

Are Public Schools Successful?

by Robert Craig

As historians of education have pointed out, today's public schools bear some relationship to the Common School movement of the nineteenth century. During that time, fighting erupted in the streets of Boston and New York because poor children, often immigrants, were barred from attending school: sometimes by law, even if the family could scrape together enough money (Craig 1999). Of course, "separate but equal" was considered standard practice, especially in the South. Despite the egalitarian goals of the Common School movement, the truth is that public schools have never made the kind of dramatic, positive impact on the lives of the poor that was originally intended.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to blame public schools for the "sum" of its failures. Children in Iran do better at math than children in the United States, for instance. But how many children go to school in Iran? What is the relationship between social class and schooling? Many questions must be answered in assessing the relative success of public schools.

Is school a sorting mechanism? If I asked a superintendent of public schools in a major American city whether the public schools were successful, what would that person say? That is one of the issues of the general question about successful public schooling. The answer is, in part, an empirical, measurable one. A first step is to decide the purpose of public schooling. Joel Spring (1989) suggested that schooling is a sorting mechanism. Is it?

Is public education a business? If public schools are businesses, should students be called consumers? The public schools with which I am familiar—the high school my son attended, for instance—emphasize business-like qualities. Signifiers such as the results of high-stakes testing, governmental ratings, and awards have become the lingua franca of school employees.

What is a "whole person"? When asked about the purpose of schooling, John Dewey said that it was related to "growth," the development of the whole person as a contributor to the democratic process (Dewey

1916). I have some idea of what “the whole person” means, or at least what it doesn’t mean. It does not mean merely intellectual qualities, which public schools attempt to measure through test scores in an effort to be more accountable and to make what teachers do more measurable.

What does “democratic process” mean? I have no idea. Ostensibly, one reason we are fighting in Iraq is to help the entire Mideast democratize itself. How would that form of democracy differ from the democracy of Athens before Christ, from the democracy of present-day Switzerland, from democracy in the United States today? Democracy is the name of nothing clear.

Does school size preclude success? Because public schools are evaluated on criteria as diverse as the spelling accuracy and moral conduct of their students, unqualified success is impossible. How can any institution be so diversified? A recent Carnegie Foundation study suggested that junior high schools and middle schools were “unethical” because students were always “between” other school levels, in a no-person’s land. Are *all* large public schools “unethical” because of their size, which can easily lead to alienation?

Are credentials the point of schooling? Ivan Illich, who was a Catholic priest at the time, suggested that the United States has a “culture of credentialing” (Illich 1973). We desire initials either before or after our names—preferably both. Do you have any idea how many credentials are available to bilingual teachers? That’s an easy one. Just look it up; you may be shocked. As Illich wrote,

Many students, especially those who are poor, intuitively know what the schools do for them. They school them to confuse process and substance. Once these become blurred, a new logic is assumed: the more treatment there is, the better are the results; or, escalation leads to success. The pupil is thereby schooled to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new. His imagination is “schooled” to accept service in place of value. (Illich 1973)

Should schools make us better? Many people I know, my son included, made it through public schools “successfully,” but often their success seems to have come in spite of their formal schooling, not because of it. What I miss most about the public schools of my childhood is what Art Brown (1998) called their “spirit”—the idea that public schools could be a positive force in making individuals and our culture better. The public schools cannot be the sole reason this “spirit” has fled, but perhaps they have contributed. Suggest to a school board member that a subject might be worthy of study in itself. Even suggest that the subject could have a

benefit, like certain ethical acts that lead nowhere beyond appreciating a poem, a painting, or a philosophic idea. Inevitably, the response will involve something about test scores, capitalism, making money, and so on.

My two children, who are eighteen and nineteen respectively, call me “old school.” That is a good image for someone like me who sees the positive thrust of public schools historically, who has some understanding of the vast changes in both schooling and culture within such a short time. “Old school” does not mean a wholesale return to a utopian ideal of schooling that never existed anyway, anywhere. But this “old school” professor still sees the great potential of public schools, still knows that even amid all the abuses within public schooling in the past, present, and future, without them social justice is eradicated. The danger is that children will learn the mechanized routines of life without coming to understand the symbols inherent in cultural existence, transmission, and change.

Does money motivate teachers? If teachers just made more money, some people say, public schooling would be more successful. Truthfully, for most teachers, motivation lies elsewhere: in seeing children and young people grow up to be active, participating social beings. The growth of this nature is a slow process. It does not occur overnight. Without our public schools, without caring and competent teachers, it wouldn't happen at all.

Are public schools successful? Given the vastness and complexity of today's social, political, and cultural issues, the answer must be an unqualified yes.

References

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