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Universal Education for a Free Society



Prior to the formation of the United States, and for a while afterward, education was a privilege for the wealthy who could afford to hire teachers to instruct their youth. Today publicly funded K–12 schooling is provided for all. Education is an absolute necessity for a democratic, free society, and a state-controlled public education is the epitome of a democracy. The citizens as a community pool their taxes and revenues to fund the schools. The citizens also elect the officials who manage the schools and set curriculum and teaching standards without intervention of the federal government, except in the instances when the state system is not in compliance with the U.S. Constitution, which government agencies must comply with to provide equal protection of the law to all citizens. (See chapter 6 for a discussion about the policy of equal educational opportunity). In broad strokes, this chapter explores the establishment of universal public education in the United States, its rationale, and its goals.

Education for Democracy

Soon after the United States was formed, Thomas Jefferson wrote, “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be” (as cited in Padover, 1939, p. 89). Jefferson was aware that illiterate and ignorant citizens could not govern themselves and would be ruled instead by the wealthy, who had the money to educate their children. Without public education, the new American government would not be a democracy, but an oligarchy—rule by the few. Democracy and education are thus inextricably linked—addressing the *pluribus* in *e pluribus unum*—and education for democracy must prepare students to be good citizens.

Jefferson envisioned universal, nonreligious education available for all to ensure the nation would have literate and politically active citizens.

He first attempted to institute this kind of education on a smaller scale in Virginia, where he proposed “A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge” (Padover, 1939, p. 89). The bill divided Virginia into twenty-four districts subdivided into wards, similar to contemporary counties with school districts. In each, an elementary school was to be built and maintained at the expense of the citizens in the ward. The curriculum consisted of reading, writing, and arithmetic. All free children in the ward, male and female, would receive three years of instruction free of expense, and additional years as their parents chose to pay for it.

In each district, an academy or grammar school was to be established and supported at the public expense to teach the classics, grammar, geography, and the higher branches of arithmetic. Furthermore, district citizens would elect a board of education. The board would hire a superintendent who would hire and evaluate teachers by testing the children. The teacher was retained if the children could recite the knowledge contained in the county board’s curriculum.

The bill was not enacted in its original form or in its 1797 revision. Wealthy Virginia citizens did not want to pay taxes for the education of the poor. Though the bill was killed, the idea lived and influenced others. Jefferson’s idea laid the conceptual frame for what we have today: publicly funded education. Now some two hundred years later, there are fifty robust school “systems” in the United States, one for each state, under the control of publically elected officials at the district, county, and state levels. One person influenced by Jefferson’s ideas was Horace Mann, a U.S. senator from Massachusetts and an advocate of publicly funded schools (Downs, 1974). By the 1840s, the nation was slowly drifting toward industrialization. Large numbers of children lived in cities and were not being educated because they were working in sweatshops, cottage industries, factories, and mills. For numerous reasons, rural areas were slow in establishing schools. A scarcity of teachers existed everywhere, and those who taught were not well trained to teach children. Jefferson’s ideal of a literate, politically active citizenship was floundering.

When Mann was appointed to be the superintendent of education for the Massachusetts Board of Education in 1837, he initiated an effort to address the following six theses:

1. People should not remain ignorant, or they will lose their freedom.
2. Publicly funded education should be provided, controlled, and maintained by the public.
3. This kind of education is best when children of all backgrounds attend.
4. This education should be nonsectarian but friendly toward religion.
5. Its philosophy, methods, and values should be those of a free society.
6. Its teachers should be well-trained professionals. (Downs, 1974)

Mann worked tirelessly for a “normal” (ideal or model) school system in Massachusetts. These schools would serve all children as the great equalizer, making the poor equal to others. This education would thus be of practical benefit to the individual as well as the state.

In Mann’s vision, children would attend a well-equipped, publicly funded school where they would share a common curriculum and learn the same subjects. Well-trained teachers were the key to make the idea flourish, so Mann established the first normal school for the professional education of teachers. With Mann’s assistance, New York State followed Massachusetts’s example. By slow degrees, the idea caught on all over the United States. An education was soon considered so important that it became compulsory, which took children out of the labor force where they were being exploited as low-paid workers in mines, mills, and factories.

The term *common schools* flowered nationwide. Schools became the United States’ commons, the place the people of a community share for the benefit of the community. There were glitches, however. Because the common schools reflected their communities, they were often segregated by race and class, and in the case of Native Americans, the federal government imposed segregated education in boarding schools far from the student’s home reservation. (These are now closed or under Native American control.)

But to this day, schools serve as the commons or center of many communities. Jefferson’s ideal—a literate, politically active citizenry—also

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Honoring Culture and Self-Identity



As students pass through classrooms each year, teachers have a limited amount of time to learn their names, discover who they are, and ideally, teach them something of value. Given the immense diversity of students and cultures, the task of truly understanding each and every student's culture is daunting, much less the unique characteristics of each student beyond culture. How, then, can teachers hope to identify and understand the diversity issues that arise in the teaching of students from many backgrounds? Moreover, having made these necessary discoveries, how can teachers help their diverse students understand similar issues as they make their way in the world?

To answer these questions I propose two essential attitudes for teachers. First, it is important for teachers to acknowledge—and work to understand—manifestations of human difference. Second, as part of such acknowledgment, teachers must know themselves well and come to terms with their attitudes toward human differences, recognizing their preferences, biases, and prejudices. To these ends, this chapter provides a nuanced explanation of human diversity in terms of culture and self-identity regarding issues such as race and ethnicity; sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation; English proficiency; and learning style preferences.

Family Culture

Culture is a means to survive and thrive learned through the shared experience of social interaction. Students are born into their respective culture and become competent individuals with unique self-identities to the extent they reconstruct the values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors learned from others within their culture. Social scientists call this phenomenon “the looking-glass self,” a process of self-identity

formation through social interaction. Simply put, adults mirror to youngsters what is expected within the culture. The adults serve as role models of cultural expectations.

The family is a culture's most important institution. No culture can survive without it. In fact, a culture is really a community of families with shared experiences, values, beliefs, folkways, customs, and tools. Other institutions play a key role in any given culture, the school being paramount among them. Until the mid-1960s, in fact, schools were considered an extension of the family, and teachers in U.S. schools acted *in loco parentis*—in place of the parents—with parental rights, duties, and obligations for children similar to their parents. That doctrine has been replaced by a doctrine of individual rights: students and teachers have rights as individuals, such as right to expression, privacy, religion, and so on. This is a legal shift in viewpoints to ensure that students do not leave their constitutional rights at the schoolyard gate. Nevertheless, many still view schools as extensions of the family.

Family is not only culture's most important institution, but the individual's most important group. It fills many human needs. The list is long but includes love, intimacy, affirmation, protection, food, and health. Self-identity and resilience are first learned in the family. If students are lucky to be reared in a happy, nurturing, and loving family, they can overcome almost any obstacles life throws at them. If they are unlucky and are reared in an unhappy, dysfunctional family, they will more than likely face difficulties with life's challenges.

We should assume nothing about our students' home life, including the value of the structure of their families. There is no such thing as an ideal structure that works best for all families. Structures vary within and across cultures. In some cultures, families may be matrilineal, organized along the mother's biologic lines with the mother as head of household. In others, families may be organized along the father's lines. In others, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other adult relatives play an important role.

Around the world, there has always existed diversity of family structures. What follows is a summary of current U.S. family structures. The *nuclear family* consists of a husband, wife, and children. The

extended family consists of one or more nuclear families plus other relatives, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and so on. The *blended family* is made up of two previously married parents and the children of their former marriages. Among Native Americans, there is also a *tribal family* structure consisting of a clan of many families living in close proximity with the same functions as an extended family (Demo, Allen, & Fine, 2000).

Family structure means more than mere numbers. For example, the extended family entails much more than “more people.” Among Mexican Americans, *La Familia* refers to children, parents, unwed mothers or fathers, grandparents, and possibly uncles and aunts who live in the same household or in close proximity. The elders are held in high regard and are involved in decision making. They may also serve as disciplinarians with the children, assist with some of the household chores, or help the children with homework, after-school functions, and so on. In their absence, aunts or uncles may serve their roles. The elders also serve as the holders of family traditions and stories, which they pass down to the children as they learned them from their own parents.

Among its many features, *La Familia* provides intergenerational bonding and cares for the elderly in a dignified environment. It solves many challenges faced by contemporary families, such as how to care for the elderly and how to assist children when the parent or parents work. I describe *La Familia* because of my personal familiarity. Other cultures adhere to their own traditional family structures and are worth learning about.

Family compositions have changed significantly. Many different kinds of single persons or couples serve as heads of households, such as gay and lesbian, interracial, and multiracial couples. For too long, people considered the ideal family composition to be the so-called nuclear family with a working father, stay-at-home mother, and the children. No doubt this ideal worked well for some, but the emphasis is misplaced. If the arrangement worked well, it was because the family was functional, loving, nurturing, and more or less happy. A good family life is the result of the quality of parenting and good luck, although structure and composition influence relationships within a family.