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The Uncommonness of the Common School

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The Uncommon Common School

By Sally H. Werheim

Equality of educational opportunity is one of the current slogans educators espouse. To provide all children with a sense of community through the same education was one of the original purposes of the American Common School. According to historian Lawrence A. Cremin, the common school was to be common for all people, publicly supported and publicly controlled. This statement reflected the ideology of the educational leadership of the times, who were a confident elite trying to apply a set of principles inculcated by family background, education and a sense of civic responsibility to a newly enfranchised citizenry. They were well meaning and motivated by concern for their fellow man. However, they were not always able to achieve their goal of community because when their common school principles were put into practice, the result was not what had been expected. The very people for whom the common school was created were discouraged from attending because they felt excluded from the environment which was created.

This study will attempt to show, through documentation found in the twenty Ohio educational periodicals published prior to the Civil War, that this occurred in Ohio, one of the new frontier communities which was very active in the quest for a common school, as were other states at this same time. Following the Revolution and reflecting the principles advocated in the Constitution and Bill of Rights, it became apparent to the leadership group in Ohio that formal schooling was an appropriate means to achieving the ends espoused by the Founding Fathers. Ohio was a new frontier community which, with the passage of the Bill to establish a State School Superintendent in 1837, tried to put these goals into practice.

As communities formed in the West, social stratification seemed to occur. Certain wealthy people in important business positions assumed community leadership and were advocates of reform movements. Many of the men who published and edited the educational journals were part of, or aspired to become, the ascending leadership group on the frontier. For example, Asa D. Lord, who edited several educational journals, served in educational administrative positions, and was a doctor by training. Another editor, John Hancock, of the Journal of Progress, was part of an old aristocratic American family, being the grandson of John Hancock. William Guggenheim, one editor of the Ohio Journal of Education, was also descended from an old New England family and served in governmental posts and as an editor of other periodicals such as the Genius of the West.

As the frontier began the process of urbanization, this leadership group feared the actions of the others and sought to use the common school as a means of institutionalizing their ideas for these groups. It will be shown that the purposes of education advocated did not meet the needs of these other groups, such as the immigrant, the Catholic, the poor, the workingman, women and blacks, who were themselves becoming an integral part of the society and expected to attend the new common school.

The question might be raised whether the common school in its sincere desire to provide a sense of community by advocating the same type of education for all people in order to eliminate differences, accomplished the opposite. It often alienated these groups by expecting them to become like the majority group. Albert Picket, editor of the Western Academician and Journal of Education and Science wrote:

But the majority, under any circumstances, must be limited in the intelligence. The stronger, therefore, the reason, that profound knowledge should be extended to as many as possible, so that by intermixture in society with those of our own acquisitive opinions—their knowledge may become diffused—their habits of investigation, and their integrity by such intercourse, be worked into the minds of the mass, and become a part of their thoughts and mode of action. The attainments of well balanced minds exert great influence over those less fortunate, the greater the number of well-educated the wider will be the reach of sound reasoning and correct principles of conduct.2

Oh how simple it all seemed to Picket who was seriously stating what he and most of his contemporaries believed the schools could do. His intent was to create a system which would successfully achieve the dream of a melting pot.

The ideas which created the common school movement emerged and took root during the period known as the era of the common man when Jacksonian democracy was the rule and mobocracy, as a result of the new privileges, was feared by many.

Daniel Aaron noted that when the West was first settled, conditions of equality prevailed, but in the 1830s and '40s, slums, paupers, and class distinctions as well as societies, private clubs, and other outward manifestations


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of a class differential came into being. This was the situation on the urban, rather than rural scene. In urban localities striking disparities in wealth and diversity of occupations sharpened class lines earlier than in less populous districts. Aaron stated:

... the myth of a unified equitarian western community must be dismissed. The urban West, as well as the urban East, presents a bewildering and complex pattern of cliques and pressure groups, social, political, and economic, sometimes resisting each other, at other times working together for the common good. The dynamic which keeps the society ever moving is money and property, and the financial elite, the merchants and their professional helpers are also the social and the political elite.1 James Hall, an observer of his time writing about the West in 1849, cited the factors which differentiated the classes. He felt the resources of the country were controlled by the business community, "embracing all those who are engaged in the great occupations of buying, and selling, changing, importing and exporting merchandise, and including the banker, the broker and the underwriter." This view was underscored by Tocqueville in writing of his observations of America. He cited as reasons the fact that money in a democratic society was greater importance because it could obtain cooperation of others and served as a natural scale by which the merit of men could be measured in the absence of all other material and exterior distinctions.4 The classes, as differentiated by wealth, moved in different circles. They may have come together for business purposes, but those of the upper echelon sent their children to private schools, married them off to social equals, occupied positions of prominence as those of bank directors, supported the Presbyterian and Episcopalian churches, and served on school committees.6

Cincinnati Society Characteristic

Aaron noted the distinctions which occurred in Cincinnati society from 1819 to 1836 as characteristic of the other urban centers of the times and set up an interesting division along so-called class lines, warning that these divisions over remained flexible, except perhaps in the case of the blacks. He described the upper classes as the business element and professional men such as doctors, clergymen, editors and teachers, whose position often depended upon the status of the people they served. The majority of the population comprised what he called the lower middle class and the lower class. These included clerks, skilled workmen, storekeepers, minor tradesmen, transients, poor immigrants and the semi-skilled (as the Irish deckhands and draymen). "And at the bottom, forming a kind of lowest hellot class and exploited by all, are the hated, disfranchised blacks." Sometimes there was a merger between classes as the structure was not absolute. "In sum then, men in America... are arranged according to certain categories in the course of social life: common habits, education, and above all, wealth, establish these classifications.6 In essence the mercantile class presided over urban affairs, for the urban development produced the stratified society and "the notion of equality, though perhaps powerful in the countryside, did not prevail in the towns."18

The ideas advanced in support of education reflected the dominantly conservative ideas of the new rising class. Aaron pointed out that the conception of educated man was:

... one which harmonized especially with the aims and interests of a commercial and 'pecuniary' culture. Education... was a discipline which inculcated the recognized assumptions of the status quo, or rather the assumptions of the mercantile and land owning class.16

Education was designed to preserve the ideas of the status quo and though the people were committed to an idea of progress, it was the progress of Meyer's "venturous conservative."2 Historian Rush Welter, in discussing the concept of progress at that time, thought of education as "... a great engine against 'depotism,' ... intended only to preserve the present structure of government and society, albeit with some minor changes."13 Progress was to be a continuation of the present and educators of the times such as Horace Mann stressed the need for the schools to build a consensus of values, the values of the group who were promoting the schools.

Schools Safeguard of Freedom

What were the values of the society and what did they envision the purposes of the common school to be? In theory the common school was to be a common equalizer that would homogenize all people from diverse backgrounds. This was a need created along with the new republican government and the freedoms it granted to diverse groups. The permanence of civil institutions depended upon educating the youth, otherwise there was the danger of losing control to the many heterogeneous groups of Anglo-Saxons, Germans, and French and half-breeds which made up the population of the West. It was noted that the ideas of the immigrants should be "remodeled" by the school.19 There was interest in maintaining the government in its present form for "permanency of our institutions presupposes capability for intelligent public action on the part of every member of the community"20 and in order to secure this, the youth must be educated to preserve existing institutions in their purity. Schools were expected to safeguard democracy and keep the republican form of government from becoming corrupted by outsiders.21

Sound educational training provided a means of social control of the child. There were attitudes of fear of the masses for Tocqueville in meeting with Timothy Walker, an Easterner visiting in Cincinnati, noted Walker's concern with the power being given the masses.18 Reverend B.P. Aydelott, in an address before the closing sessions of Woodward College and High School in Cincinnati in 1836, stated his fear of the less-enlightened and the poor whom he termed "working classes" that and hope the teachers would guard them from "apostles of destruction."22 This was an argument used to gain support for the common school movement, for if the poor could be controlled by the educational system, then it would be far less costly than caring for them later as criminals or paupers. Reverend Dr. Humphrey noted that the schoolmaster's affect was for eternity because he was dealing with the plastic minds of his pupils. By making the pupils good, they would curb their waywardness as adults and would fit well into the society. The school had to act upon the young, demanding strict subordination to
prescribed rules and duties. Education would diminish atrocious action and evil, and as a result, legislation would become milder, religion would be purified from superstition and the society would be improved by the educated. Education was looked upon as a form of social insurance to be paid for as a preventive against crime, vice and pauperism. Free universal education, according to Asa D. Lord, editor of the Ohio Journal of Education, was to be the "best insurance which can be effected upon property, and the surest guarantee for the safety of property, reputation and life."

Another great concern was preventing corruption with sound moral education. This was the beginning of the conflict between those who advocated direct religious training in the schools and those who professed a need for non-sectarian moral training. Part of this battle took place in Massachusetts between Horace Mann, who advocated Bible reading without note or comment, and the group who wanted sectarian religious training in the public schools.

Schools Not Just Intellectual Training

In Ohio, the concern of the people was with the question of moral principles as part of educational training. There was concern expressed that the intellectual needs of the children were being attended to, but that their affective or spiritual culture was inadequate. There was emphasis placed upon development of the whole mind, body and spirit with education promoting loyalty to parents, good institutions, good government and to heaven. It was important to keep the passions in check and to provide youth with discipline using stern principles of religion and morality when children were young. Moral education took precedence for, it was noted in The School Friend that, "we are free to say, unhesitatingly, that we consider a right education of the mind, the development of the intellectual character, infinitely more important than any degree of pure intellectual education."

In addition to political, moral and social purposes, it was noted in The Universal Educator that the schools were still expected to "cultivate all the powers and faculties of mind ... to an equal standing with those of their fellow beings who possess the greatest degree of knowledge, wisdom and goodness." It was hoped that the schools would produce good learners, not necessarily learned men. The intellect was created not to receive material passively, but to use its powers to observe, reason, judge, contrive and be active in acquiring truth, through inquiry.

While development of the intellect was deemed important, advice was often given against "premature mental effort to be the real cause of very much of the evil which is charged against study itself." It was argued that too much study could be injurious to health, monotonous and tiresome. It was even suggested that schools were being promoted to keep students from the employment market, and that shorter sessions should be the rule. Reverend Edward Thompson felt that "genius is more frequently a curse than a blessing. Its possessor, relying on his extraordinary gifts, generally falls into habits of indolence, and fails to collect the materials requisite for useful and magnificent efforts."

Another of the primary objectives of the school was to teach the youth to labor efficiently by instructing them in the principles of business. A differential was drawn between those who attended the colleges and academies and those who sought a livelihood as laborers. The school was to assist in making the individual productive both to himself and to the society. The schools would produce laborers, industrious shop-keepers, prosperous and wealthy mechanics, and honorable merchants. They would then become influential citizens and act as stimulants to prosperity.

So regardless of the diversity of the student's background, aspirations, ideas, or personal values, the philosophy of education of the first half of the nineteenth century was to prepare the student morally, intellectually, vocationally, socially, and politically to fit readily into the ideal of community for the society which was being built. The plan was to take all these students, but provide them with the kinds of schooling to ensure social democracy. The common school was designed for the major social group and was, in reality, an uncommon school. Evidence to this effect can be found in the many ways the different groups were viewed and how the programs in the schools were designed for them. In planning education for all, the needs of such groups as the Black, the Indian, the woman, the Catholic, the Jew, the poor, and the immigrant were often overlooked in the zeal to provide community for all. This problem was even recognized by Marcellus F. Cowdery, a noted leader of the times:

"It has certainly failed during the last fifteen years, of commanding general confidence, and of meeting the wants of our increasing population ... while it affords encouragement to the acquisition of knowledge to a majority of the children of the State, it neither aims at the proper education of all, nor provides means adequate to the accomplishment of this object."

Educational views expressed about these minority groups provide insights into how they were viewed. This becomes obvious in noting how the poor were viewed. John Pickett, expressing his concern for the poor, questioned what would happen, "unless the hand of charity is extended to their aid." Many journal articles talked about the lower classes in derogatory ways. Asa D. Lord noted that the number of illiterates had increased since 1840 and attributed this to the influx of foreigners, "many of whom are known to be deplorably ignorant; it is unquestionably true that a large portion of our youth are either orphans, or the children of those who have no just views of the importance of education ..." He went on to affirm that these types of people allowed their children to leave school whenever they could go to work and those that stayed caused trouble in the schools. Stereotypes of the poor were also perpetuated. For example, it was noted that "taste and refinement had to be advanced in the schools to prevent the homes of the poor from being "a receptacle of filth ..." Poverty and crime were almost always equated. The evil habits were traced to a lack of instruction for those "whose natural mental powers have been smothered for want of civilization.""
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pupils good, they would curb their waywardness as adults
and would fit well into the society. The school had to act
upon the young, demanding strict subordination to
religion. The Board did not deem this objection sufficient enough to reject the book, however, Hancock editorialized that immigrants had rights and privileges of nates, but "... we believe we ought to have and assert some sort of national character. Though we have no established church, yet we believe the religion of our people to be decidedly Christian and Protestant, and we have no desire to see it anything else." 31

Typical of the treatment accorded to the American Indian was the fact that both the Indian and the Negro were excluded from the schools which were designed for all. The Negro was relegated to separate schools by the Ohio Supreme Court. Those who were more than three-eighths African and were colored in appearance were also not allowed to attend the common schools. This condition of special schools for blacks existed in Ohio till after the Civil War, despite the fact that in 1828, 10 percent of the population of Cincinnati was Negro. Richard Wade in his study of The Urban Frontier concluded that "at just the time when the black population expanded most rapidly, its contacts with other Cincinnatians lessened markedly." 32 This happened at the time when the idea of a common school for all people was just getting started as the means of providing social intercourse for all in the society.

They felt they were providing for the education of all the children in the state, but only in separate institutions. To the thinking of the leadership this was a progressive step, for there were those serving on the Committee on Education of the Ohio Constitutional Convention in 1850, who argued against provision of any type of education for the Negro. 33 In one place, the Dalton School District, integrated schools for the Negro were advocated, but never accepted. Minority groups occupied little of the plane of the majority power structure as it went about planning an educational system which was to be available and common to all.

Problems Developed

As the schools developed, evidence began to appear that there were many problems the schools encountered as they tried to provide a common school experience. Merle Curti, in his study of an American frontier community, noted that many did not participate in the formal educational process because some lived in remote sections, there were language barriers for the foreign born, a lack of interest on the part of parents, and that poverty played against education. 34 Though Curti's study was of a small community, many of his conclusions paralleled ideas which were discussed in an article in the Ohio Journal of Education. This article dealt with enemies of the common school, placing them into three categories, (1) those unwilling to be taxed, (2) those unwilling to have their children associate with the vulgar and rude, and (3) those who wanted their children instructed in sectarian religious forms. 35 Asa D. Lord wrote about the disinterest in making repairs to buildings and improving existing facilities. He also discussed the subject of irregular attendance; and in other articles statistics were quoted which showed an absentee record of 20 percent of those enrolled in the Cincinnati schools. 36 By 1860 certain statistics showed that less than half of those eligible to attend schools were enrolled. Such variables as illness, deaf roads, and the lack of shoes kept many children from the schools each year. 37

Perhaps some of this disinterest existed because the schools were not serving the needs of all the groups for whom they were intended. The leaders of the common school movement believed in and supported the concept of a school common to all people, where a common educational program could advance common values and aspirations of a democratic society. This did not provide an opportunity for education in terms of different individual's particular needs or values. The concept of providing for community was not fully realized for certain groups.

Though the leadership group was well-meaning, even they recognized that they did not achieve what had been intended. The Ohio public school system was never able to provide true equality of educational opportunity for all—it served only one class. Its problem has been and still continues to be that it is a common school, with common goals trying to create a community for a society whose needs are not necessarily common. Until it begins to provide for the diversity of the population through purpose and program, it will encounter difficulty in achieving its goals. The uncommonness of the common school will continue to preclude the possibility of equality of educational opportunity, now as then.

FOOTNOTES


2 Western Academician and Journal of Education and Science, I. No. 1 (1837), 229.


7 Aaron, "Cincinnati," p. 93.

8 Pierson, Tocqueville and Beaumont, p. 551.


10 Aaron, "Cincinnati," p. 335.


13 "Our Public Schools," Western School Journal, I, No. 2 (1847), 9.


Any Educational System? The School Friend, V, No. 3 (1850), 40. 
Mr. Grable, "Common School Government," The Ohio Teacher and Western Review, I (1850), 540-42.

- Pierson, Toqueville and Beaumont, p. 561.
- "The Universal Educator," 3.
- John W. Picket, "Lancaster and Pestalozzi," Western Academician and Journal of Education and Science, I, No. 6 (1837), 274.
- Samuel Lewis, "Free Schools," Ohio Common School Director, I, No. 3 (1839), 44.
- Catherine E. Beecher, Educational Reminiscences and Suggestions (New York: J.B. Ford, 1874), notes this several times throughout the book.
- Samuel Lewis, "How to Get Good Teachers," Ohio Common School Director, I, No. 5 (1838), 70, 72.
- "Ibid., 1, p. 72.
- "Mingling the Sexes in School," The School Friend, V, No. 6 (1850), 88.
- Samuel Lewis, "On What Can We, As Americans United Do, To Indicate Our National Character?" Ohio Common School Director, I, No. 3 (1836), 46; see also, "Notes of an Eastern Tour," Ohio Teacher and Western Review, I, No. 4 (1850), 105.
- Ohio Teacher and Western Review, II, No. 4 (1851), 181.
- "Notes of an Eastern Tour," 105.
- For a description of Indian Education see, "Education of Indian Tribes," Western School Journal, I, No. 4 (1848), 172.
- Wade, The Urban Frontier, p. 220.