

Spring Essay: Education as a Power Struggle.

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In *The American School: A Global Context*, Joel Spring highlights themes that emerge throughout the history of the United States schooling system, including struggles over cultural, socioeconomic, and political dominance. Groups with competing interests often had differing concepts of how, when, where and why schooling should be made available to children. More often than not, shifts in educational philosophy had more to do with societal pressures than they had to do with the students themselves; education has long been seen as a way to solve societal problems. However, the precise nature of these problems--and how best to solve them--have been a subject of debate throughout the history of the nation. In the text, Spring communicates the tensions between warring societal visions, clashing cultural traditions, and disparate concepts of what should be considered moral, ethical, and equitable in schooling American youth. He links these concepts together in a retelling of history that illustrates how those conflicts brought about the public education system we know today.

Culture and Schooling

As early as the first arrival of European colonizers to North America, concepts of schooling were already quite different between regional groups of settlers. In northern New England, fervent religious groups establish settlements with the intention of becoming ideal societies, role models of piety (Spring, 2014, p. 16). They placed great emphasis on the education of their children (both moral and intellectual), and sought to use education as a means to save delicate human souls from the evils of the world. No greater evidence of this motivation can be found than in the name and intention of the first US school mandate, Massachusetts' "Old Deluder Satan Law", which set forth educational requirement in order to ensure that the populace

could read scripture and would obey the moral codes of the society along with biblical word (Spring, 2014, p. 17).

Meanwhile, a little further south in Virginia, the budding society focused instead on the establishment of profitable plantations. In such a place, private tutors were hired for wealthy children, while the education of the general public was minimal, perfunctory and disciplinary, where it existed at all (Spring, 2014, p. 21-22). This system confirmed social and economic class gaps between rich landowners and poor workers which would endure. In this simple comparison, already we can see the precursor of the US's liberal north and class-divided south, which would come to a violent head in two short centuries.

The budding cultural disparities between early settlers of the US, however, did not culminate in a direct ideological clash, due to regional distance. However, true cultural clashes began as early colonizers began sharing space with new immigrants to the US. In the early-to-mid 18th century, for example, a flair of xenophobia sparked up against German culture corresponding with an influx of German immigrants. Fearing that the immigrants' culture and language would begin to dominate in Pennsylvania, "the English embarked on a policy of 'cultural Anglicization'" (Spring, 2014, p. 23), where immigrants were forced to suppress their German heritage and language in favor of English. Though marginalized, conflicts between German and Dutch groups and the Anglican majority continued and isolated groups of Mennonites and Amish among others still exist, separated from the national school system to preserve their cultural heritage.

Though one of the first, German immigrants were not alone in being targeted for Anglicization. Corresponding with periods of high immigration, similar groups who were

targeted included Russian, Austro-Hungarian and Italian peoples in the 1880s-1930s, and Asian, Central and South Americans, particularly in the mid-to-late twentieth century (Spring, 2014, p. 201). In the twentieth century, “Americanization” and Anglicization in schools included efforts to change the language, cultural practices, and even the diet of immigrants. As an example, public schools in the twentieth century included a purposeful campaign to acculturate immigrants to the new American diet of prepackaged, easy-to-digest, and often bland food, compared to the complex and flavored dishes immigrants often brought from their home countries. “Through the school cafeteria, they hoped to persuade immigrant children to abandon the diet of their parents for the new American cuisine” (Spring, 2014, p. 209). Even names of immigrant children were sometimes changed in schools to sound more “American” (p. 217). This effort was not met without resistance; Spring explains that tension existed, both for children and for adults who found themselves subject to “Americanization” when attempting to attend night school, or even use public services, such as the hospital (p. 209). For some immigrants, the response was to hold tight to their cultural heritage, and to create enclaves in cities where they could maintain their traditions, language, food, and religion. For others, and for many of their children, “Americanization” would be inevitable, surrounded by and inundated with the culture of their new country.

One of the most tragic cultural struggles was that between Native Americans and American colonizers. Seen as obstacles to the expansion of European settlers, Native Americans were routinely killed, exploited, isolated in reservations (often away from their home lands), and their youth assimilated to European-style culture through missionary schools (Spring, 2014, p. 25-27). Schools dedicated to assimilating and religiously converting Native American

youth sprang up beginning in the 17th century but continued throughout American history, including Eleazar Wheelock's "Moor's Charity School" designed to teach children to live in the manner of New England farmers (Spring, 2014, p. 28). Another example of Native American acculturation attempts comes from Dartmouth college, whose charter reads "for the education and instruction of youth of the Indian Tribes... and christianizing Children of Pagans..." (Spring, 2014, p. 28). Many tribes fought back against this treatment, believing that their own culture was superior to that of the invasive European settlers, such as the Powhatan Algonquian in Virginia (p. 27).

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, some Native Americans had accepted the need for education in order to learn to read and write, to better fight for their rights and freedoms to maintain their own culture and land. The Cherokee nation was one of the few who invited in white teachers. Tensions rose when these teachers, often missionaries, attempted to alter the tribes' social habits before teaching them to read and write (Spring, 2014, p. 126). The attempt to culturally transform Native Americans was made official in the Civilization Act of 1819, which appropriated funds towards schools, but not without strings attached.

In response, an ideological schism among native peoples separated progressives who accepted acculturation as a means of promoting individual welfare and social mobility, and traditionalists who rejected European-style schooling in favor of strictly maintaining traditional ways (p. 127). Of the two groups, progressive Native Americans were more likely to accept education from missionaries, to acculturate, to trade, and ultimately gain economic advantage by participating with the larger culture of the United States. Some inter-married with those of European descent, owned large parcels of property, and even owned slaves (p. 128). Ultimately,

it was the educated children of European-descended and progressive Native American (Cherokee and Choctaw) parents who signed over all traditional lands to the U.S. government, becoming infamous figures in the memories of traditionalist Native Americans to this day (p. 129).

Religious Culture and Schooling

Another major vehicle of cultural power struggle in American schooling was religion, beginning with the “Old Deluder Satan Law” and continuing on with the philosophies of major educational leaders such as Noah Webster in the 19th century, who “equated public virtue with a Protestant Christian morality” (Spring, 2014, p. 51). As the common school movement took center stage in the mid-19th century, religious freedom and diversity became an ever more serious impediment to a national system of schooling. At this time, religion was so intertwined with schooling as to be inseparable; it was vital to an institution which was seen as a vehicle for instilling public morality. Despite most popular religions being Christian in foundation, rivalries between competing denominations made it equally impossible to choose just one for the common schools to teach.

Horace Mann, leader of the Massachusetts state board of education, attempted to resolve the conflict by proclaiming that common schools would teach only general principles of Christian morality and traits universally seen as virtuous, avoiding any details which were unique to one denomination or another (Spring, 2014, p. 84). The schools would also teach a common set of political values, and avoid any discussions which were controversial in nature (p. 85). Even so, a common agreement on religious values to be taught in Massachusetts public schools

was never universally agreed upon. As a result, many religious private schools continued on alongside public schools, as they still do.

Economics and Schooling

Throughout American history, schools have been used to control social mobility. In some cases, it was used to control and confirm societal strata, elevating the rich while subjugating the poor. At other times, it was used in attempts to provide social mobility to lower classes. In the 19th century, competing philosophies (and competing personal interests) would see different regions leaning one way or the other.

Noah Webster and the Lancaster Charity Schools represented efforts to stabilize and control populations of children, under the assumption that social problems such as crime resulted simply from lack of moral instruction and stable, disciplinary environments. The schooling systems provided by these sources did not promote economic mobility, instead focusing on control and obedience.

Noah Webster, a Connecticut teacher and textbook writer (Noah Webster House & West Hartford Historical Society, n.d.), propagated the belief that schooling should be about creating a good, moral, and *obedient* public (Spring, 2014, p. 51). Working in the early 19th century, Webster's focus was on creating a system of schooling independent from English influence (such as English textbooks and language conventions), and to relieve pressures such as over-full classrooms (Noah Webster House & West Hartford Historical Society, n.d.). However, intellectual liberation--and the economic mobility that comes with it--was not a major concern

for Websterian schooling, which was based upon the concept that children's natural passions needed to be subdued and in so doing, make children appropriately subordinate and stable in their societal roles as adults (Spring, 2014, p. 51).

The Lancasterian system of charity schools ran with this concept to the extreme. As much a training academy as a school, the mission of Lancaster schools was to reduce crime and immorality in American youth, and to do so en masse (Spring, 2014, p. 61). Many described Lancasterian schools as akin to educational factories, where many hundreds of students could be taught simultaneously through a hierarchical system of instruction combined with strict procedures and disciplinary actions. Popular in urban areas, these schools were exceedingly inexpensive to run. They emphasized obedience and industry, thereby setting up pupils to be good members of the working class; they clearly separated the educational experiences of children of differing social classes (p. 66). While some lauded these schools for taking criminal children off the street and into the schoolhouse, others rejected this type of schooling, claiming that without resolving the underlying economic problems from which crime arose, "increased education simply meant improving the educational level of the criminal" (Spring, 2014, p. 87).

In stark contrast to the beliefs that created the Lancaster schools, Thomas Jefferson argued that education should be a means through which to identify and promote a "natural aristocracy." An advocate of "faculty psychology," Jefferson suggested that complex liberal arts schooling should be made more widely available, especially to the lower classes. Through a broad liberal education and meritocratic promotion of gifted individuals to ever higher levels of education, youth from any economic class could become leaders of society (Spring, 2014, p. 56).

Jefferson's plan included the proposition that gifted children be selected from every grammar school in the country, regardless of the parents' wealth or privilege, and promoted to higher education at the public's expense. What is so remarkable about this proposition is its inherent suggestion of social and economic mobility, and it was one of the first of its kind in the budding United States.

Jefferson outlined his plan in "A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge", which was never formally implemented (p. 56). Barriers to implementation were many and included resistance from aristocracy, resistance to using public funds for the universal education of children, and resistance to equal education for both genders. However, many of Jefferson's ideas are evident in our modern system of schooling, which is universal, compulsory, available to all genders, and promotes bright students from all social and economic classes through a system of merit-based grants and scholarships. However, even with such a system, many of these promotional means are provided through private sources rather than through a government mandate, and the selection of grant winners may still be biased, based on who is providing them.

One attempt at providing education in the Jeffersonian style were schools who operated based on ideas published in *The Yale Report*, which defended the idea of "faculty psychology" whereby the student was seen as inherently talented, and schooling was meant to develop these natural talents. The job of educators was to provide a liberal arts foundation in fields such as languages, philosophy and science in order to develop a students' ability to perform higher-order thinking tasks, theoretically preparing them for a wide range of life experiences (Spring, 2014, p. 69-70). *The Yale Report* specifically objected to schools, particularly colleges, providing narrow

professional and practical curriculum, designed to limit higher-order critical thinking and funnel students into a working class occupation.

A series of advocacy groups calls the workingmen's parties developed in the mid-19th century in response to this debate. They questioned the quality of education provided by charity schools, and asserted their belief that these schools increased social class differences rather than minimizing them. Linking knowledge to social and economic power, workingmen's groups warned that a continuation of separate institutions for rich and poor Americans (liberal arts for the rich, practical training for the poor) would lead to knowledge belonging to a select strata of Americans. Furthermore, "lack of education among workingmen, it was argued, kept them ignorant of their rights and allowed for exploitation of the privileged" (Spring, 2014, p. 89).

Horace Mann (mentioned in the previous section), who helped establish early common school in Massachusetts, was one of the figures who attempted to resolve the workingmen's conflict through the creation of a public system. He believed common schools should be available to all children for a time, wealthy or not, sitting in the same classroom, receiving the same varied education based upon shared national values. In providing this universal education, paid for by property owners, Mann believed that children of the lower classes would have the tools to lift themselves out of poverty. However, unlike Jefferson, Mann did not envision or include a systematic method of elevating students beyond the common school, and left much of the burden--and the blame--of poverty and crime on the individual (Spring, 2014, p. 87).

Political Freedom, Equality and Schooling

Cultural, economic, and political struggles are tightly intertwined throughout history; disenfranchised groups tended to suffer in all three categories. African-American / Afro-American / Black Americans absolutely fit this description, but this section will address the group primarily as an example of a struggle for political freedom and equality in schooling. The terminologies for this group have changed throughout history, but “Black American” or “black education” will be used here for the purpose of acknowledging that by the twentieth century, African-Americans as a group had been so far removed from cultural African roots as to be a distinct, fully American group, with a culture that did not exist outside of North America. Furthermore, this term acknowledges the inclusion and conflation of other dark-skinned peoples with the misnomer “African American,” such as certain native peoples of the Caribbean.

Soon after the Civil War, Booker T. Washington’s “southern compromise” urged Black Americans not to pursue political power, civil rights, or higher education. In the early 20th century, the conversation shifted with the help of W. E. B. Du Bois, who in 1903 published *The Souls of Black Folk*, and helped found the NAACP in 1909 (Spring, 2014, p. 219). One of his goals was to set up young Black Americans with education sufficient to craft them into leaders of the black community, who would fight against the prevailing theory that free black people should continue to be kept in ignorance and made content assuming roles both subordinate and subservient to white people (p. 220).

Though segregated schools had existed as early as the 19th century in areas such as Boston (Spring, 2014, p. 119), a burst of schools for black children were built between 1910-1930, largely paid for by Black Americans themselves rather than from public/white tax dollars (p. 221). Though segregated, this allowed black children to begin to receive the

education envisioned by Du Bois and others, as well as providing jobs for educated black people as teachers of the next generation.

Of course, segregated schooling was not sufficient for achieving the full political right and freedoms Du Bois dreamed of, and the unequal funding of these institutions compared to white schools was painfully apparent. As early as 1833, segregated schools were reported as having inferior conditions and inferior education, which were sometimes as humble as a one-room basement in a church (Spring, 2014, p. 120). While the segregated schools of the twentieth century showed some improvements due to parental involvement, the influence of the NAACP, and the renewed belief in the ability of Black Americans to overcome their marginalization through education (p. 221), segregation simply could not continue for long. In 1954, segregation was ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court (p. 117). While this solved some problems, it created others that are apparent in our school systems today: biased treatment against black children in mixed classrooms, patterns of harsher discipline for black students, marginalization and minimization of black intellect compared to white peers, and gerrymandering of district lines to create unofficial segregation of rich from poor areas, often coinciding with racial demographics.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The American School* clearly frames our national schooling system as the result of centuries of conflict, struggle, and broad ideological shifts as competing interests vied for power and dominance over how young minds should be shaped. Cultural assimilation of immigrants and Native Americans, often compounded with racist messages and systematic

marginalization, disadvantaged these groups and stripped them of their cultural identities in favor of creating a unified national culture, despite attempts by traditionalists to maintain their identities. Schools often arrested social and economic mobility, offering vastly different programs depending on the demographics they served, offering impoverished children over-full schools with limited curricula and strict disciplinary procedures, while children of wealthy parents often had access to better schools with broad liberal arts curricula, allowing them opportunities to become the leaders of society. Groups like the workingmen's party attempted to push back on these policies with limited success. Lastly, groups such as Black Americans struggled throughout history to receive a fair and equitable education alongside white children, stymied by segregation and racist assumptions. Though their struggle did result in broad political change, unofficial segregation and biased treatment of black children remains a problem to this day.

Though *The American School: A Global Context* is a historical text, gaining insight about these struggles only highlights their enduring nature as we continue, as a nation, to battle with these very issues. Through considering the past, assessing our beliefs, and considering the virtue of our collective motivations, we may still be able to adjust our society--and schooling system--to best serve the needs of our diverse nation.

References

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