The Functions of Education in the United States

By Chris Wright

"What purpose(s) does and should education serve in a modern society?" This question tends to be ignored in policy debates, though answers to it are implicit in many political proposals. On one level, the proper answers are virtually truisms: education should increase students' knowledge, facilitate their cognitive growth and self-knowledge, prepare them for an economically productive adulthood, socialize them in such a way that they become citizens "mindful of the common weal," and in general make both the individual's and the community's life richer, more enlightened and moral, than it would be otherwise. These are humanistic answers that come naturally to us, since we live in a liberal society. In illiberal societies the emphasis might be less individualistic and more explicitly nationalistic: for example, in Stalin's Russia people might have thought that whether education contributed to an individual's "growth" was far less relevant than whether it prepared people to subordinate themselves to the interests of the state, to fulfill their economic roles faithfully and productively for the sake of realizing socialism. The commonly accepted functions of education vary between social contexts. So do, in fact—to a limited extent—the morally proper goals (as opposed to the goals that people in fact think education should accomplish, or the functions it actually serves). In a society in crisis, the ideal role of education surely differs from its role during normal times.

I'll take it for granted in this paper that, apart from times of extraordinary crisis, the correct functions of education are humanistic and liberal. Illiberal goals are always wrong, since they violate principles of the freedom, dignity and equal worth of all human beings. However, this still leaves open more specific questions, including "Should we try to use education to heal societal problems, such as class divisions and racism?" and "Should schools focus on inculcating patriotism, or should respect for the sordid truth guide the curriculum in history and civics classes?" Questions about higher education are pertinent also, for example whether it is more properly characterized as a "community of scholarship" or as a democratizing force that should serve societal needs. In the following, I will first summarize the history of American attempts to define the functions and missions of education; in the second section, I will set forth my own conception of what education ought to accomplish.

The Past

The republican sentiments that prevailed during and after the American Revolution influenced political theorists and policymakers in their advocacy of

education as playing "an important role in reconciling freedom and order."[1] Proper education would civilize the unwashed masses, train them to be good republican citizens who would elect wise leaders. It was through education that a descent into anarchy was to be avoided and that the enormous country would be tied together into one entity. Thus, the moral or civic aspect of education was considered at least as important as the intellectual aspect. And since education was supposed to train men from nearly all classes to be intelligent citizens, many political leaders argued that schools should be organized and financed by state governments. Education should be free, or nearly so. In 1779, for example, Thomas Jefferson put forth a plan (subsequently defeated) for free schools in Virginia. In 1786, Benjamin Rush introduced a plan for Pennsylvania that called for a state-supported university, several colleges around the state, and a free school in every town.[2] These proposals, being ahead of their time, had little impact. State legislatures were unwilling to institute taxes for education.

During the early decades of the republic, most rural children, who greatly outnumbered urban children, attended local schools a couple months in the winter and a couple in the summer to learn reading, writing and arithmetic. For these children and their parents, the primary purpose of education was simply to acquire enough rudimentary cognitive skills to function in the countryside. Urban education was more complex: there were "independent pay schools," which were somewhat like inexpensive private schools; there were apprenticeship opportunities for boys, which required the masters to furnish a rudimentary education; and there were church charity schools for orphans and the poor. As social problems increased through the decades, charity schooling became more widespread and secular (although the traditional denominational schools persisted). Reformers argued that increased schooling would mitigate problems of poverty and crime. "Both English and American advocates emphasized collective goals—such as the reduction of crime and disruption—rather than individualistic goals—such as intellectual growth or personal advancement. …One central goal…was to rescue children from an allegedly harmful family environment."[3] Charity schools were funded by philanthropists and voluntary associations.

During the mid-nineteenth century, as capitalism and industrialization tore up the old society and left relative chaos in its wake, the emphasis on education as a facilitator of social stability increased. "In cities the prevention of crime and poverty became the leading moral mission of public schools."[4] It was during these decades before the Civil War that the common-school movement began. Carl Kaestle defines a

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[1] Carl Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780–1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 5.

[2] Ibid., 9.

[3] Ibid., 33, 47.

[4] Ibid., 70.

common school as "an elementary school intended to serve all the children in an area."[5] Such schools were not quite an extension of charity schools, since they were not solely for the poor and sometimes cost families a small amount of money. They were usually state-supported and state-regulated, though minimally. Reformers like Horace Mann and Henry Barnard advocated common schooling as a way to foster social harmony by bringing (white) children from all classes together, and by indoctrinating the youth with republican, Protestant and capitalist ideas. The socializing functions of education were emphasized more than ever before: these schools were to be a force for egalitarianism. The Whig Party, but many Democrats as well, came to think that government intervention was essential to instill morals and mold the diverse population into a cohesive whole, a project that intimately involved education.

"Generally speaking," said John Pierce, Michigan's first superintendent of public schools, "the child uneducated in knowledge and virtue is educated in the school of depravity. And what is true of the individual is true of communities." The reverend Elia Cornelius echoed that opinion: "the moral and religious improvement of the poor is the surest and best means of relieving their wants."[6] As Kaestle summarizes, "Intellectual education did not receive as high a priority as moral education in discussions of the purposes of common schools. Far more emphasis was placed on character, discipline, virtue, [Americanization,] and good habits than on literacy, arithmetic skills, analytical ability, or knowledge of the world."[7] Throughout the middle decades of the nineteenth century, epic debates took place over tuition-free schooling, centralization, government involvement in education, taxation for schools, and other issues, but eventually the "progressive" viewpoint emerged victorious. It became accepted that a major goal of education—and an important reason why government should be involved in it—was to alleviate social problems and to play some role, limited or otherwise, in integrating immigrants into the broader society.

Paul Peterson characterizes the view that was emerging as Hegelian; he takes John Dewey to have been its most influential exponent.[8] The ideology was more nationalistic or collectivistic than liberal: the emphasis (to repeat) was on transmission of the country's culture and mores, assimilation of immigrants into the society, and use of public schooling to remake society in a more harmonious, homogeneous image. Liberal values were considered compatible with this vision, but they were subordinate to the value of social harmony. After all, the turn of the twentieth century was the age of

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[5] Ibid., xi.

[6] Ibid., 81.

[7] Ibid., 100.

[8] Paul Peterson, "The New Politics of Choice," eds. Diane Ravitch and Maris Vinovskis, *Learning from the Past* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

Progressivism, which sought to rectify social ills by governmental means—government intervention, centralization, but also the deepening of democracy.

Consistent with these circumstances is the unabashed triumphalism that was taught in social studies courses, the narrative of America's glorious and noble history. The American Revolution, for example, in the early twentieth century was often portrayed as something approximating good against evil, revolutionary "demi-gods" against the "deep-dyed scoundrels" who constituted Britain's leadership.[9] Likewise, the evils of slavery received short shrift in textbooks, due to the influence of the South on publishers. W. E. B. Du Bois complained that "our histories tend to discuss American slavery so impartially that in the end nobody seems to have done wrong and everybody was right."[10] This "impartiality" fit nicely into the narrative of America as a country unparalleled in history for its magnificence.

Inculcation of a patriotic ideology seemed especially important in the United States, as opposed to other countries, because hordes of immigrants had to assimilate into the culture. This was an enormous problem, and schools had an essential role to play with respect to it. Indeed, Patricia Albjerg Graham argues that it was probably education's most important function during the first quarter of the twentieth century.[11] The need to Americanize immigrants and their children "pushed the country to develop comprehensive schools through high school before they were common elsewhere."[12] Instilling enthusiasm for learning in children was at best an incidental goal, if that; the real goal was to create a "melting pot" of ethnicities, races and religions. How little academic learning was valued is shown by the *Report of the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education of the National Educational Association*, published in 1918, which declared that the principal aims of education were as follows: health; command of fundamental processes; worthy home membership; vocation; civic education; worthy use of leisure time; and ethical character.[13] Of these seven aims, only "command of fundamental processes" hints at academic learning; the rest have to do with socialization, in particular with immigrant assimilation and an easing of citizens' painful process of adjustment to a vast industrial economy.

"Americans," according to Graham, "have traditionally considered their schools mechanisms for social improvement."[14] We have already seen examples of this. Around the beginning of the last third of the twentieth century, the mission was expanded yet

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[9] Jonathan Zimmerman, *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 25.

[10] Ibid., 42.

[11] Patricia Graham, "Assimilation, Adjustment, and Access," *Learning from the Past*, 10.

[12] Ibid., 11.

[13] Ibid., 13.

[14] Ibid., 3.

again to include giving minorities and the poor increased access to education and thus to social advancement. This is not surprising, considering that schools and universities were at the forefront of the civil rights movement and many of its battles were fought on their turf. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, passed in 1965, "established the principle that children from low-income homes required more educational services than children from affluent homes did." [15] Francis Keppel, commissioner of the U.S. Office of Education during these crucial years, was ambitious: he not only wanted to expand access but to emphasize socialization less and academic learning more. To this end he arranged for the federal government to give additional funds to schools to help them educate impoverished children, and he established the first national testing program.

Keppel's concern with the academic curriculum was ahead of its time. It wasn't until the 1980s that the nation became fixated on the "learning" aspect of education, with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. This report warned of "a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very existence as a Nation and a people."[16] Low educational achievement was rampant. The report recommended that state and local high school graduation requirements be strengthened so that they included, at a minimum, four years of English and three years of mathematics, science and social studies each. America was galvanized by this report into establishing commissions and task forces to study ways of improving learning. States rewrote curriculum frameworks, which resulted in the rewriting of textbooks. State testing was revised; many governors became converts to outcome-based education, which led to the unending search for better tests and assessments to measure student achievement. When George H. W. Bush became president he initiated the America 2000 plan to reach a wildly ambitious set of goals by the year 2000, including that the high school graduation rate would rise to 90 percent, U.S. students would be first in the world in science and mathematics achievement, every adult American would be literate, and every school would be free of drugs and violence.[17] Bill Clinton continued Bush's crusade to improve educational standards (at least according to these politicians' rhetoric), as did the second Bush.

At the same time, with the rise of multiculturalism the emphasis on America's unique moral greatness, as well as on the "melting pot" ideology, declined. In the early 1960s it was still possible to see in fourth-grade textbooks such passages as the following, which describes the massacre of the Pequots by Captain John Mason:

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[15] Ibid., 18.

[16] Diane Ravitch, "Standards in American Education," ibid., 180.

[17] Ibid., 184.

> His little army attacked in the morning before it was light and took the Pequots by surprise. The soldiers broke down the stockade with their axes, rushed inside, and set fire to the wigwams. They killed nearly all the braves, squaws, and children, and burned their corn and other food. There were no Pequots left to make more trouble. When the other Indian tribes saw what good fighters white men were, they kept the peace for many years.
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> "I wish I were a man and had been there," thought Robert.[18]

The socializing functions of such a textbook are obvious. But by the 1980s and '90s, textbooks had become more sophisticated. The narrative tended to be more ambiguous, less insistent of America's righteousness. The socialization purposes of school were no less important, but they had become oriented toward teaching respect for all people and cultures rather than focusing solely on how magnificent America and Western civilization were. This seems to be the stage we're at now.

In the foregoing brief survey I haven't discussed colleges and universities. Until the late nineteenth century and especially the advent of mass higher education in the early twentieth century, the institutions that existed were mostly private and catered to future lawyers, professors, diplomats and so on. There were also teachers' colleges, so-called "normal schools" (from the French, *écoles normales*). In the middle and late nineteenth century, however, public state universities began to be created in a number of states as a result of the passage of the Morrill Act in 1862, which gave federal land grants to states for this purpose. The growth of mass higher education was slow, but it came to maturity in the Progressive era, largely through the efforts of California and Wisconsin Progressives. The result was what John Aubrey Douglass has called the California Idea: "a cohesive and popular vision of public higher education as an ameliorative and pro-active agent of state and local government, which would set the stage for a modern and scientifically advanced society."[19] The industrial economy was expanding rapidly in California and all around the country, which necessitated "better-trained labor, a new class of professionals, and greater access to education." Public universities, in other words, were to become an essential agent of social and economic change, in particular the democratization of science and the economy. The first states in which they realized this purpose were California and Wisconsin.

The California system became a model for other states. Junior colleges emerged to supplement teachers' colleges and the prestigious University of California as a way

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[18] Quoted in Noam Chomsky, "The Function of the University in a Time of Crisis," in *For Reasons of State* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 307.

[19] John Aubrey Douglass, *The California Idea and American Higher Education* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 82.

to democratize higher education. The University of California itself grew from an original campus at Berkeley to a campus at Los Angeles, and from there on to other cities around the state as the demand for education kept pace with the rising population. The Berkeley campus symbolized the fusion of the old humanist, elitist conception of higher education with the new utilitarian, democratizing conception, in that it excelled both in the humanities and in scientific research for the benefit of agriculture, engineering, physics, etc.[20] The role of California's higher education system as a facilitator of economic and social progress became evident to the entire world, which for many decades would look to California as a symbol of the potential of democratic higher education if empowered to serve the needs of the state.

Later in the century, the university's mission became less clear. The institution experienced a kind of identity-crisis, which, if anything, has become more acute in recent years as government funding has dried up even as student populations have increased. Arguably the ambiguity in the university's mission was implicit even in the Progressive age; it became explicit, however, in the 1960s, with the disruptions caused by the Vietnam War, the anti-war movement, and the student movements. For many decades there have been three major functions that the university has fulfilled: the first is expressed in Willhelm von Humboldt's humanistic definition of the university as "nothing other than the spiritual life of those human beings who are moved by external leisure or internal pressures toward learning and research";[21] the second is to facilitate the democratizing and 'civilizing' of society and the economy; the third is to be an enabler of power-structures in business and the government, for instance to be a branch of the defense industry and a manifold source of profit for corporations and investors. The first two purposes are each partly realized in the 1960s-ish understanding of the university as ideally a locus of subversion, of the questioning of authority, of the radical democratization and de-bureaucratization of society, a place where shibboleths are attacked and discredited. But the third purpose is directly opposed to this noble ideal of intellectual freedom, and is even in tension with the university's role as advancing the democratization of professional, economic and scientific life. In recent years, the third purpose has been gaining at the expense of the other two.

The Future

Having considered the history of American education, we'll consider now the question of what purposes education *should* serve. I stipulated in the beginning that, whatever they are, they have to be at least *compatible* with humanism and liberalism,

[20] Ibid., 104, 105.

[21] Quoted in Chomsky, op. cit., 299.

i.e., respect for the individual's freedom and creativity. We can expect that "schooling" and "higher education" will not have exactly the same functions.

The first question to ask is whether education should be devoted solely to (1) disinterested learning, unconcerned with social implications, and (2) realization of the individual student's creative personality, or whether it should also aim to fulfill certain socializing functions, such as indoctrinating children with patriotism or egalitarian ideas. Surely the answer is that it is neither possible nor desirable for the socialization aspect to be eradicated. Every generation of reformers has correctly assumed that socialization is not only an incidental but an integral function of schooling. Children have to learn how to relate to others, and one cannot simply assume that they will learn proper behavior from their parents. But the behavior and beliefs they are taught at school should consist in an elaboration of liberal humanism—that is, respect for others, the belief in human equality and freedom, a broad humanitarianism, a commitment to reason and truth, etc., all of which components preclude aggressive patriotism or nationalism, exclusivist theology, racialism, and the like. In fact, children should not even be taught that the United States is a better country than others, and certainly not that it has a "great" history, since the first idea can lead to an emotional kind of patriotism singularly compatible with both willful ignorance and an irrational respect for one's compatriots over other people, while the second idea is contradicted by the facts. If patriotism is to be inculcated at all, it should be of the tepid sort that encourages you to help your fellow citizens in such a way that citizens of other countries are not hurt.

It's true that in social studies classes, a narrative of American history has to be presupposed by the textbooks one uses and the teacher's approach to them. But the narrative should not consist in the triumphalism that has been taught for much of American history. Rather, it should be organized around the simple but fundamental truth that *through popular struggle, people(s) have won freedom—and freedom has never been won without popular struggle*. Students ought to be taught that American history is "great" only insofar as it has been shaped by progressive popular struggles. The government's history should not be celebrated. The major crimes of political and economic power-structures ought to be discussed, but not at the expense of stories of progress.

The objection that the foregoing revisions in educational indoctrination would lead to a disintegration of America's social fabric due to a lack of commitment to the nation is unconvincing. What keeps the social fabric intact is not having been taught a narrative of American greatness in one's childhood and youth, but instead "the dull compulsion of economic relations," to quote Karl Marx. I.e., the daily subordination to economic and social relations that are difficult to revolt against. Whether the hegemony of any ideology at all is important in sustaining the structure of American society is in fact an open question.

On the other hand, the objection that my ideas are unrealistic, that they could never be actualized given the interest of the elite in maintaining the status quo, may have some truth but is irrelevant. I am proposing only an ideal we should try to approximate, because it would benefit both society and individuals and, moreover, is a consistent elaboration of our deepest shared values.

With regard to "indoctrination," then, students should be taught to think for themselves, to accept nothing on the basis of authority, to value truth and evidence above everything except freedom and compassion, and to develop themselves creatively in all directions as long as their creativity does not interfere with others'. The seven "principle aims of education" listed above (from 1918) are a good starting-point, but more emphasis should be placed on academic learning and spontaneous creativity. All academic learning should be consistent with the best scholarship (though simplified for children).

Horace Mann was right that we should use education, from the lowest to the highest, partly as a way to remedy social inequalities and divisions. Thus, it is advisable to mix children from different races and from the lower and upper classes together. Through busing, (some) suburban children should be sent to inner-city schools and inner-city children should be sent to suburban schools. If implemented—which it wouldn't be—this idea would have the added advantage of focusing attention on the inadequacies of city schools and causing suburban money and power to be used for their improvement (since middle- and upper-class parents would presumably insist on better city schools for their children). Similarly, affirmative action programs should be widely implemented in higher education. However, education should not be considered the primary means of rectifying social problems like crime and poverty. Far more effective would be massive, government-funded reconstruction of urban areas (with the participation, and in the interest, of the communities involved).

The new concern in recent decades with the quality of academic learning in schools is a positive development. However, the way to approach the issue is not through financial rewards based on standardized testing but through the infusion of massive aid into urban schools for the sake of reducing class sizes and hiring better teachers, i.e., raising teachers' salaries to attract the most qualified candidates. New schools ought to be built, and old schools renovated. Curricula in all states ought to be redesigned along the lines I outlined above. Such measures would have a perceptible impact on both academic learning and socialization. They would simultaneously help the individual and the community.

Reforms in higher education should be as radical as those in primary and secondary education. To repeat, the major purposes of higher education are to give the masses access to the 'higher' spheres of economic, scientific and professional life, and in so doing to stimulate the country's economy while encouraging upward mobility amongst the populace. Wilhelm von Humboldt's humanistic conception of the

university is valuable too but arguably secondary to the "democratization" conception. Given the university's tremendous potential to benefit society, as evidenced in its contribution to California's development during the twentieth century, federal and state governments should pour tens of billions of dollars into public universities and colleges across the country. High tuitions are a barrier to fulfillment of the university's democratizing potential; indeed, education should be free.

The least valuable purpose of the university is its being a handmaiden of corporate profits and the Department of Defense's high-tech research. Insofar as such research may be of use to society—as the development of the computer and subsequently the internet was—it is to be encouraged; but research on "weapons of mass destruction" such as napalm or missile systems (during the Vietnam War) contradicts the university's humanistic, democratic mission and is thus wrong. Likewise, for obvious reasons it is dangerous to think of universities as businesses whose funds should be invested in stocks and so forth, as is increasingly done.

Broadly speaking, there seems to be no contradiction between the humanistic and the democratic missions of education. Each is compatible with an ideological foundation in liberalism and an emphasis on the worth of the individual personality. These values should be the standards by which we judge how well any given aspect of education is fulfilling its goals.

We can learn a lot from the history of education, as an extended essay would demonstrate. The purpose of this paper has been merely to sketch the history of how reformers in the United States have conceptualized the functions of education and to propose on the basis of this knowledge a bare outline of an ideal educational system in the future. The chances of its being realized are slim, but nothing great has ever been accomplished without an unrealistic ideal in mind.