

Schooling for Democracy or for The Workplace?

The articles in this special section have offered a vision of the future of American schooling and society. Ms. Meier believes that it is a vision that needs to be refocused.

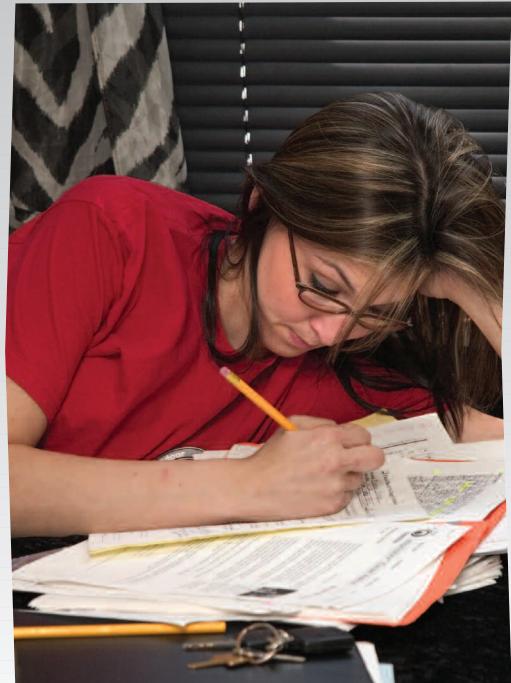
BY DEBORAH MEIER

AFRIEND of mine has a running joke about the way we take in the world: he looks for all the points of agreement, and I look for all the differences. We usually end up in the same place, but the love of a good argument is rooted deeply in my education. Thus it's a form of compliment to find the articles in this *Kappan* special section to be so provocative. Taken as a group they say much that I agree with, but I'm going to be trying my best to express an essential disagreement with what runs through them and through much of current thinking about K-12 education. It has something to do with the idea of self-agency, the underlying belief that what is essential is our capacity to be the agents of our own destiny. It's a capacity best illustrated by our high-level thinking as infants, exhibited from the beginning in childhood play. That's a thread that fascinates me, as I suspect it is what sustains democratic and productive life. It's an idea that is in danger of being forgotten for reasons I want to explore in this critique. So I'm often ignoring our points of agreement and the important ideas that each author brings to the theme in order to suggest the basis for an alternative vision of K-12 schooling.

Over time and after much rereading, it turns out that

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my disagreements seem less sharp, and a new synthesis is developing. So I apologize ahead of time for not reminding readers that, in each case, these are readable and useful essays on the most important topics in educational discourse these days. That being said, I believe that these kinds of debates are the very stuff of a strong democratic culture, and so I welcome this opportunity to challenge some of the points made in these articles.

All of these articles appear to see our system of public education primarily as a pipeline into college or the workplace. Perhaps I missed it, but I do not think they ever connect the education of our children to the mission of building a strong democracy or to stewardship over the planet. And while they probably agree (only Rhonda Meyer is explicit about it) that the problems facing our schools and children cannot be solved by schools alone, they do not elucidate what other societal measures are needed to help all children go on to college, finish college, and hold decently paid jobs in a safe and secure environment. Meyer sees the solution mostly as increased choice through privatization, but, while she and I disagree, that clarity gives me an inkling of where she might take us.

Furthermore, on occasion, the authors demonstrate insufficient care about how we use our educational history. One cannot do everything in a single article, but I worry about our casual assumptions about the past. For example, how are “the neighborhood schools of today . . . very different from those we attended,” as Meyer puts it? Or just below that assumption, what’s the evidence that “the primary mechanism for achieving” opportunity has ever been our schools? This is too important an issue (I would term it a “myth”) to summarize in quite such a facile manner.

But let me explore these articles individually, selecting particular issues raised that I approach from a different viewpoint. Since I’ve already touched on her article, let me start with Meyer’s piece on behalf of choice. I’m a fan of choice, but I was surprised by her use of the prekindergarten and postsecondary levels as *successful* examples of choice in action. In fact, insofar as they are privatized, these levels “work” (I would argue in a longer piece) very poorly in terms of equity and quality for *all children*. Her analysis of the differences between public and private models for prekindergarten hardly begins to address the question of who attends which and what is meant by a strong foundation. Nor is she more convincing with regard to the role of private education in solving the problem of the dropout rate for black males.

And it’s not clear to me how Bill Gates’ travels abroad have much to do with the subject of U.S. student achievement. (Surely he didn’t notice that U.S. students score near the bottom of the pack while he was abroad?) Besides, it isn’t a fact. U.S. students score in the middle. And maybe it’s my old age that makes me more sensitive to the fact that in 1896 — long before I was born — many of the elite students attending Harvard needed remediation; their professors decried their poor preparation. The same was true in 1941, when *Life* did a

study of Columbia University students.¹

But one “seamless” quality of all of these articles lies in their unbroken reliance on assuming that “student achievement” equals — in Meyer’s words — “simple assessments,” that is, test results. It is also clear that, to Meyer, “choice” means the privatization of America’s “government schools.” I think the really interesting issue is how choice might be compatible with *public* education.

I experience a similar disconnect when I encounter the Computer-Assisted Learning Method (CALM) — a technology program for the teaching of chemistry. I find much that is admirable about CALM and may indeed explore it. But I also find it strange that, after the discovery that today’s students seem to require immediate feedback, CALM’s solution is to give them even more of that immediate feedback.

Perhaps what the youths of today need is precisely the opposite. Perhaps more than feedback, they need to learn how to better assess their own work and how to better judge it for themselves. To boast that the great advantage of CALM as a tool for teaching chemistry to kids is that they “know immediately if their answer is correct” frightens me — and seems to delight the authors. To compare it to Socratic pedagogy, as they do, suggests that we interpret that form of pedagogy rather differently. While they and I may be glad that they have added essay questions to CALM, I believe that the authors see it as a drawback that the essays “require interaction by the instructor to provide feedback.” Is the only answer to the media-induced culture of instant feedback (read gratification) always more of the same? I’d like to have seen the authors explore that question.

At the other end of the scale from teaching chemistry to college and high school students is Ruby Takanishi and Kristie Kauerz on birth to age 5. I take more time with this single article because it is where my earliest and most abiding interest in education lies.

The authors seem to see these years as primarily a time to “get ready” for school. (In another context, I’m sure they’d also see it as a time of trust building, exploring the human and natural environment, and so on.) While they seek not just to serve younger children better but also to change some aspects of the system itself, mostly they take schooling “as is.” I felt cheered by their concern for change, for it has been the central argument of my own work. But their ready agreement that “there must be increased alignment and coherence across what has traditionally been seen as early childhood education and . . . K-12 education” is troubling to me. In seeking to tack early care and education on-

to the bottom of the K-16 agenda, we may be doing more harm than ever. Do they take this stance because they believe it is the best option or perhaps because any other stance seems hopeless?

Takanishi and Kauerz accept the definitions of “proficiency” and the demands made of middle and high school students as arbiters of what must go on in the earlier years. Thus they move “seamlessly” into the importance of increasing skills in the early years, and the task of parents and child-care workers becomes more, not less, like that of schoolteachers: adapting the years

gross unreliability of such instruments for young children.

But all was forgiven by the final paragraph, when they write, “Our nation’s democratic traditions and our economic power depend on enhancing the educational capital and well-being of all our children.” That’s a tone missing from most of these articles. But missing still from this particular essay on early childhood is any reference to the role of play and imagination in childhood — or in life. This is an absence that helps promote the unwise view that play is a “no-no” word. If play and

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from birth to age 5 to meet the needs of high schools and colleges. I fear that such an approach will, despite their hopes, lead to an increased focus on testable skills for younger and younger children.

Making the prekindergarten years more and more integrally part of a dysfunctional K-12 system hardly seems the right goal. Takanishi and Kauerz aptly note that one sharp difference between the years from birth to age 5 and the years of K-12 schooling is that the former focus on “child-directed” activity (sometimes called play) as opposed to “schooling,” with all the baggage that comes with it. It was not clear to me whether they approved of this difference or not. But in society at large, they are right to argue, children are not seen as naturally brilliant learners. And while childhood experiences for the poor and rich are hardly equal, they may well be more equal before children arrive at school than after.

Looking for a vertical alignment from birth on could be a revolutionary concept — or just a prescription for earlier and earlier academics. In stressing that “PK standards in physical/motor, social, and emotional development” should extend upward into the K-3 grades, Takanishi and Kauerz put forth a hopeful sentiment. Yet what strikes me even more powerfully about the transition from preschool to the K-12 schools is the rapid disappearance of very young children’s intellectual liveliness and openness to learning — including quite abstract learning. The authors of this piece even appear to suggest that testing (accountability for “measured outcomes”) should start far earlier than third grade — despite what the testing industry itself views as the

imagination can’t be celebrated even in an article intended to reach mostly educators, we are indeed in trouble.

The “genius” of America, I would contend, has rested on its respect for playfulness, imagination, thinking outside the box, practical smarts, the taking apart and putting together of objects, exploring, and inventing. Everywhere I travel I find “foreigners” who are eager to imitate that aspect of what they imagine our system to value. I worry a great deal about my country’s economic future — not to mention its civic one — if we fail to specifically nourish these characteristics or assume that computer-based, virtual play will substitute. I suspect that both authors agree with me — at least up to a point — but that their caution reflects their, perhaps accurate, reading of the times we live in.

As in most of the articles in this section, the starting point of Julia Link Roberts’ article is a picture of learners in constant need of external motivation and guidance. This sets a pattern for birth-to-grave dependency on authority, which again distresses me. The value of interconnections between ages and grades and generations is quite different from an “integrated” seamless path with agreement at all stages. In emphasizing only the latter, we are at risk of forgetting the importance of autonomy and self-direction.

Is the kind of work ethic Roberts describes, one which depends on “teachers continually directing practice and study to the next level,” what Americans need to sustain democracy or our economy? Hard work can too often become synonymous with good work. Sometimes all we mean is that a 5-year-old can do with dif-

ficulty what a 6-year-old does with ease — in short, that anything that can be done earlier should be done earlier. Similarly, a notion of equity that rests on our matching each individual to his or her potential may in practice turn out to be precisely the paradigm of many a familiar dystopia. It's got an important kernel of truth embedded in it — and an important danger.

Unfortunately, as I used to remind my esteemed colleague Ted Sizer, who also liked the athletic metaphor, most of us have had quite a different experience in the world of sports. We are, not by accident, a nation devoted more to fandom than to playing.

Yet despite all these concerns, the author's focus on broadening the ways we think about talents and eliminating artificial barriers to their development (e.g., grade levels) opens up avenues for thinking about schooling for the future.

Finally, two articles — by the scholars at Indiana University and the University of Maine — get to the heart of the matter. Molly Chamberlin and Jonathan Plucker see the half-full side of the past 30 years of school reform and wax enthusiastic about the arguably "most successful public policy initiatives" in the past quarter century, among them, "charter schools, school choice, standards-based instruction, and the expansion of systematic assessment." My colleagues from Maine seem equally comfortable with standards-bred accountability. While I fear it, they seem comfortable with tying the core of P-12 education in each area and at every grade level to standard assessments. They assert that P-12 education is "definitely further along in this area than is much of higher education." They see the need to adopt similar policies at the college level in order to produce a seamless P-16 system.

I treat these two articles together because they are linked by their focus on preparing a highly skilled work force. More mandates and more alignment are seen as necessary to ensure that work-force demands are met. The authors acknowledge the need for assessment that, as the Indiana scholars put it, "goes beyond test scores," and they even call for more longitudinal data — a critically important and often ignored idea — but to what end?

The focus is still unremittingly on preparing students to "fit into" the future rather than to shape it. This is the prevailing mindset despite the fact that, to paraphrase Linda Darling-Hammond's speech at the 2007 fall forum of the Coalition of Essential Schools, we do not know what the work of the future will be like and so ought not to presume that "content knowledge" is where we should be placing our bets. And surely it's questionable whether the "content knowl-

edge" that our current teachers have in their heads is what needs to be in the heads of their students if we are to have a more vibrant future. Especially if I were to accept such a paltry goal as "better-educated graduates for the workplace or entry into postsecondary education," as the scholars from Maine state it, I'd be calling for a much more radical approach to P-16 education and assessment.

But of course, I don't accept that definition of our goal. I'm even fairly sure none of these authors does either. The most complex questions facing our future will be determined not by faceless trends or economic necessities, but by some human beings — mostly those with above-average power — making one choice rather than another. I want us to educate today's youths — all of them — to join in the conversation about those choices and to influence that future. I don't want them to take a particular future as a given. I want them to contest it, to imagine how else it might be, not just to accept what they are told it must be.

And if we want to do this within the context of the democratic idea, we need to rethink the connections between "academics" and democracy. Democracy is a very complex idea, with many repercussions, and a fragile one at that. Democracy is not the "natural" state of human society, and each democratic culture rests on tradeoffs that cannot be easily unlinked. The only institution we have deliberately created to influence the young has utterly ignored, not simply failed to tackle sufficiently, this difficult idea as a serious and unifying task, as the coherent framework for all other studies. Approaching this idea requires that we rethink the meaning of schooling and reexamine the linkage between the culture of a school, its particular curriculum, its organization of learning and pedagogy, its governance, and so on and the democratic idea and its future viability in our society. *That* is my agenda, and that agenda underlies all of the above critique!

That agenda also requires us to express our indignation at the odd notion that society can continue to treat its citizens with fierce inequity, a problem that then falls to our schools alone to solve. As the gaps between rich and poor, minority and majority, those born here and immigrants increase in every other sphere (income, health, incarceration rates), the schools themselves promote inequity when they generously accept responsibility for all of it. W. E. B. Du Bois hardly reserved his critique of America to schooling alone. Nor should we.

1. For corroboration and more on the topic, see Richard Rothstein, *The Way We Were? Myths and Realities of American Student Achievement* (New York: New Century Foundation, 1998). 

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