

Rethinking Education (2)  
Posted On:December 31, 1969

The pandemic closing of schools has given us an opportunity to rethink what we want of our nation's education. At our country's beginning, education followed the elite British system of passing on the secular gifts of Roman and Greek knowledge, plus emphasis on the Hebrew and Greek biblical moral teachings. An added feature of this sort of education was political theory and thinking arising from the Greek and Roman experiments with republics.

This system rested on college-educated tutors hired by elite families to educate their sons. These tutors immigrated mostly from Scotland, which was then going through an explosion of learning, based on the Protestant promotion of Biblical literacy, but adding recently revived Greek learning that rested on the scientific method. Science was making a dent in superstition.

As more immigrants arrived in our young country, forming communities, Protestantism again set the tone: every village was to have a schoolhouse that taught literacy, numeracy, and history, and inculcated good behavior. Children (now including girls) absorbed the values needed to be responsible free citizens.

Public education was engaged in building citizens prepared to participate in their own governance. This proved extremely important as waves of immigrants flooded into the country, people who needed to be Americanized quickly, a need met by educating the children. Several practices were considered essential in Americanizing children: following teachers' instructions, sharing and cooperating, learning to participate in governance (elections and being generous winners and graceful losers), and assuming more and more responsibilities as the children grew older.

The content of public education focused on early reading, arithmetic, geography, history (starting with local and expanding to state, nation, and Roman/Greek/Biblical) for those students who aspired to university education. Elite universities (often church-controlled) started to branch out with Jefferson's founding of the University of Virginia, secular and state run, and agricultural colleges with monied founders (Cornell), another model quickly adopted across the country.

As the country grew, education expanded to mandate that all children from 6 to 12 have public schooling, financed and managed by States and Counties. We never had a national school system, but did somehow model similar curricula everywhere: citizenship, civics, literacy, numeracy, science, and pragmatic subjects (shop and domestic sciences). Sports soon entered, proving training good for the body and the mind (good sportsmanship) and promoting community solidarity.

This system proved so successful that within one generation of immigration, gifted students quickly Americanized and were admitted into colleges and into government positions.

This excellent system was gradually watered down in the need to educate overwhelming numbers: emancipated Blacks moving north, who had been deprived of good educations; immigrants with no tradition of public schooling; and a fad of teens disdaining school. Civics and geography were dropped, and curricula dumbed down.

Because school funding depended largely on zip code, those districts with more money got better schools. The poorest were relegated to failing and falling apart schools, resulting in a growing population of under-educated citizens.

Compounding the problem is the Internet, flooding the minds of children and the under-educated with unvetted data, conspiracy theories, popular vulgarity, and loud platforms for demagogues. We currently see the consequences of this: a sizeable percentage of the population unable to separate a big lie from fact: that our recent election was one of the fairest and most honest in history.

Our Pandemic shutdown has relegated schooling to distance, computer-aided learning, which leaves most children without socializing community of peers and mentors, and the poorest children with scant access to even computer learning.

Next time: Reforming Education.

686 words

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