feature

Fanatical Secularism

Many educators see themselves as called to emancipate their students—a mission that can leave students imprisoned intellectually

by CHARLES L. GLENN

The Supreme Court’s majority opinion in the Cleveland voucher case, Zelman v. Simmons-Harris, was of course the most newsworthy aspect of the decision, but the dissents were no less revealing. In about 500 words, Justice Stevens managed to use the word “indoctrination” four times and “religious strife” twice. Likewise, Justice Breyer’s dissent begins and ends with warnings of “religiously based social conflict” resulting from allowing parents to use public funding to send their children to sectarian schools. Today it is a little startling to encounter these echoes of Justice Black’s 1968 dissent in Board of Education v. Allen, in which he warned:

The same powerful sectarian religious propagandists who have succeeded in securing passage of the present law to help religious schools carry on their sectarian religious purposes can and doubtless will continue their propaganda, looking toward complete domination and supremacy of their particular brand of religion. . . . The First Amendment’s prohibition against governmental establishment of religion was written on the assumption that state aid to religion and religious schools generates discord, disharmony, hatred, and strife among our people, and that any government that supplies such aids is to that extent a tyranny. . . . The Court’s affir- mance here bodes nothing but evil to religious peace in this country.

Although the Supreme Court’s decision in Allen has left no detectable sign of “disharmony, hatred, and strife among our people,” the dissenting justices
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in the Cleveland case seem to believe that the only way to avoid “indoctrination” and religious warfare is to educate children in government-run schools (even though most industrialized countries provide support to religious schools. See accompanying table, page 64). Concerns over deep entanglements between government and religion have of course haunted the nation from its very beginning. But in the education realm, the sheer hostility toward religious schools is not just a matter of separating church from state. It in part reflects and derives from the self-image of many educators, who like to think of themselves as having been specially anointed to decide what is in the best interest of children. Faith-based schools, they assume, are in the business of “indoctrinating” their pupils, while public schools are by definition committed to critical thinking and to the emancipation of their pupils’ minds from the darkness of received opinions, even those of their own parents.

What I have elsewhere called “the myth of the common school” is a deeply held view with tremendous political resonance, first articulated in the 1830s by Horace Mann and his allies. This myth insists that enlightenment is the exclusive province of public schools, which are thus the crucible of American life and character in a way that schools independent of government could never be.

The actual working out of this powerful idea in the 19th and early 20th centuries was not altogether benign. It included, for example, systematically denying that there were a number of ways to be a good American. Nor was the common school ideal ever fully realized, even in its New England home. Segregation by social class persisted, and black pupils were unofficially segregated in much of the North and West and officially segregated in all of the South. Even the famed “steamer classes” that served immigrant children in the cities of the East and Midwest often did not keep them in school beyond the first year or two.

The case for charter schools, vouchers, and other forms of “marketized” education rests not only on educational performance but also on the claims of freedom of conscience. Parents have a fundamental right—written into the various international covenants protecting human rights—to choose the schooling that will shape their children’s understanding of the world. But a right isn’t really a right if it can’t be exercised. Families who can’t afford tuition at a private school or a move to the suburbs should still be able to make choices regarding their children’s education.

There is, in other words, a strong argument against attempts by government to use schooling to achieve political or cultural change—or stability, for that matter, John Stuart Mill gave this argument definitive form in 1859, writing:

All that has been said of the importance of individuality of character, and diversity in opinions and modes of conduct, involves, as of the same unspeakable importance, diversity of education. A general State education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another; and as the mould in which it casts them is that which pleases the predominant power in the

The Enlightenment Mission
In The Myth of the Common School (1988), a historical account of how the ideology of state schooling emerged, I traced the myth’s development in 19th century France, the Netherlands, and the United States. To a great extent the myth was informed by a bias against orthodox religion, often in the name of what was considered a “higher and purer” form of Christianity stripped of “superstitious” elements such as an emphasis on sin and salvation, in favor of a purified morality and faith in progress. State-sponsored schooling was intended to replace religious particularism (whether Catholic or Calvinist) as well as local loyalties and norms with an emerging national identity and culture.

Enlightenment in this form was experienced by many as oppressive rather than liberating. In place of the convictions that had given meaning and direction, and often color and excitement, to their lives, people were offered a diffuse array of platitudes, a bloodless “secular faith” without power to shape moral obligation or to give direction to a life. The effect was to set people free for a new and more oppressive bondage, unrestrained by the custom and ceremony from which, as the Irish poet William Butler Yeats reminded us, innocence and beauty come to enrich our lives.

This political account of the development of public education continues to be helpful in understanding present-day conflicts in Western democracies. If we recognize that the attempt to achieve a government monopoly on schooling was intended to serve political purposes during a period of nation-building, we can see that this monopoly is no longer appropriate—if it ever was.

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Nonetheless, the myth of the “common school” deserves credit for many of the accomplishments of public education in this country. It articulated a coherent vision of the American character and of an America-in-process, and it made both convincingly attractive. In recent decades, however, this hopeful myth has been transmuted into an establishment ideology that borrows much of the language and the positive associations of the common school to serve a bureaucratized, monopolistic system that is increasingly unresponsive to what parents want for their children.
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triangle: how teachers and other educators have understood
education realm also require that schools refrain from seeking
to form the character and worldview of their pupils? This is one
of the central dilemmas of a republican form of government,
least in its contemporary form of limited state power. While
republics pledge to respect the freedom of their citizens, they
also depend on the voluntary adherence of those citizens to often
complex norms of civic life. As a result, as Montesquieu pointed
out, "It is in republican government that the full power of edu-
cation is needed." The citizens of a republic must be virtuous
since they govern themselves.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote that the teacher must choose
whether he will make a man or a citizen. The choice is not so
stark, but it is nevertheless real. The state may seek to mold cit-
zizens on a particular pattern, but citizens in a free society
surely have a right not to be molded, in their opinions and char-
acter, by the state. The child is not the mere creature of the state.

Emancipating the Mind

Any account of the tensions between the educational goals of
government and of families must consider the third side of the
triangle: how teachers and other educators have understood
their mission. It is easy to assume that public school teachers
line up on the side of the "state project" in education, while teach-
ers in faith-based and other nonstate schools line up on the side
of parents. But the reality is much more complex. Indeed, the
simple state-versus-parents dichotomy fails to do justice to
many educators' perception of themselves as emancipators of
the minds of their students.

As noted, education theorists have long contrasted the
emancipatory role of the public school with the "indoctrination"
they attribute to religious schools. This strikes a note with
tremendous cultural resonance. "Emancipation," Jacques Barzun
tells us, is "the modern theme par excellence." The most influ-
ential of contemporary educators like to think of themselves as
liberators of the minds of their pupils rather than as conveyors of "dead" information, such as the traditions of Western culture.

As a result, those who set the pace in the world of Ameri-
can education has increasingly been provided by big-city and
state superintendents, professors of education, and officials of
the education associations and teacher unions who see little need
to respond to the uninformed views of the general public and
of parents. This was illustrated by a 1997 Public Agenda sur-
vey of "teachers of teachers," professors in teacher-training
institutions. Of the 900 professors surveyed, 79 percent agreed
that "the general public has outmoded and mistaken beliefs
about what good teaching means." They considered commu-
nication with parents important, but not in order to learn
what education parents wanted for their children. Parents
were to be "educated or reeducated about how learning ought
to happen in today's classroom."

The professors of education surveyed were convinced, for
example, that "the intellectual process of searching and struggle-
ging to learn is far more important ... than whether or not stu-
dents ultimately master a particular set of facts." Sixty percent
of them called for less memorization in classrooms, with one
professor in Boston insisting that it was "politically dangerous
... when students have to memorize and spout back." By con-
trast, according to another Public Agenda study, 86 percent of
the public and 73 percent of teachers want students to mem-
orize the multiplication tables and to learn to do math by
hand before using calculators.

These are not purely technical questions; they reflect
assumptions about the very nature of education. The profes-
sors are expressing one form of the "cosmopolitan" values that
have been promoted by American schooling over the past cen-
tury. This perspective has made the exclusion of religion from
the public schools seem not a matter of political convenience
or respect for societal diversity, but essential to the mission of
education. It is also a sign of intellectual laziness. Teaching facts
requires knowledge, which is acquired through rigorous study
and research. All it takes to teach values is the ability to spout
your own beliefs and prejudices.

Platonic Education

The marks of this condescension can be found in the various
controversies that swirl around public schooling. State-imposed
curriculum frameworks and standardized tests are condemned
as distractions from the teaching of "critical thinking." Lecturing
is rejected as an unsound practice because it wrongly assumes
that the teacher holds some authority. Nor should the teacher
stress right and wrong solutions to the problems that she
poses; what is important is the pupil's engagement with the
search for an answer. This self-censorship on the part of teach-
ers is even more important when it comes to sex education,
where talk of "character" and "virtue" is deeply suspect.

So much is this set of attitudes—the priority of "liberation"
or "emancipation" as the central metaphor for the teacher's
work—taken for granted among American educators that the
higher performance of pupils in other countries on international tests in math and science is often dismissed as reflecting other countries’ inappropriate stress on drill and memorization. The possibility that a stress on rich curriculum content can result in lively, engaged classrooms is seldom credited. American education, is that the teacher should never impose anything on his students, nor suggest to them that there are fixed truths that can be satisfied only by hard, honest mental effort. This is the traditional justification for a “liberal” education.

The classic description of such an emancipation is Plato’s parable of prisoners in an underground cavern, convinced that the shadows on the wall are the only reality. One of the prisoners, in a process that Plato explicitly calls an analogy for education, is freed from his chains and brought to a state, literally, of enlightenment.

Plato makes it clear, though, that it is not enough to loose the chains; the prisoner must be forced to turn toward the light and compelled to venture out of the cavern. Only gradually can he bear the light of day, and only after much experience can he look directly at the source of light and truth. Even the gifted youth who are being groomed for leadership, we are told elsewhere in The Republic, should not be exposed to the pleasures and rigors of the search for truth through argument until they have mastered the disciplines of music and gymnastics and have matured through responsibility. Otherwise, Plato warns, they will just play with ideas, without any solid foundation or useful result.

While Plato stressed the laborious acquisition of knowledge and understanding as the means to enlightenment, our impatient age has preferred to think of the emancipation to be achieved through education as simply the removal of the chains of illusion (conventional morality and traditional religious world-views) without the discipline of seeking truth or the confidence that there is truth to be found.

Critical thinking and creative problem-solving are certainly among the primary goals of a good education, but they are not developed casually in the course of an undirected exploration. Nor should we assume that there is an innate human propensity to rise to that challenge. Most of us are intellectually lazy about large spheres of the world around us. For every person who really wants to know how an automobile engine works, there must be a dozen of us who are content if it starts reliably when we turn the key. This is not necessarily bad. Life would be impossible if we could not take much around us for granted, and even new discoveries rest on the discoveries of others that we do not have to repeat.

Deconstructivism

This is the fundamental wrong-headedness of another classic description of education, Rousseau’s Emile. Raised in isolation, denied the use of books and of direct instruction by his tutor, Emile is expected to learn by following his natural inclinations and responding to situations that his tutor secretly creates for him. The boy, Rousseau tells us, “instructs himself so much the better because he sees nowhere the intention to instruct him.” His tutor “ought to give no precepts at all; he ought to make them him.”

Here is the authentic note of much current pedagogical advice. The article of faith widely held among educators, especially those who have themselves benefited from the most sophisticated education, is that the teacher should never impose anything on his students, nor suggest to them that there are fixed truths that are worth learning or seeking to discover. Instead he should closely observe the interests of his students and create situations in which they are challenged to use those interests as opportunities for learning. In responding to these challenges, the students will “construct” solutions and even meanings that are uniquely their own and will thus be more deeply and validly
Teaching facts requires knowledge, which is acquired through rigorous study. All it takes to teach values is the ability to spout your own beliefs and prejudices.

learned than any that might be suggested by the teacher or by the wider culture and tradition. In the process, students will become autonomous human beings, not the mere creatures of their culture, and will develop capacities of critical judgment that will enable them to participate in creating—"constructing"—a better world.

According to a recent account of "constructivism" in the 2000 yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education:

There is to be no notion of correct solution, no external standard of right or wrong. As long as a student's solution to a problem achieves a viable goal, it has to be credited. Nor can relevant educational goals be set externally; they are only to be encountered by the student....the constructivistic teacher is to make do without any concept of objective truth or falsehood.

"Even if it were possible to educate children in this way," philosopher Roger Scruton has written, "one thing is certain: that each generation would know less than the one before.... And that, of course, is Rousseau's underlying intention—not to liberate the child, but to destroy all intellectual authority, apart from that which resides in the self." As a result, Emile is the least free of children, hampered at every point in his search for information, and "one can read Emile not as a treatise on education, but as a treatise against education." Rousseau's pupil could arrive at a quite incorrect understanding of many natural and social phenomena by relying naively on his experience alone.

Why should we concern ourselves with what Rousseau wrote almost two-and-a-half centuries ago—or indeed with what Plato wrote long before that? Because education is an enterprise, more perhaps than any other save religion, that is shaped by how we choose to think about it.

There is another tradition of thinking about education. It is expressed in the Hebrew scriptures and Jewish practice: "Why do we do these things?" The Passover questions are answered with a story about the experience of a people, a story that has sustained them and given moral direction and meaning to their lives. Does being taught a tradition and taught within a tradition prevent them and give moral direction and meaning to their lives? Does the knowledge-centered teacher, "Scruton points out," "in the business of passing on what he knows—ensuring, in other words, that his knowledge does not die with him." The teacher who loves his subject and cares about his students is concerned that the rising generation not know less than the one that preceded it.

Emancipation is among the elements of a good education; it can help to prepare the way for the exercise of freedom by removing barriers, but it does not of itself make a man or woman free. Education that supports individual freedom and a free society is induction into a culture, not as a straightjacket but as the context of meanings and restraints that make the exercise of real freedom possible. As Philip Rieff has noted, "A culture must communicate ideals...those distinctions between right actions and wrong that unite men and permit them the fundamental pleasure of agreement. Culture is another name for a design of motives directing the self outward, toward those communal purposes in which alone the self can be realized and satisfied."

It is for this reason that structural reforms supporting freedom and diversity in education are not enough; they must be paired with a willingness to confront the much more difficult issue of the purposes, the means, and the content of a good education. Diversity and choice must be paired with common standards, and the content of these must be rich and meaningful. This will require an effort for which the schooling we have received in recent decades almost unfits us, to rediscover and give new life and conviction to those elements of history and culture, the virtues, achievements, and consolations, that have at all times shaped and sustained civilization. This is not a plea for a narrowly Western nostalgia trip, but rather an insistence that only a recovery of the permanent things, of humanity's highest accomplishments, can serve as the basis for a worthy education.

Such a happy outcome would be helped along if opponents of school vouchers would refrain from scare tactics based on unfounded stereotypes about faith-based schooling. Schools that teach in ways shown to be harmful to children should be shut down, but the debate over how to organize a pluralistic education system is not helped by worst-case scenarios. Many Western democracies have faced this challenge successfully, finding an appropriate balance between the autonomy of schools and public accountability, and we can do so too, now that the Supreme Court majority has decided in favor of educational freedom.