

Deborah Meier

A view from the schoolhouse

Elementary education has become ... a sort of vaudeville show. The child must be kept amused and learns what he pleases. Many teachers scorn the old-fashioned rudiments; and it seems to be regarded as a misfortune to read and spell.

– *New York Sun* editorial, October 5, 1902

During the past forty or fifty years those who are responsible for education have progressively removed from the curriculum ... the western culture which produced the modern democratic state.

– Walter Lippmann, addressing the American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1940.

These quotes appear in Richard Rothstein's Twentieth Century Fund report on student achievement in the United States, *The Way We Were?* Rothstein's book should be required reading before

any of us take to print on the current shortcomings of our schools. Life is always more complicated than the school war critics on both sides (actually there are far more than two sides) make out. The closer one gets to the schools, the more complicated it is even to sort out the sides. Ravitch presents a picture of our school crisis that often misses the nuances and complexities of the real situation.

My disagreements with Ravitch's argument may result from our different perspectives. It may be that the closer that one gets to a classroom, the less credible some of her explanations and solutions to our troubles appear.

The stories she tells – about how our textbooks and our curriculum have been systematically dumbed down – may lead one to forget about what actually happens in classrooms, not to mention in children's minds. That's the central problem with her argument: What goes on in kid's minds is much less related to textbooks and official curriculums than policymakers suppose. Even when they are well served by the schools they attend, children get their education from sources far more influential than textbooks: television shows, video games, the Internet, peers, popular songs, movies (the list goes on). In fact, the story of America and our common culture are

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only tangentially in the hands of school people.

The official curriculum is mostly just a series of institutional hurdles for kids. Getting better textbooks, designing tests to prove they have read these books, making sure that teachers have a greater store of inert knowledge, having a more tightly organized curriculum, paying teachers by test results, holding more kids over in grade: these are all familiar remedies. They've been in and out of favor over the years.

The current hope among reformers like Ravitch seems to be that the weight of the modern state, aided by modern technology, will accomplish what these "old-fashioned" methods have failed to accomplish in the past: to get all the ornery parts of the real world – from kindergarten to the workplace – to line up, or else. ("Alignment," in fact, is the current "in" word among educators.)

Ravitch and I agree that American educators, whether so-called progressive or traditionalists, have rarely taken intellectual life seriously. But what she misses is that they have taken "academics" all too seriously. Unfortunately, the 'academic' exercises favored in the schools have been largely unrelated to the life of the mind. It's no accident that the expression "It's academic" means boring or "beside the point." There's the shame.

It is not 'academics' we desperately need to devote more time to – it is rather engaging the attention of young people in matters of real importance. That's the missing link. That entails our paying closer attention to how children actually engage with the world – to what they see and do when we're not looking. Neither better textbooks nor a better curriculum suffice. We need a different kind of school in which adults are more, not less, powerful in the lives of kids.

Our problem is not the absence of a common culture, but our uneasiness with the common culture that exists. This popular culture has a tenacious grip on most kids, parents, and even us teachers. It happens to be a culture that I am often at odds with. But if I wish to moderate its influence on our children, I know I must first acknowledge it, then take it on critically, and finally offer compelling alternatives.

This doesn't mean aping Walt Disney, nor does it mean trying to compete with even the best of popular culture. On the contrary, it means taking seriously the one advantage offered by school settings: they are made up of real live people. Unlike the mass media, schools could be communities of adults who know their kids personally, with all their curious ideas. They could be places where kids might have intelligent interactions with adults whose ideas and life experiences they might wish to emulate.

Like Ravitch, I think we ought to introduce all kids to a culture that is currently quite *uncommon*. Doing this means changing the implicit culture of schools, the ways ideas are imparted (and largely devalued) in our classrooms. It means changing the way adults interact with kids, independently of textbooks and tests.

Ravitch hopes that if states list exactly which events, authors, titles, and historical dates students should "compare and contrast," the result will be improved intellectual competence. However, a prestigious regional education laboratory (MCREL) recently noted that if one took seriously the current specifics listed in state frameworks, students would need to spend an additional nine years in school just to cover the material listed – never mind remembering any of it, much less understanding it!

Getting to the bottom of things requires close and respectful relationships between novices and experts, as together they confront challenging subjects and ideas. Then, and only then, do texts matter, and real trade books are often a better vehicle than books written for captive student audiences.

Current textbooks are indeed bland, but not more so than a century ago, when no one worried about the absence in these texts of strong females, or people of color, or non-Christians. In the past, it's well to remember, very few children learned very much, few made it through grade school, and fewer still through high school. In the process, vast numbers of students were made to feel stupid – and resented it. (Perhaps anti-intellectualism was in part their form of revenge.)

The old ethnocentric curriculum was not one whit more serious or thoughtful than the multicultural curriculum often favored today – and ever so much more insulting to millions of Americans, thanks to its casual sexism, racism, and anti-Semitism.

It's not multiculturalism that has hurt our schools, but business as usual: both the relentless dumbing-down of all meaty and controversial ideas, and the absence of strong adult communities that respond to kids personally. Increased centralization of decision-making about what goes on inside schools is not likely to lead to livelier classrooms or more powerful adult communities.

Some people apparently imagine they can remake the next generation only by removing the bad influence of the current crop of adults – both parents and teachers. Such ideas flourish both on the Right and Left. Both the Right and the Left imagine solutions that bypass the dumb teachers, through “smart” lessons plans designed by right-minded experts,

with close monitoring and penalties for deviation. The weapon of choice: high-stakes testing.

The trouble is that intellectual life depends, as Ravitch well knows, on persuasion, not mandated truth – on conveying a range of ideas, not one putatively best idea.

Knowledge and skill are passed on, in the end, by the communities of people that matter to us as learners, not by the textbooks whose pages we turn in order to prepare for tests. Building such communities, ones that “matter” to kids, is the tough work.

There is no shortcut. The fastest route involves supporting, nudging, provoking, persuading – in short, educating – the adults who must remain in control of our school systems. It means doing whatever it takes to increase the odds in favor of strong, interesting schools where adult ideas are taken seriously, and where pop commercialism can be challenged while a deeper appreciation of the world is fostered.

If we want to produce a culture that isn't dominated by commercialism, as Ravitch and I both do, we need schools that enlist the energies of both adults and kids in a common effort to make sense of things. We need to start with school communities where adults, in the presence of their students, defend their views and develop their ideas. They need to accept responsibility for doing what they believe is in the best interests of the youngsters they know well, not cede their authority in the name of standards imposed by centralized authorities.

We need to provide school people, and families with the time – ah, time – to tackle tough questions. Young people have to believe we're serious about the value of knowledge, human reasoning, good arguments, weighing evidence, and negotiating compromises. They have to

believe that we, rather than some distant authority, adhere to high standards – and practice what we preach.

The kids need to be in the presence of thoughtful, informed teachers – not functionaries reading scripts designed in central offices in order to produce results on mindless tests scored by machines.

Our far-from-perfect democracy has never depended, for better or worse, on our citizenry's knowledge or appreciation of great literature or history. The United States has nevertheless had a rare run at democratic government and culture. This suggests we have time on our side – which democratic solutions always require: the time needed to gradually rebuild schools on a human-scale, schools that respect our historic genius for diversity, skepticism, openness, and hands-on ingenuity, staffed by teachers

who look upon sweeping predictions of civilizational crises with just a wee bit of humor.

If the gaps in resources between the rich and the poor continue to grow ever wider, it's hard to see how schools alone can close the achievement gap. In fact, it is amazing how well we have done in getting so many poor kids through high schools at a time when, as a country, we are irrationally focused on celebrating fame and fortune for the few. Still, more can be done, provided we focus our energy on what really matters.

If Ravitch wants to make a quick difference, she should try perhaps to influence the script writers for Walt Disney, not the bureaucrats who write the lesson plans for Chicago's Board of Education. The latter is a waste of precious time.