

Negotiating “Public” Education

By Glorianne M. Leck

We in the United States have long endured non-democratic schools. Daily student life has been encased in an atmosphere of hierarchical management. Decisions about what is worth learning and doing are made by experts. Those so-called experts, be they state or local school boards, gained their sanctions through industrial and related business interests.

In the last century and a half we, as a nation-state, have centered our final claims for social and intellectual authority around the experts who did scientific studies, be they in biology or theology. Well intentioned, and evident in the work of the likes of John Dewey, educators thought our schools were a place to work together and aid society in solving economic and social problems.

The modern operations of schooling during the twentieth century have lulled most citizens into not caring to challenge the conflicting interests of the politicians, the state, and the industrialist. We learned that as citizens of the United States, we were the most advanced and fortunate people in the world. We learned to rely on experts for conflict management, and in some very real sense many of us gave up the time and lost the inclination to think beyond self-interest.

Schools in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were the source for teaching belief in science and the

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progressive value of technology for capitalism. People were cajoled and then indoctrinated into believing that truth could be objective and validated. This was not an emphasis on community of the people, but rather on a community of experts. Citizens, for the most part, were made to believe that public schools could be a neutral place once religious values were put aside. It was believed that economic skills leading to expertise could be taught in harmony with shared public values.

In the last fifty years school curriculum was loaded with constructs wherein other nation states were portrayed as foreign and suspect. We were taught that only the clandestine C.I.A. and the president knew who among the foreigners could be trusted. Today the Internet and the television tells us that the word "foreign" no longer refers to some exotic dark and mysterious entity. "Foreign" is now more likely to be seen as an opportunity for expansion of markets and prospects for new jobs. The notion that only the United States and Europe are highly advanced and civilized has worn thin.

United States government policies have gradually lost their pre-Viet Nam credibility. That, and ongoing revelations about disparity in distribution of economic benefits and social/political power, have eroded the loyalty once shown not only to political leaders, but, by extension, to the public schools. Schooling propaganda of United States superiority lost its shine and with it has gone much of public confidence in the expertise or credibility of the public schools. Schooling appears to have been too tightly tied to the government.

At some point along the way, the public schools were used by the industrialists to sell the public on the hope for upward mobility. Recently, we learned that schools were more likely to reflect the class system and maintain it rather than alter it. That failure has been made painfully obvious to many through the works of independent writers such as Jonathan Kozol.

Many poor people and racialized minorities had hoped to improve their economic conditions through public schooling. Now the same people have come to see public schools as unsafe and unhelpful. Those holding tenuously to middle-class identity have made it known that they are ready to pay tuition and argue for vouchers to try to get the kind of schooling that will maintain their dream of social stability and upward mobility for their children.

Having learned to depend on government and academic experts to help us sort through public information and its sources, we fought as good soldiers in the hot and cold wars. As the so named "cold war" politics of the latter part of the twentieth came to a halt with the disintegration of the Soviet Union, so, too, came a new twist in the role of schools. So much and so many had depended on competition with the communist world as a reason to do whatever needed to be done socially and academically. This shift in international politics brought a shift in economics. The electronics revolution, which grew out of the Cold War competition, enabled corporations to probe new markets. New prospects for the spread of consumer culture have created a demand for new locations of the capitalist economy.

Television has had a special place in all of this providing information and creating consumer markets. Television served as the source of information in the United States during the Cold War, the anti-Viet Nam War Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, the Liberation Movements, etc. Recently a television marketing vehicle, Channel One, has moved into undersubsidized American schools, assuring large corporations a strong and busy youthful consumer culture.

Electronic media has moved far beyond television. Now anyone with access can, and any story can be broadcast to the not-so-far corners of the world by an active and growing Internet computer system. As a people, we appear sometimes frustrated with and at other times giddy in the presence of this overwhelming amount of unscreened and readily available electronics information. Some are immersed in the presence of international CNN television news coverage, the world-wide web, and immediate access to individuals all over the world through electronic mail.

Never have we known a more common medium than television with which the majority of people can be quickly and uniformly informed. While there is a disparity in access to electronic information via the Internet, the access to basic information through the culture of television is widely and internationally available. Political credibility can be won or lost in a matter of days.

The very concept of "nation state" upon which the Cold War was so dependent is now strained by global economics and borderless electronic communications. Harangues about "the new world order" and "the global economy" vie for our attention. These political frameworks range from fear of an upper class conspiracy to a call to learn more math to keep the good old nation state economically competitive.

So what is it that representatives of the federal government in the United States are now attempting to accomplish with the latest aggressive movement to wedge themselves into the curriculum and testing processes of previously state-controlled and locally-run public schools? For what projects or purposes is the federal government involving itself in the certification and in the preparation of teachers? Have politicians a sense that "authority" by expertise is at risk? Is there an interest in creating uniformity to substitute for or to generate loyalty?

As I ask these questions, I am reminded of what I learned and pondered about another time and place. In the mid-sixteen hundreds, Puritans seeking religious freedom in the new continent brought their community together around the idea of creating schools. These Protestants against church hierarchy and state religions fled England only to find themselves with new circumstances related to authority. The Puritans witnessed a plethora of competing claims to right interpretation of the Biblical text within their own community. These feuds presented a major disruption, and the community elders decided to address the problem by creating a public place, a school, where children could learn to read the words through which the meaning of the text was conveyed. It was believed that this reading skill would

provide children with some opportunity to decide for and among themselves whose voice and interpretation would have the most harmful or positive consequences for them. Here, at least theoretically, children could even consider the bias of their parents and the ideologies of the clergy.

In my recontextualized version of this early American law in Massachusetts Colony (called the Old Deluder Satan Act), I want us to consider what happens to a people who have been highly dependent on a paternalism that uses institutions to control interpretation of information. What happens when the credibility of the authority is lost or critically challenged? I am asking, have the citizens of this country—the United States—been prepared with the critical-thinking skills necessary to sort this mass of electronically conveyed information? Have we any publicly agreed upon or institutionalized criteria for validity? A better question might be framed this way, “Does the claim of expertise backed by the United States government have sufficient credibility to continue to maintain a social order?”

Those early Massachusetts settlers seemed to recognize that it was the social negotiation of the meaning of language and the consideration of value that needed to be addressed in a public setting called schools. They also appear to have recognized that the existing authorities whose views were to be considered—for them the clergy and the parents—needed to be kept apart from the school. The Puritans’ covenant with schooling as a base for a people to learn to consider meaning and consequences of authority has been lost in subsequent United States legislative and judicial decisions about schooling. Political compromises with religious schooling, private interest, and government control (through strings attached to subsidies) have eroded that original schooling purpose. In the process of the evolution of United States schooling, the very decisions that children might have learned to make have become usurped by so-called experts, including, but not entirely represented by business interests on school boards and parental influences over school policies and curriculum requirements.

Consider the contrast between the early designs for schooling that I have described and those fostered by advocates for Channel One, home schooling, vouchers, public funding for parochial education, and federal involvement in nationalized testing and teacher certification.

As I see it we moved away from schools as a place to acquire basic language and civic literacy. We moved toward a schooling institution that stopped considering religious conflicts in monitored settings and in turn has become dominated by nation-state and vested economic interests. While those who were not Christian Protestants argued successfully for parochial schools, the military and business interests became more and more dominant in managing the curricula of the public schools.

Social instability may again bring the question to the forefront, “How can we as a people negotiate our values to guarantee safety and meaningful dialogue for mutual coexistence and social problem solving?” If that question is posed then, as

a nation and as members of a world community, we, like the pilgrims in Massachusetts Bay Colony, may call out again for the need for "public" education. That is to say, "public" education where the central purpose is focused on children being taught to read, think, dialogue, and consider ideas and the consequences of certain ways of believing. Until "public" schools are redirected to that primary social task, all other entrepreneurial types of schooling are legitimate competitors. Any private enterprise may claim they can better prepare children for certain job skills. Any private enterprise may claim to better prepare children for standardized testing. Any private enterprise may make the claim that they, because of who they know, can smooth the path for certain children to have advantage in a particular job market and thus hold a key to upward mobility.

Until the primary role of public schools is seen as an educational necessity for public citizenship, we will see a broad diversity of specialized schooling options. Even while teachers and teacher educators struggle to meet basic commitments to educate for public citizenship, we will find ourselves overwhelmed by the competing claims for authority over the public-school curriculum.

Meanwhile, television and the Internet—with its tremendous and unfettered ability to pursue markets—will provide a broad-based flow of relatively non-negotiated information. The individual or group that is the most persuasive within the electronic medium, as it currently sits in the heart of commercial culture, will be most likely to control the reconstruction of social and thus intellectual authority.