

REFLECTING TODAY, CREATING TOMORROW

The Dual Role of Public Education JON YOUNG

The only hope for curing the ills of the world is that young people may picture a better one and strive to realize it. To frame this picture and to cultivate that ambition is the greatest duty of the school.¹

Education, as Terry Wotherspoon reminds us, is a social activity concerned with the development and transformation of people's lives.² Fundamentally, it is about self-knowledge and identity: about coming to know ourselves – who we are, where we are in time and space, where we have been, where we are going, what we can become, and what our responsibilities are to ourselves and to others. Recognizing that a great deal of what we know, believe and can do is *not* learned in schools, it is nonetheless the school – particularly the public school – where society's most sustained and systematic efforts to structure and direct that process for our youth takes place. With governments spending some \$37 billion in 1999-2000 on elementary and secondary schooling for more than 5 million students, the nation's education system constitutes not only one of its major public assets but also an expensive, highly visible instrument of social policy that shapes both our individual and our national identities as Canadians living in a pluralist/multicultural, capitalist democracy. It is where the interests of individual children and families meet the interests of the state, and it is where the past and present meet the future. Given this, it is inevitable that schools become the focus of a never-ending curriculum debate as to what knowledge and whose cultures constitute the appropriate and necessary basis for this process of identity formation. In Paquette's words:

Control over both the form of schooling and its academic and moral content is the symbolic battlefield wherein ideas, beliefs and cultures struggle perpetually for more control of what societies will look like in the future.³

The Socializing Role of Schools

To state that a role of schools is to contribute to the preparation of young people for adult roles and active citizenship in Canadian society masks the complexities of the task. What knowledge, skills and dispositions any one of us needs to live a fulfilling, successful and productive adult life is not something that lends itself readily to a "once-and-for-all" definition – either by any one individual or collectively by the state. Today the increasing recognition of Canadian cultural diversity and the uncertainties associated with technology and a changing global economy serve only to add to the ambiguity associated with this agenda. Yet this is the task of schools. Three questions help to illustrate the complexity of the school's socializing role: Where do the responsibilities of the school end and other socializing agencies take over? How do schools prepare different

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students for different roles? What knowledge and skills are deemed essential to this purpose?

Where does the school's role end?

We live within a complex web of different social and cultural relationships and networks that range from the local and familial to the national and the global, many if not all of which play a part in our total education. Yet the public school is not only universally available and publicly funded, it is also compulsory. Since the introduction of compulsory attendance legislation in Quebec in 1943, young people everywhere in Canada have been required by law to go to school (although across the country there are different legislative provisions relating to compulsory school ages, definitions of what constitutes a school, and the grounds on which one might be exempt from attending).

In the last half century the public school has been asked to take on more and more responsibility for shaping people's lives and addressing perceived social problems and challenges – from human sexuality and HIV/Aids awareness to conflict resolution and driver education. This broadening of the school curriculum invites further debate and raises concerns from professionals that, when carried too far, it distorts the primary purpose of schools. Expecting teachers to be 'all things to all people', they argue, prevents schools from successfully focusing on their traditional intellectual responsibilities. It also invites criticism from those parents and communities who see this expanding role as encroaching on, and undermining, the proper authority of the family and the community.

This debate over the appropriate scope of the socializing influences of the school curriculum has a long and vigorous history of both accommodation and confrontation in Canada. It has seen parents jailed and their children taken from them for not sending them to school; it has given rise to a range of different legal provisions for home schooling; and it is reflected in the array of different provincial regulations providing for the establishment, and sometimes public funding, of private/independent schools.

How do schools allocate students into an unequal and competitive social order?

To talk of preparing young people for adult lives requires us to give attention to how schools prepare particular students for particular roles in adult life, for whether we are discussing the labour market and our public lives or the social, emotional and cultural aspects of our private lives, the diversity of adult roles is great. Within the sociology of education literature, the role of schools in allocating young people to positions within the existing economic structures is seen as a major purpose of the education system. Furthermore the public school is generally seen as an



EN BREF Les écoles sont l'endroit où les intérêts de l'enfant et de la famille rejoignent ceux de l'État, et où passé, présent et avenir convergent. Les écoles sont des lieux de socialisation mais aussi de transformation. En tant qu'instrument de socialisation des jeunes, les écoles sont au cœur d'un débat sans fin qui cherche à déterminer quelle est la culture et quelles sont les connaissances qui doivent servir de fondement nécessaire et approprié au processus de formation de l'identité. Dans leur rôle transformationnel, les écoles doivent regarder au-delà des valeurs et priorités actuelles afin d'anticiper ce qui sera requis dans le futur.

appropriate agency for doing this in a way that is acceptable and fair. Two views dominate the analyses of what schools do – and should do – in this regard. The meritocratic perspective sees schools as the neutral and benign vehicle through which students explore their interests and, based on individual talent and effort, acquire the skills and credentials appropriate to different occupations and statuses in society. The social reproduction perspective sees schools serving to perpetuate and legitimize existing inequities in terms of people's access to higher status occupations. According to this interpretation, family circumstances rather than individual talent and effort are the primary determinants of school success.

While both of these analyses offer insights into the ways schools currently function, they also serve to frame quite different visions of the role of the public school in Canadian society. It is possible to argue that while the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s saw a greater commitment to creating a pluralistic, inclusive and meritocratic system, the more recent 'market-driven' orientation to public education in a number of jurisdictions will increase the degree to which family circumstances impact upon school success.⁴

What Knowledge? Whose Knowledge?

Notwithstanding the existence of home schooling provisions across the country, the private school system, and federally funded schools in First Nations' communities, close to 95 percent of Canada's diverse student population attend provincially funded public schools and follow a curriculum prescribed by the provincial governments. As Canada has, in the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, shifted from being a country with an explicitly assimilationist and Anglo-Conformist (outside of Quebec) social policy to a multicultural society in which equality rights are embedded in the Constitution, the school curriculum has been expected to reflect this new reality.

Building a new public school curriculum that can simultaneously value and incorporate the diversity of experiences that children bring to the school as well as pay attention to the perceived demands of an increasingly technological and global social order is a challenge to policy-makers, curriculum designers and teachers alike. On occasion this has led to pressures to develop culturally focused schools within the public school system, such as the Aboriginal-focused Niji Mahkwa and Children of the Earth High schools in Winnipeg. On other occasions it has seen the development of bilingual and trilingual public schools.

However, for many people the ideal of "the common school" where children from all walks of life come together and learn from one another still dominates much of our thinking about public schooling, and despite the fact that in many cities neighbourhood house prices serve to enforce their own forms of segregation, priority is given to developing curricula that are truly inclusive – which draw in/on the richness of knowledge and human experience in our diverse

society and which support learning and school success for all students.

The Transformative Role of Schools

For all of the challenges schools face to prepare society's young for the world as it is today, preparing them for the future magnifies the task in hand. Yet the role of schools has always been about building the future at the same time as it reflects the past and maintains the present. This is the notion reflected in the quote from the principal of the Winnipeg Normal School some 70 years ago at the beginning of this article and in Osborne's vision of the democratic ideal of public schools as "socializing children into a society that has yet to be created and by doing so make its creation possible."⁵

At a time when rapid and large-scale change is characterizing many aspects of our lives, preparing students for an uncertain future invites several different responses. For some, at least some aspects of Canada of the future are readily apparent, if not inevitable, and require an educational response – the call, for example, from Canada's business leaders for schools to pay greater attention to developing the skills they associate with a highly skilled, globally competitive labour force, or the need for schools to better prepare students to appreciate the cultural diversity that has long been and will increasingly become a hallmark of Canadian society. For others, little is either apparent or inevitable, and the task of schools is, more critically, to help create the future. It is in this context that the educative ideals of public school – more than just socialization – become of central importance. It is by introducing students to the broadest possible range of knowledge and experiences and engaging them in an ongoing exploration of the "big questions" of life that we equip the next generation to recognize and challenge the failings and injustice within our present world and in doing so work to build a better one.

The challenge, then, is for schools to look beyond present values and priorities, to try to envision what the future

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It is not enough for today's schools to turn out young people who can make their way more successfully in the world they find; it must turn out young people who can and will make the world better than they have found it. Dr. J.G. Althouse, Chief Director, Department of Education, Ontario. 1944

will require. Ken Osborne, in his valuable discussion of citizenship education, argues that: Canada's existence requires special qualities in its citizens: acceptance of diversity, a willingness to live with ambiguity, an understanding of the nature of the country and a familiarity with its history and, not least, the ability to enter into the continuing debate that characterizes Canadian public life.⁶

If Canada's public schools are to nurture these qualities, it is important that they resist pressures of the neo-conservative reform agenda to privilege labour market training over all other educational purposes and reaffirm the broader educational purposes of self-knowledge and democratic citizenship. If they fail to resist those pressures, says Osborne, "we will be neither individual men and women seeking to make the best of our lives, nor citizens engaged with others in a common enterprise, but only workers and consumers, fodder for the technological future"⁷

Conclusion

Finding the right balance between various pressures for socialization and the need to prepare for – and help to create – an unknown future demands that we engage in a public dialogue on public education that fosters support for public schools and public solutions to the challenges that they face. These debates need to take place at the individual school, school board, provincial and national levels, and they must be truly public, including – but not dominated by – the teaching profession. Paquette (1991) reminds us of both the uncertainty and the importance of this dialogue on public education when he says:


It is by introducing students to the broadest possible range of knowledge and experiences and engaging them in an ongoing exploration of the "big questions" of life that we equip the next generation to recognize and challenge the failings and injustice within our present world and in doing so work to build a better one.

Inevitably these solutions [to the complex challenges of public education policy] will be tentative and evolutionary, but they will be nonetheless important for the fact [that], since the quality of life that our children experience is intimately and inextricably related to the quality of the solutions we devise.⁸ ★

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Notes

- 1 W.A. McIntyre (Winnipeg Normal School principal), 1932, p. 45, quoted in Ken Osborne, "Education for Democratic Citizenship," in *The Erosion of Democracy in Education: From Critique to Possibilities*, eds. John Portelli and R. Patrick Solomon (Calgary: Detselig, 2001), 56.
- 2 T. Wotherspoon, *The Sociology of Education in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1998).
- 3 J. Paquette, *Social Purpose and Schooling: Alternatives, Agendas and Issues* (London: Falmer Press, 1991), 2.
- 4 See D. Henley and J. Young, "An Argument for the Progressive Possibilities for Public Education: School Reform in Manitoba," in *The Erosion of Democracy in Education: From Critique to Possibilities*, eds. John Portelli and R. Patrick Solomon (Calgary: Detselig, 2001) 297–328.
- 5 Osborne in Portelli and Solomon, 51.
- 6 Ken Osborne, *Education. A Guide to the Canadian School Debate* (Toronto: Penguin, 1999), 21.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 8 Paquette, 178.


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