
BACKGROUND BOOKS

THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Apart from the Civil War, perhaps no topic has generated more books about America by Americans than education. The two subjects have at least one thing in common—enduring controversy among the specialists.

In **Schooled to Order: A Social History of Public Schooling in the United States** (Oxford, 1979), David Nasaw sums up the current “radical” critique of education: “Public schools are social institutions dedicated *not* to meeting the self-perceived needs of their students but to preserving social peace and prosperity within the context of private property and the governmental structures that safeguard it.”

School administrators, Nasaw charges, stress vocational education for poor and minority students, while offering academic programs to white middle-class youths.

A sharp counterargument comes from Diane Ravitch in **The Revisionists Revised: A Critique of the Radical Attacks on the Schools** (Basic Books, 1978). Ravitch contends that lower-income Americans have *rightly* trusted the schools to improve their children’s prospects for higher economic status. She cites studies (by Stephan Thernstrom and others) indicating that upward mobility has characterized life in America during the last 100 years.

Schools may provide the ticket to a better life, but do they prepare students for the journey? In her thoughtful analysis of changing themes in American history textbooks, **America Revised** (Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1979), Frances

FitzGerald faults most narratives for depicting the world as a place “without malice or stupidity.” Pupils who learn bland versions of the past, she suggests, risk feeling “that their own experience of conflict or suffering is unique . . . and perhaps un-American.”

Controversy over the purposes of education in a democratic society is not new, as Lawrence A. Cremin’s general histories make clear. **The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1879–1957** (Knopf, 1961, cloth; Vintage, 1964, paper) traces the debate over academic rigor versus the “use of the schools to improve the lives of individuals,” from the common schools to the launching of Sputnik.

Two giants who helped shape U.S. schools were Horace Mann (1796–1859) and John Dewey (1859–1952).

Known as “the father of the American public school,” Horace Mann was a tireless, ever-optimistic reformer. In **Horace Mann: A Biography** (Knopf, 1972), Jonathan Messerli recounts his broad interests in politics and social uplift. In addition to serving in the Massachusetts legislature and as a U.S. Representative, Mann bitterly opposed slavery and helped establish America’s first state hospital for the insane at Worcester, Mass., in 1833.

In **The Life and Mind of John Dewey** (Southern Ill., 1973, cloth; 1978, paper), George Dykhuizen demonstrates that Dewey, like Mann, was something of an overachiever. Co-founder, with Charles Sanders Peirce and William James, of the philosophical school of Pragmatism,

his writings had a lasting effect on the disciplines of philosophy, psychology, and pedagogy.

There are books that describe education and books that attempt to *change* it. During the 1950s, James Bryant Conant took "academic inventories" of American high schools. Many of the Harvard president's recommendations, recorded in **The American High School Today: A First Report to Interested Citizens** (McGraw-Hill, 1959), have been widely adopted, particularly in the suburbs: third- and fourth-year language courses, tuition-free summer schools, the grouping of students in each subject according to ability.

In 1964, Congress ordered a survey of educational opportunity. Two years later, sociologist James S. Coleman and six fellow researchers issued **Equality of Educational Opportunity** (Government Printing Office, 1966). They reported on the relationship between students' achievement and the kinds of schools (segregated, integrated, rich, poor) attended. Among their findings: Minority students from poor homes do better in affluent white schools. Their research helped convince the courts to adopt plans for "immediate integration" (i.e., busing).

Two contrary studies followed, headed by Harvard sociologist Christopher Jencks. **Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America** (Basic Books, 1972, cloth; Harper, 1973, paper) shows that an adult's income is determined primarily by employers' biases and "luck," rather than by family background and the number of years spent in school. "The evidence suggests," the authors contend, "that equalizing educational opportunity would do very little to make adults more equal."

Jencks' second analysis devotes only a few chapters to education's impact on adult Americans' paychecks. **Who Gets Ahead? The Determinants of Economic Success in America** (Basic Books, 1979), is rigorous, technical, and difficult to read. It reveals, among other things, that the earnings of white- and blue-collar workers are not affected by the quality of primary and secondary education they received.

Various groups in the United States have distrusted the public schools and have attempted to do the job themselves. In **Catholic Education in a Changing World** (Holt, 1967, cloth; Univ. of Notre Dame, 1969, paper), George N. Shuster notes that in 1840 America's 200 Catholic schools served a missionary function. Later, their role changed. Catholic immigrants saw them as bulwarks of the faith and as guardians of traditional values.

Meanwhile, the sons of both ministers and millionaires went to austere Protestant boarding schools in New England. In **The Headmaster: Frank L. Boyden of Deerfield** (Farrar, 1966, cloth; 1979, paper), John McPhee superbly describes a man "at the near end of a skein of magnanimous despots." Boyden came to Massachusetts' Deerfield Academy in 1902 and was headmaster for 66 years. McPhee ranks him with other famed Yankee autocrats—Groton's Endicott Peabody, Andover's Alfred Stearns, and Exeter's Lewis Perry.

The poor had to settle for less. According to Henry Allen Bullock in **A History of Negro Education in the South: From 1619 to the Present** (Harvard, 1967), as late as 1910 there were no black public institutions in the South's segregated school systems that offered even two years of high school. Oddly, neither Bullock

nor any other historian has examined in depth black successes in education below the university level. Black prep schools in the South evolved into colleges. Washington, D.C.'s Dunbar High School, America's first black public high school, was founded in 1870; over an 85-year period, 75 percent of its graduates went on to college.

Unlike the United States, where education is left to the individual states, Britain loosely controls its school system through four separate ministries that answer to Parliament. In **Education in England and Wales** (Shoe String, 1978), H. C. Dent notes that school principals decide what subjects to teach and which teaching methods to use. Religious instruction is mandatory in primary and secondary schools. Secondary "grammar" schools provide the brightest 20 percent with an academic curriculum leading to final exams, a General Certificate of Education, and, often, a university. The remainder attend technical schools or secondary "modern" or "comprehensive" schools, offering tracks from academic to vocational.

A Common Entrance Examination taken by boys 12 and 14 years old sorts out candidates for entry into the famous "public" (private boarding) schools—e.g., Eton, Harrow, Winchester. In a colorful history, **The Old School Tie: The Phenomenon of the English Public School** (Viking, 1978), Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy examines these schools' reputations for snobbery, homosexuality, brutality, and solid academic performance.

In **Education in Japan: A Century of Modern Development** (Govern-

ment Printing Office, 1975), Ronald S. Anderson notes that students must attend classes from one to two months a year more than their American counterparts; thus by the end of the ninth grade, many have logged nearly two additional years in the classroom. Students go into either academic or vocational programs in high school. "A graduate of the vocational track," writes Anderson, "cannot go on to the university, no matter how promising he may be."

W. D. Halls notes that central control of French schooling predates the 1789 Revolution, in **Education, Culture and Politics in Modern France** (Pergamon, 1976, paper): "The school is the instrument of the State to promote national feeling . . . to induce a sense of civic responsibility . . . to foster loyalty to the regime." The Ministry of National Education in Paris still directs teacher training and dictates all curricula. Thus, for example, at a given hour, all French children at the same grade level will be studying Descartes.

The closest thing America ever had to a national curriculum was **McGuffey's Eclectic Readers** (7 vols., Van Nostrand reprint, 1978), 100 million copies of which were sold between 1836 and 1900. The *Primers* were concerned with morals, God, and elocution, as well as with the alphabet, words, and simple sentences. The *Fifth* and *Sixth Readers* exposed very young children to Defoe, Shakespeare, Dickens, Emerson, Thoreau, Jefferson. The current faddish nostalgia for the *Readers* should not be held against them; they were successful in getting generations of American children to read.