those most deserving. If, however, the evidence indicates that schools fail to cultivate intellect even among those students whose giftedness predisposes them to intellectual endeavors, then schools might properly be classified as anti-intellectual. Before drawing any conclusions about the intellectual character of U.S. schools, however, it is important to examine the three types of evidence that bear on the question.

The Mission of Schools

Although universal public schooling is usually justified on the basis of egalitarian aims, its benefits are hardly distributed equitably among students from all types of backgrounds. Schooling, in fact, seems to provide a mechanism for distinguishing among students, in part by identifying differences in their academic performance. More importantly, however, schooling sorts students into different instructional groups--roughly comparable to the social groupings of their parents--for the purpose of providing them with different types of education (see e.g., Oakes, 1985; Spring, 1976).

Bowles (1980, p. 125) explains this process:

1. schools have evolved in the United States not as part of a pursuit of equality, but rather to meet the needs of capitalist employers for a disciplined and skilled labor force, and to provide a mechanism of social control in the interests of political stability;
2. as the economic importance of skills and well-educated labor has grown, inequalities in the school system have become increasingly important in reproducing the class structure from one generation to the next;
3. the U.S. school system is pervaded by class inequalities, which have shown little sign of diminishing over the last half century; and
4. the evidently unequal control over school boards and other decision-making bodies in education does not provide a sufficient explanation of the persistence and pervasiveness of inequalities in the school system. Although the unequal distribution of political power serves to maintain inequalities in education, the origins of these inequalities are to be found outside the political sphere, in the class structure itself and in the class subcultures typical of capitalist societies.

This argument, though compelling, competes with another--perhaps equally compelling--argument: that schools sort students not primarily on the basis of their class and race backgrounds, but solely on the basis of their academic aptitudes. This alternative argument offers a seemingly just rationale for schools' practice of providing different students with preparation of varying types. By applying a professional technology, educators prepare students to assume suitable roles in the work force. The schools' differentiated curriculum works fairly and efficiently to produce the stratified work force that business, industry, and government require. Such an argument justifies inequalities in the distribution of the benefits of schooling by claiming that the disparate benefits are the incentives on which a meritocracy depends.

These reasons for sorting students might be credible and even fair under certain conditions. They would be credible if schools could, in fact, identify children's aptitudes accurately and if childhood aptitude were a reasonable predictor of adult success. They would be fair if the varying occupational roles for which students were prepared had more or less equal status or, at least, if all students of equal ability had equal access to the most prestigious roles. A review of the relevant literature, however, suggests that none of these conditions applies.

Judgments about students' academic aptitudes. First, research shows that educators frequently make incorrect judgments about students' academic aptitudes. This research (see e.g. Good & Brophy, 1987; High & Udall, 1983; Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1982) indicates that teachers tend to estimate more accurately the academic capabilities of attractive, neatly dressed children from middle class backgrounds and underestimate the capabilities of other types of children: unattractive, poorly dressed children or children from lower class and minority-group backgrounds. Even when educators base their judgments on measures of aptitude or achievement that purport to be objective, they may not be able to identify real differences among students. According to Oakes (1985, p. 10),

differences that appear to be substantial according to test results may, in fact, be relatively minor given the universe of knowledge or skill the test purports to measure ... the differences in actual (not measured) ... achievement, then, may be relatively quite small. And yet we are willing to judge a student's level of achievement and, consequently, determine the kind of education he or she is provided on the basis of these test scores.

Childhood aptitude and adult success. A second body of research that helps us evaluate the meritocratic argument provides evidence about the relationship between childhood aptitude and adult success. According to this research, aptitude alone does not predict adult success. Rather, aptitude has some influence on the amount of schooling an individual obtains, and the amount of

schooling has a considerable influence on status and earnings. Jencks and his associates (1972) found that the strongest correlation between schooling and earnings was not that between childhood IQ and earnings, but that between years in school and earnings.

Another indication of the weak association between academic aptitude and occupational success is the considerable overlap in the IQ scores of individuals from occupational groups as different in status as lawyer and cashier. Roe's (1956) research, for example, showed that IQs among lawyers ranged from 95 to 160 whereas IQs among cashiers ranged from 85 to 155. Clearly, variables other than IQ are operating to determine which individuals become lawyers and which become cashiers.

Differential reward for adults. A third body of research provides findings about the rewards of different occupations. A review of this research allows us to determine the fairness of schools' sorting practices. If the research shows that sorting results in a division of labor in which the various occupational roles are rewarded equally, then sorting practices--even if not wholly accurate--might be said to be fair.

The research, however, shows just the opposite trend. Not only is there a large difference in the remuneration provided to different types of workers, but the differences appear to be increasing in magnitude (see e.g., Leontief, 1982; Thurow, 1987). According to Apple (1987, p. 64).

It is estimated that in 1985 a poor family was at least 5 percent less well off than in 1981, while a middle-class family was 14 percent better off. A rich family showed a 30 percent gain in its already large advantage. These figures, even if taken by themselves, indicate a marked redistribution of income and benefits from the poor to the rich. They are made even more significant by the fact that the middle class itself is actually shrinking as the numbers at the extremes grow. We have more and more a "double peaked" economic distribution as the number of well-to-do and poor increase.

Even considering these findings, sorting might be construed as fair (i.e., as meritocratic) if it afforded individuals with equal measured abilities equal access to the most highly rewarded occupations. Nevertheless, the research that addresses this question shows the reverse trend. Individuals with equal levels of education and similar social class backgrounds, but differing levels of IQ, are likely to attain similar levels of economic reward. By contrast, individuals with equal adult IQ but differing SES and levels of education are unlikely to attain similar rewards (Bowles & Gintis, 1973; 1976). According to Olneck and Crouse (1979, p. 24), "the vast preponderance of inequality in schooling, occupational status, and earnings has no relationship to differences in measured cognitive ability."

Inequality in the benefits provided to equally capable--but culturally different--individuals is demonstrated dramatically by a comparison of the incomes of black and white college graduates (Althausen, Spivack, & Amsel, 1975). These individuals were matched on the basis of their GPA, family SES, and the selectivity of the college that they attended. Even considering these similarities among the students in the two groups, their average incomes differed markedly. Race alone appeared to have an important influence on the economic success of these equally capable individuals.

In summary, we find that the research simply does not support the meritocratic rationale for schools' practice of sorting students. Instead, it seems to provide clear evidence that schools sort students for the purpose of recreating in each generation the economic stratification of the previous generation. Although individual students may use their educational attainment as a way to escape the economic lot of their parents, the majority of students do not find that schooling offers a very promising avenue of social mobility.

The alternative to the meritocratic argument. Given this evidence, what might we conclude

is the real purpose of the academic curriculum? Critical theory offers a reasonable answer. Proponents of this line of inquiry suggest that the purpose of the academic curriculum is to transmit the culture, knowledge, and prerogatives that enable dominant groups in the political economy to make their views of the world acceptable to virtually everyone and, thereby, to insure their continued domination (Apple, 1982). The process by which schools promote this ideological hegemony of dominant groups results in what critical theorists term, "cultural reproduction" (see e.g., Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

According to this view, cultural reproduction is made possible because schools provide the arena for students from different class backgrounds to engage in conflicts over academic benefits (such as grades, honors, and credentials) that are symbolic of class conflicts over economic and political benefits (see e.g., Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, 1979). This symbolic struggle distinguishes those who are academically successful from those who are academically unsuccessful, a process that reinforces and legitimates the competitive principles of capitalism. At the same time, the process shows students of all class backgrounds that certain ways of speaking and acting (i.e., certain types of cultural capital) are more likely than others to influence the outcome of conflicts over academic benefits.

Schools, however, not only provide the site for symbolic class conflicts, they also help to create the basis for such conflicts by legitimizing certain types of knowledge and discrediting other types of knowledge (Apple, 1979; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985). These processes occur overtly in the determination of what constitutes school knowledge. According to Apple (1979, p. 45),

the problem of educational knowledge, of what is taught in schools, has to be considered as a form of the larger distribution of goods and services in a society. It is not merely an analytic problem (what shall be construed as knowledge?), nor simply a technical one (how do we organize and store knowledge so that children may have access to it and "master" it?), nor, finally, is it purely a psychological problem (how do we get students to learn "x"?). Rather, the study of educational knowledge is a study in ideology, the investigation of what is considered legitimate knowledge ... by specific social groups and classes, in specific institutions, at specific historical moments.

This view suggests that certain types of knowledge acquire value because they are included in the adopted curriculum; but knowledge of particular types also acquires value because of the role it plays in promoting the goals of the "hidden curriculum." Through the hidden curriculum, students learn patterns of behavior that implement certain class-related expectations. These patterns of behavior distinguish students who are compliant and receptive to academic learning (and therefore likely to succeed) from those who are non-compliant and unreceptive to academic learning (and likely to fail). In addition to the seemingly more objective differences in levels of academic achievement, these noncognitive differences among students serve as another basis for schools' practice of sorting students into different instructional groups.

Since, as we have seen, schools exist primarily to sort students according to their background characteristics, they have a vested interest in seeing that a large percentage of students do not acquire academic competence, let alone develop intellect. Teachers may, however, work to counter this mission. Evidence of teachers' intellectualism would demonstrate their capacity to take on such a project and might, in fact, indicate their role in promoting school outcomes that subvert--rather than support--the cultural reproduction that schooling intends. Research about the intellectual characteristics of teachers is, therefore, important to our understanding of the ways in which schools promote or suppress the development of intellect.

The Intellectualism of Teachers

Even though some scholars make efforts to engage practicing teachers in active processes of inquiry (see e.g., Glickman, 1990), teachers rarely seem to act like intellectuals. One indication of this characteristic of teachers is their relatively low performance on measures of academic competence. Another indication is their generally limited interest in scholarly activities. These characteristics, however, may be unfairly attributed to teachers. An alternate reading suggests that the climate of schools conditions the routine compliance of teachers and limits their intellectual curiosity and productivity.

Teachers' academic ability.

Several studies (e.g., Schlechty & Vance, 1981; Vance & Schlecty, 1982; Weaver, 1978, 1979, 1983) document the low standardized test scores of prospective teachers. These studies indicate that high school seniors and college students who intend to major in education exhibit lower academic achievement than those who intend to major in other subjects. Additionally, these studies show that the recent rate of decline in the scores of prospective teachers exceeds the rate of decline in the scores of other college students. By comparison with the scores of students majoring in other fields, the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores of prospective teachers are quite low and continue to drop. Prospective teachers' scores rank lower than those of prospective nurses, biologists, chemists, aeronautical engineers, sociologists, political scientists, and public administrators.

In addition, there appears to be a negative correlation between teachers' academic ability and their tenure as teachers. Research comparing those teachers who stay in teaching and those who leave (see e.g., Schlechty and Vance, 1981; Vance & Schlecty, 1982) indicates that academically talented teachers are much more likely than less talented ones to leave the classroom. According to Levin (1970), many academically capable individuals give up teaching in order to pursue careers that more generously reward their talents. Levin's interpretation blames the poor economic rewards of teaching for the outflow of talented teachers, but one might also blame the anti-intellectual culture of schools. After all, the de-skilling of teaching (see e.g., Apple, 1987) is as likely to be a cause of the outflow of talented teachers as it is to be a consequence of it.

We need to be cautious, however, in using this evidence alone to judge teachers' intellectualism. Academic competence as measured by standardized achievement tests is not the only condition for the exercise of intellect. We know, for example, that many academically talented individuals use their talents to pursue practical rather than scholarly occupations (see e.g., Hofstadter, 1963; Katchadourian & Boli, 1985). Therefore, it might also be the case that some relatively low-achieving individuals choose to engage in scholarship rather than in other sorts of work. Public school teaching might, according to this logic, provide such individuals with the opportunity to pursue their academic interests. This may be especially applicable to economically disadvantaged individuals, whose academic achievement may not reflect their aptitude and interests and for whom the ease of entry into colleges of education may offer an opportunity to qualify for a job that is secure (Lortie, 1975).

Considering this possibility, it makes sense to look for research that examines the academic interests of teachers. There is no body of research, however, that directly addresses this question; but related research of two types enables us to infer some answers. One type of related research evaluates the course-taking of prospective teachers; and another type considers teachers' reading habits and preferences.

Teachers' academic interests.

Research that evaluates the types of college courses that prospective teachers complete provides an imperfect reflection of the academic interests of such individuals. Most college

programs include particular sequences of required courses, and many programs leave little room for students to choose electives. In spite of these conditions, however, we suspect that individuals who have compelling academic interests would be likely to promote those interests by taking higher-level courses in areas of interest; and we also suspect that individuals who complete few higher-level courses in any field probably have limited interest in academic scholarship.

A recent content-analysis of college transcripts provides the basis for comparing the course-taking of prospective teachers with that of other college students (Galambos, Cornett, & Spitzer, 1985). This study found that prospective teachers took fewer liberal arts courses than did their counterparts in other arts and sciences majors. In addition, the teachers took fewer upper division courses in subjects other than pedagogy. According to the authors, "teachers, as compared to arts and sciences graduates, take fewer hours in mathematics, English, physics, chemistry, economics, history, political sciences, sociology, other social sciences, foreign languages, philosophy, and other humanities" (Galambos et al., 1985, p. 79). These patterns appear to indicate that prospective teachers do not often make a special effort during their college years to pursue advanced study in fields other than pedagogy.

These findings address the question of teachers' academic interests quite indirectly; and, perhaps, they better describe the nature of curricula in teacher education than they do the interests of teachers. Another body of related research, however, provides more direct evidence about teachers' interests. This research considers the reading habits and preferences of teachers.

For several reasons, measures of teachers' reading are appropriate indicators of their scholarly interests. First, reading is, by its nature, an intellectual act, requiring the reader to reflect on what is written and construct meaning from it (see e.g., Friere & Macedo, 1987). Readers tend, therefore, to be more reflective and more critical than nonreaders. Second, reading provides access to content that is available nowhere else. Since text is such an efficient means of storing ideas, it is the medium most often used for that purpose. People who are concerned with ideas (i.e., those with academic interests) must frequently encounter text in order to compare and contrast their ideas with those of others. Finally, reading provides entry to the intellectual forum in which scholarly dialogue takes place. As a consequence, those who read widely in a field are more likely than others to make a significant contribution to that field.

Taking these features of reading into account, we believe we are justified in considering the frequent reading of literature in an academic field as a necessary (if not sufficient) condition for scholarship. Moreover, we find that the types of books and periodicals that a person reads provide evidence of the nature and intensity of that person's academic interests. With these premises in mind, we turn to the research on teachers' reading habits and preferences.

Studies of teachers' reading show two consistent patterns. First, they show that teachers do not read very much. Duffey (1973), for example, found that--on average--teachers read 3.2 books during the year preceding his study. He also found that approximately 11% of the teachers that he surveyed said that they had not read a single book during that year (Duffey, 1974). Another study, however, found that teachers seem to read a bit more: 8.5 books per year (Roeder, 1968 cited in Ilika, 1974). This amount of reading was not much greater than the amount done by other middle class individuals, who read--on average--8 books per year. Using a different method of measuring the quantity of teachers' reading, Vieth (1981) found that 34% of the teachers in her sample spent less than one hour per day reading.

The second pattern that this research reveals is teachers' overwhelming preference for popular rather than scholarly or professional literature. According to Duffey (1974), nearly 69% of the teachers in his sample who were reading a book at the time of the survey were reading a popular book. Of those who were reading about education, most were reading books intended for the general public.

Teachers' journal reading reflects similar trends. Cogan and Anderson (1977), for example, concluded that teachers spent very little time reading professional journals. A survey conducted

by Koballa (1987) showed that middle school teachers of life science most often selected practical rather than theoretical journals about science or science teaching. In fact, many of these teachers ranked *Science World* as one of the two journals they found most helpful. This finding disturbed the researcher: *Science World* is a journal targeted for middle school students, not for middle school teachers (Koballa, 1987). By contrast, only four percent of the teachers ranked *Scientific American* as one of the two journals they found most useful.

The research about teachers' reading is illustrative, if not definitive. It seems to suggest that, in general, teachers do not have well-developed academic interests. Coupled with research about teachers' academic aptitude, this research suggests that most teachers do not see themselves as intellectuals or engage in substantive intellectual work. This finding, however, may reveal more about the nature of schools than about the inherent characteristics of teachers.

The nature of teachers' work.

Literature on the professionalization of teaching points to workplace conditions that limit teachers' power and, consequently, their willingness and ability to shape any--including an intellectual--school mission. Even educational reform efforts that claim to empower teachers seem to leave teachers out of the decision-making process (Metropolitan Life, 1985).

According to literature on the working conditions of teachers, teaching has become such a "deskilled" job that talented teachers either leave teaching or learn how to treat it mechanistically (see e.g., Apple, 1987; Glickman, 1990). Guttman (1987, p. 77) summarizes this interpretation: "most teachers who begin with a sense of intellectual mission lose it after several years of teaching, and either continue to teach in an uninspired routinized way or leave the profession to avoid intellectual stultification and emotional despair."

This response on the part of teachers occurs because most schools treat learning as consumption of information and teaching as delivery of information (Devaney & Sykes, 1988). These premises about learning and teaching delimit the conception of teaching and, as a consequence, offer a narrow view of the teacher's role. According to this view, teachers perform their role by using the most effective techniques to deliver the information that makes up the curriculum. Teachers neither choose the curriculum nor invent the techniques. Rather, teachers follow the curriculum that the state or district mandates and mimic the techniques that educational research validates. This view suggests that teachers are more like workers than like professionals because they lack "control over what is produced and how it is produced" (Filson, 1988, p. 304).

Several features of schooling reinforce this conception of the teacher's role. Delaney and Sykes (1988, pp. 16-19) identify these features as: (1) the large numbers of students with whom teachers must work, (2) the need for teachers to maintain order, (3) the schools' requirement that teachers use adopted textbooks, (4) the prevalence of accountability systems that rely on standardized tests, and (5) the overarching concern that students learn basic skills (see also McLaughlin, Pfeifer, Swanson-Owens, & Yee, 1986).

Schools with these features reflect a custodial orientation (see e.g., Cusick, 1973). According to Hoy and Woolfolk (1990, p. 281), such schools provide "an inflexible and highly regimented setting concerned primarily with maintaining order." Such schools suppress teachers' intellectual curiosity and inventiveness because these characteristics disrupt the orderly routine. Teachers become socialized to a school culture that promotes isolated work, discourages interaction among colleagues, and resists change (see e.g., Liston & Zeichner 1990; Sarason, 1971). In such schools, teachers come to believe in the necessity for order, and they lose their optimism about the efficacy of schooling (Hoy & Woolfolk, 1990).

For whatever reasons--personal characteristics or workplace conditions--teachers do not seem to define themselves as intellectuals. Nor do they see schools' role as predominantly intellectual. These findings, however, provide an insufficient basis for claiming that schools are

anti-intellectual. As we have suggested earlier, it might be possible for schools to have elitist--but still intellectual--aims. They might, for example, demonstrate a high regard for intellectual work by allowing only a few capable students to engage in it. Consequently, to take the next step in our argument, we need to evaluate the evidence about the nature of education for the most intellectually talented students that public schools encounter--those often termed, "gifted."

The Education of Academically Gifted Students

The primary rationale for gifted education is that some children's aptitudes for scholarship or art are so extraordinary that they cannot be adequately educated through ordinary methods (Feldhusen, Van Tassel-Baska, & Seeley, 1989). It seems, therefore, that schools should make special efforts to cultivate these students' intellectual talents; but the case is otherwise. Programs for gifted students often devalue scholarly pursuits. In fact, activities in enrichment programs for the gifted are generally irrelevant to the students' intellectual achievement (Stanley, 1977, 1986); instead, these programs inculcate social behaviors that reflect middle-class norms.

Many gifted programs, for example, focus on counseling able students or developing their social skills through activities such as leadership training and small-group interaction (e.g., Parker, 1983). In the name of improving gifted students' creativity, many programs forego substantial academic content and, instead, teach problem-solving skills in isolation from any particular academic content. These "skills" are easily acquired and applicable only to narrowly-structured problems; they are, in consequence, of doubtful merit (McPeck, 1981). As Borland (1989, p. 174) notes, special instruction for the gifted often consists of "an array of faddish, meaningless trivia--kits, games, mechanical step-by-step problem-solving methods, pseudoscience, and pop psychology." Moreover, educators frequently dissuade students from attempting intellectually challenging programs by exaggerating the emotional and social risks of strategies like acceleration and early college attendance (Daurio, 1979).

Furthermore, most gifted students do not have access to comprehensive programs that are intellectually challenging. Few such programs exist, and those that do are seldom found in public schools. Instead they are found in the expensive private schools that serve a different elite--the children of the wealthy.

Private preparatory schools and ivy league colleges almost exclusively enroll students whose family interests are those of the ruling class (Dormhoff, 1983). Even these schools value conspicuous consumption and status more than intellectual accomplishment (Trumpbour, 1989). They attempt to cultivate a technocratic elite that supports rather than challenges the status quo (Hobsbawm, 1973; Katchadourian & Boli, 1985; Veblen, 1899/1979).

As a consequence, some of the most intellectually precocious students in the public schools remain as unprepared as other students to engage in scholarly or artistic work that requires concentrated study and dedication to ideas. Instead, they are better prepared to assume the role that best suits the vested economic interests of the wealthy, the role of intelligent careerist. In this role they are capable of responding efficiently and pragmatically to work-related problems but unable, or at least disinclined, to examine the broad social, economic, and political context in which the problems are set.

Nurturing Intellect

Substantial evidence suggests that, as an institution, education reproduces, and perhaps extends, social and economic inequality. Moreover, three aspects provide views of education as an anti-intellectual enterprise: its mission, the characteristics of teachers, and its programs for the most academically able students.

This evidence suggests that elementary and secondary education in contemporary America pursues neither equality nor excellence. For us, the key element missing from the experience of

schooling--and from other institutions of mass culture as well--is care for intellect. Such care involves attention to the thinking subject, the minds of students, and, equally important, our own minds as those who care for students. It is not sufficient for schools to concentrate on any particular set of "skills," for skills merely operate on some object. Nurture of intellect allows individuals to understand and, what is more, to interpret the world. Only a mind attuned through long practice to integrating facts and ideas, to assessing hypothetical realities, and to striving for exact expression is capable of interpretation.

Interpretation involves critique, and critique of whatever sort implies a direction for change. For this reason, nurture of the intellect also entails the disposition to critique the world, largely in order to change it. The point is that change requires different interpretations, and the avenues of mass culture provide too few.

Perhaps the evolution of communication and control (i.e., the ethos of information) in the postindustrial world makes interpretation more difficult. If so, then the crisis of education is part of a much wider, and more serious, cultural crisis (Bell, 1973, 1976). Whatever the case, resolution of the crisis is not amenable to fiat, and the discussion that follows does not comprise a set of "reforms" to be imposed on schools. In fact, it is doubtful if any other institution in contemporary society has authority sufficient to redirect education in the ways that we imagine to be necessary.

Hope may, however, lie in the individual and organizational exceptions to the general trend. Schooling, after all, is a purposive institution, made by humans to accomplish certain aims. Control of the institution is contested ground, and the interests that control particular schools (and classrooms) in part determine the character, if not the ultimate aims, of schooling as an institution.

What Should Schools Be For?

If intellect serves to guide interpretation, critique, and change, then it may well threaten the vested interests of power. Too wide an effort to nurture intellect is, therefore, a potential threat to such interests. We conclude that, as an institution, education serves to channel intellect to less threatening ends.

The previous discussion provided examples of this process as it applied to gifted children. This one example also illustrates the "microphysics" of educational power (cf. Foucault, 1979, on prisons). The example shows how institutional power bends intellect to certain purposes. The power is applied by functionaries of the institution (teachers and administrators) who translate institutional aims into particular practices. In this case, analysis of the practices demonstrates the contradictions of their premises. In short, the development of exceptional talent is supported in rhetoric and suppressed in practice. Educators serve this purpose willingly, but unconsciously, as a result of their selection, their training, and their acceptance of the instrumentality of their institutional role.

The major premise of education as an institution, however, is that schools are an arm of the nation state. The following discussion first considers this premise, and then elaborates three alternative premises more in keeping with our notion that nurture of intellect must become a major educational aim.

Education as an arm of the nation state.

As an institutional phenomenon, education in the modern world is an arm of the nation state (e.g., Boli, Ramirez, & Meyer, 1985; Deaton & McNamara, 1984; DeYoung, 1989; Howley, 1991; Meyer, Tyack, Nagel, & Gordon, 1979). In the United States, the machinery of the institution applies an apparently value-free technology of improvement and management to the supervision of students, fitting their growth to the national interest.

The intent served by this role for education is to colonize students' mental functions in certain ways. Schools, for example, serve to manage and develop "human resources" and "human capital," and inculcate predetermined values of national interest (e.g., Deaton & McNamara, 1984). As an arm of the state, the institution of education treats children as sites for the development, in the national interest, of a variety of useful skills (Howley, 1991). Policy-makers overtly express the hope that all children will become effective and efficient instruments of economic production. In reality, education is another policy tool to allocate poverty and affluence (cf. Tomaskovic-Devey, 1987).

The call to improve "American competitiveness"--which figured prominently in every major reform report of the 1980s--was, for example, a call to defend national economic security. Few policy-makers, scholars, or citizens questioned if the agenda were worthy or feasible. Legislatures around the nation, however, responded quickly, often echoing the theme of national competitiveness as a matter of state or local security.

Carried to its logical conclusion in the current political economy, however, competitiveness would tend to destroy national cohesion and increase group inequality (see Chubb & Moe, 1990 for a contrasting interpretation). Such outcomes would result from the invariable competition among states, districts, and individual schools for acclaim and resources. Because education as an institution legitimates the inequalities of the political economy, competition among schools would intensify--rather than off-set--inequalities among schools and their students. As a result, some schools and some students might be better able to respond to the supposed needs of the nation, whereas the majority would be less able to do so.

The alarm sounded by reformers was principally rhetorical. It served more to rally national effort on behalf of vested business interests at a time of international business stress, than to change education in significant ways (Spring, 1987). Two related points explain why business took such an interest in reforming education. First, the growth of trans-national corporations posed challenges to national political economies (Jacobs, 1984). With American interests in trans-national corporations at an all-time high, American business itself became the cause for much of the comparative disadvantage of the U.S. political economy. Second, by shifting the burden to education, business interests in the 1980s deflected the attention of politicians and bureaucrats from their own excesses and problems (DeYoung, 1989; Spring, 1987).

Time and again, reform reports delineated what business interests claimed to desire in employees--better thinking skills for problem-solving and better attitudes toward teamwork (e.g., Committee for Economic Development, 1985; Etzioni, 1985; Perelman, 1990) as priorities for the nation's schools. In the effort to rally a populace skeptical, at least since the Vietnam era, of the abuse of national power, the business community, working through the prerogatives of a conservative political regime, exerted tighter control over the machinery of education (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985).

Alternative premises.

We are concerned that education become something other than a state mechanism for dominating the thought and behavior of citizens; namely, an institution that nurtures the intellect of individuals, regardless of their race, class, sex, or ethnic origins. We are not, however, laying out a plan for reform and restructuring. The present dimensions of the institution took shape for 100 years. The changes we envision will take equally long, if, in fact, the political economy will tolerate them. Our principal aim in this discussion is to present overlooked issues and alternatives for educators, especially those concerned to reconcile talent development and social justice.

We do not, however, believe that education should forego instruction that is practical. Our concern is rather with the narrow instrumentalism with which schooling discriminates between what is practical and what is not. This narrowness of view not only renders the humanities, for instance, impractical, but it also suggests that manual or technical skills are practical only to the

extent they prepare students for jobs. The notion that everyone should strive for at least partial mastery of a variety of practical skills (for example, sewing, engine maintenance, plumbing) has also been lost. Lost too, is the appreciation of these practical skills as devotions ("avocations") that have a meaningful place in people's lives. The meaning that such devotions acquire both amplifies and is amplified by nurture of the intellect. Cultivation of these devotions, we observe, is very likely to concern the ethical, political, and aesthetic issues considered in the last section of this essay. We observe that the practical has meaning for individuals and that this meaning is more likely to emerge when education respects intellect. The writer Wendell Berry understands the significance of practicality:

The essential cultural discrimination is ... between the superfluous and the indispensable ... Granting the frailty, and no doubt the impermanence, of modern technology as a human contrivance, the man who can keep a fire in a stove or on a hearth is not only more durable, but wiser, closer to the meaning of fire, than the man who can only work a thermostat. (1970/1989, p. 76)

The discrimination between what is practical and what is not requires intellects attuned to critique. What disturbs us most is that the mission of education--production of patriotic jobholders--so distorts the intellect that people have a more difficult time making such discriminations than they otherwise would.

Our view of schools' mission relies on three premises that accord the curriculum a different role from the one it presently serves. These premises point to three aims for education that are sufficiently expansive to encompass education that is equally useful because it is meaningful.

The first premise claims that a primary mission of schools should be to promote students' ethical reasoning. According to this view, a fundamental mission of schools is to act as the conscience of the polity. By distinguishing their goals from those of the nation-state, schools should be able to develop curricula that give students the academic background and the personal entitlement to offer meaningful critique of the institutions of modern life.

Not only is this mission an important precursor of social change, it is also an important safeguard of such change (see e.g., Brym, 1980). Any society--regardless of the tenets on which it is founded--can lose sight of its most worthy aims. A citizenry capable of ethical reasoning, however, can evaluate and redirect its government.

Moreover, citizens are entitled to a government that advances their human rights, including the right to political voice and to self-directed work. As Bell (1976) notes, the evolution of human rights has not been well attended to in modern capitalist societies. Advancing such rights is possible only within a society that places as great a value on the welfare of groups as it does on the accomplishments of individuals. Consequently, the schools in such a society should cultivate among students an appreciation for the scope and limitations of individual potential as well as an appreciation for the potential of humankind.

These two aims are not incompatible, although much of current educational thought makes them out to be (see e.g., Grant & Sleeter, 1985; Tannenbaum, 1981). Their apparent conflict, however, can be resolved by dislodging the concept of individual potential from its moorings in an ethic of competition. Schools can establish a frame of reference that enables students to see that their accomplishments are more than personal triumphs over other students. This altered frame of reference would demonstrate to students the preeminence of activities directed toward the survival and betterment of the human species and of the planet.

This frame of reference would also support the second premise on which we believe that schooling should rest. This premise defines a just political mission for education, namely, that schooling should function as the harbinger of democracy. Schools must accept this mission if they are to have a meaningful role in changing how social relations are structured. Currently, students have few models to guide their thoughtful but active participation in the political

process. The trappings of a representative democracy within a nearly monopolistic capitalism offer little to convince students of the value of participation. Moreover, representative democracy (as we know it) most often substitutes advertising for debate.

Students educated to interpret their surroundings would be better able to identify the limitations of whatever political formations prevail. Students also need to be prepared to serve as actors within a less contrived and more substantive political arena. In order to assume such a role, they need to understand the assumptions as well as the processes of democratic governance. To promote such understanding, curriculum must offer students a forum for discussing political ideas as well as meaningful avenues to address political and economic issues in their communities. These avenues, however, would differ from the channels progressive schools habitually use for cultivating students' democratic sentiments. Rather than construct for students an artificial political microcosm (such as that implied by the term, "student government"), schools should involve students in the real events of the political economy that take place within their communities.

Such activities form part of a larger project, which involves, in our view, the most substantive role that schools should undertake. Our third premise is that this project--encompassing schools' aesthetic mission--is of primary importance. Applying the term "aesthetic" to all representations of human experience and objective reality, this premise reflects our belief that human knowledge and understanding are justified in their own right, without reference to their immediate utility. Representations of experience and reality--in the arts and sciences--form, we believe, a legacy that allows humans to address the enduring predicaments of existence.

An aesthetic mission requires schools to provide all that is necessary to prepare students to construct personal interpretations of the world. By examining, reflecting on, and reconceiving others' interpretations of the world, students become able to internalize--as well as to assert--their own interpretations. These interpretations not only become the foundation for students' definitions of themselves, they will inevitably serve as the bases for students' ethical judgments and political actions.

The aesthetic mission of schools is most similar, on the surface, to what schools currently do. They present a body of knowledge that seems to represent the most significant elements of the cultural tradition. Regardless of appearances, however, this body of knowledge is offered only as the cursory treatment of content (e.g., Hirsch, 1987). Viewed this way, knowledge is treated superficially, reduced to unrelated bits of information, and trivialized. Curriculum of this sort uses a set of facts to distinguish those who master an approved canon from those who do not. Such a curriculum, however, certainly fails to encourage students to explore the personal and universal import of a body of knowledge.

By contrast, we believe that the aesthetic mission of schools requires the selection of some body of knowledge for students to use as the beginning point of their intellectual exploration. This knowledge needs to be of the sort that expands rather than limits students' choices.

Such knowledge is easier to characterize when it helps students develop a fundamental method of inquiry or expression. For example, the knowledge about how to read makes available to students a wide range of intellectual choices. It is more difficult to specify, however, the most important knowledge within disciplines such as literature and history that are essentially discursive.

Students certainly need to read enough history to understand and even to participate in its method, but we are not clear how much or what kind of history will accomplish that aim. Issues such as this are basic to the development of curriculum, and should, therefore, be addressed by teachers, with the participation of members of the community that a school serves. To engage in such work, however, teachers will need to value intellect more than they currently do. They will need to have exposure to the broad body of knowledge from which a curriculum might be drawn.

Moreover, they must be willing to submit such curriculum to a process of continual critique. Only through this critique will schools be able to develop a curriculum that gives students access to the assumptions on which their cultures rest and, at the same time, shows them how to challenge or elaborate those assumptions.

Construction of the Curriculum

If schools are to serve these ethical, political, and aesthetic ends, their curricula must change. But how should curricula change? Observers--both liberal and radical--who conclude that the public-school curriculum as presently constituted limits students' academic achievement have recommended curricula that include various bodies of knowledge.

Liberal observers generally recommend the traditional canon of western thought as important for all students, regardless of social class or aptitude. The Paideia Proposal (Adler, 1982), for example, advocates a basic liberal arts education for all students.

Radical critics, by contrast, usually propose curricula that replace the established curriculum with non-traditional content (i.e., an anti-canon) relevant to the history, culture, and liberation of oppressed groups. In consequence, radical critiques often find the classical canon to be little better than the basic skills curriculum that most contemporary schools implement (Weiler, 1988). According to Giroux (1988), schools that confine education to "high-status" (p. 194) knowledge serve the interests of the ruling elite; making the traditional canon available to all students does little to advance the human rights of oppressed groups.

We take a view that differs from both liberal and radical perspectives. This view proceeds from points already made. If the construction of curriculum is a critical task for educators and community members, and if schools are to be harbingers of democracy, then educators--whether liberal or radical--ought not to espouse a single curriculum for all students. Children grow up in particular surroundings, and educators must construct curricula that respond to those particularities.

At the same time, children ought, we believe, to grow up into a wider world--at least intellectually wider--than the one into which they are born. One aspect of this process is developmental; that is, students' minds mature with age. Educators should nurture that development so that students grow into adults who can grasp, use, revise, and invent ideas. Another aspect of this process, however, is circumstantial. In this aspect, educators select content that leads students to bridge the gap between the particulars of their existence and the universal dimensions of human existence. Educators, however, cannot undertake these roles unless their own intellects guide the construction of curriculum.

Unfortunately, this role for intellect is seldom realized in contemporary public school classrooms. As a result, students generally imagine for themselves selfish ends in worlds that resemble the narrow ones they inhabit in reality. That is, they imagine themselves as being incrementally more successful than their parents. One casualty of the failure of intellect in classrooms may be social mobility of a more significant sort. An even more important casualty, we would argue, is intellectual mobility; the disposition to imagine and act upon other realities than those that are merely apparent.

In fact, both the canon and the anti-canon seem equally important to us. Ideally, all students would learn that the world differs radically from the one they think they see just over the sills of the classroom windows, the one they know so well. In constructing curriculum, however, wise educators bind themselves to their students' origins, that is, to where their students are coming from. By examining and building on the meanings that seem familiar, students learn that the world they think they know so well--their immediate world--differs somewhat from their image of it.

For example, developing family chronicles and oral histories of various groups and cultures helps students realize the limits and expand their conception of apparent reality. Such

openings exist in all disciplines, sometimes because of students' misconceptions, but sometimes because of the unexplored richness of their personal experiences. The point is that instruction must regularly exploit such openings so that students can begin to construct bridges between the narrow worlds that seem so familiar and the wider ones that seem so foreign.

The content of the curriculum, however, is not immaterial. Any curriculum must have substance. The idea that instruction should impart intellectual processes rather than intellectual content is misguided, unless it acknowledges that dealing with important knowledge is the way humans think. Educators are often tempted into believing that thought processes exist somehow apart from content. This is simply not true, and thinking cannot be taught apart from something worthy about which to think.

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I've written about, studied, and lived in rural places. (It's debatable whether or not I still live in a rural place, but the local chamber of commerce says I do, given that our house sits 2 miles north of I-64).

Culture, politics, economics, and history concern me. I wish schools were better at promoting 'the life of the mind' (whatever that is; finding out is part of the adventure) among everyone. And I think there are reasons they don't, but these reasons constitute more than just inattention or foolishness. Culture, politics, economics, and history suggest reasons.

Literature (fiction) may be a much better guide to true education in rural places than the sorts of poor studies we educationists sponsor. Check out Wendell Berry's *Second Growth* (circa 1950) or Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News* (circa 1990) and even E.M. Forster's *Howards End* (circa 1920). These folks have preserved something we have tried desperately to abandon, but can't actually escape. The wonder is that, though these books (and many more) treat the dilemmas of rural life, they also deal with the idea of a true education more universally. Now, that's fun because it's not easy. In particular, novels don't lend themselves to translations as cookbooks.

Teaching well is the most difficult work in the world. We make a great mistake with attempts to make it easy or happy. Happiness is not a worthy aim for education, nor is getting and holding a good job.

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