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Education, Democracy, and the Science of Individual Differences

> The question of mental capacity from the standpoint of race has become of particular interest for America on account of the immigration situation and the presence of the Negro. In this connection it becomes important to determine how a race rises from one level of culture to another, whether by internal stimulation and native ability, or by accepting and imitating the culture of the higher level of society; and more particularly, which races are fit to progress and which are not, and why.
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> W. I. THOMAS (1912)[1]

> It has been recognized that equality of opportunity is not provided when all children must take precisely the same work, that what may be a significant opportunity for one child is a relatively valueless opportunity for another. Rather, the term has come to mean that every child should have equal opportunity to develop his particular abilities and aptitudes for successful and happy living in a democratic order. It is under the pressure of this demand that the curriculum has been broadened, special classes formed, varied types of materials introduced and flexibility of school organization increased.
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> HOLLIS CASWELL AND DOAK S. CAMPBELL (1935)[2]

When W. I. Thomas, the University of Chicago sociologist, posed his questions about race, he did so in order to encourage research that would dispel popular ideas about the innate inferiority of some races. In 1912, at the height of the progressive era, Thomas used a variety of sources, including Franz Boas and W. E. B. Du Bois, to argue for the primacy of culture and social environment in the formation of group character and to insist on the capacity of all races to learn. Thomas was not specifically addressing the problem of the schools, but his article contained a significant quote which underscored the meaning of the American faith in education as it had hitherto been understood and expressed by social progressives. In Poland, in the mid-nineteenth century, according to one of Thomas's sources, "the feeling of the nobles with regard to education of the peasant was expressed in the opinion . . . that culture not only did not become the peasant, but for the most part he was incapable of it."[3] The belief that certain segments of the population were incapable of being educated un-

derscored, by contrast, the firm commitment initiated by the common school ideal and confirmed by social progressives that all Americans could be educated.

In the 1920s, views like those of Thomas, which explained racial characteristics in primarily cultural terms, grew in certain academic circles, especially in anthropology and sociology. But these views competed with and were frequently eclipsed by another and increasingly powerful explanation that provided very different answers to Thomas's concerns. In answer to Thomas's inquiries about mental capacity in the context of immigration, this view brought a sharp and unadorned emphasis on differences that were inborn, unlearned, and impermeable. And it was this set of beliefs, deeply informed by a psychology of measurement and expressed in IQ testing, that exerted the most powerful influence on the schools. The emphasis on inborn differences cast a pall on traditional American assumptions about the educability of all, and throughout the 1920s it existed in deep tension with the continuing pressure for more and longer education. The tension between fuller education for all Americans and the implied limitation on the educability of many outside the American mainstream characterized school development during its crucial period of expansion and is fundamental to an understanding of the particular meanings that schools gave to their adoption of progressive concepts and language. For while progressives had challenged the schools to expand and deepen their commitments to democratic education, they left an unclear legacy, incomplete definitions, and ambiguous challenges to an institution already deeply troubled by the practical realities of immigration.

The reasons for the increased reliance of the schools on forms of thinking that emphasized the inborn rather than the learned were complex as I hope the following discussion will reveal. But certain underlying influences can be more simply suggested. First, by emphasizing schooling as socialization, progressive social reform had impressed upon the schools the necessity to define the child whose schooling was their object, and this made the schools turn to those tools, above all the IQ, which could provide an efficient and cheap definition. Secondly, progressive school reform, which exerted an increasing influence as school systems grew in size and complexity, was part of another face of progressivism—managerial reform, from which it drew significant inspiration. And while social reformers expressed progressivism's most generous impulses and humane directions, managerial reformers, who were enamored of efficiency, expertise, and a systematic approach to institutional development, cast a long shadow over the entire period. Thus while social reformers' expectation of the new role that schooling would play in society added gravity to the schools' burdens and renewed seriousness to their purpose, it was the emphasis on system and

order that defined the direction of school development in the 1920s. When the pedagogical emphasis on socialization and the institutional pressure for systematic expansion were combined with the reality of millions of school-age children from foreign homes and cultures, the product was both the fulfillment and the devaluation of the democratic faith in schooling.

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The expansion of American education in the early twentieth century was often described in language drawn from the theater or the circus: "dramatic," "spectacular," "amazing," "extraordinary." Though overdrawn, the adjectives capture certain dimensions of the phenomenon. How else describe a system that within the half century from 1890 to 1940 saw the proportion of all children five to seventeen years of age attending school soar from 44 to 74 percent? How else portray an industry in which the annual expenditure per child climbed from 17 to 105 dollars in the same period and for which the average number of attendance days rose from 60 to 130?[4] Ordinary words fail to convey the scope of an enterprise which from a rudimentary dedication to teaching reading, writing, and citizenship prided itself by the 1920s and '30s on its medical services, vocational guidance programs, mental hygiene clinics, social dances, orchestras, gymnasia, free lunches, and community centers. Small wonder that the words of description were often also words of praise, suggesting that like the triumphant economy of which it was part, the development of education in the United States was simply larger than life.

Larger than life too were the problems with which the schools were forced to deal. Progressive reformers had articulated as an imperative and in theoretical form the burdens the schools were already beginning to carry—the burdens of a heterogeneous population and a rapidly changing environment. While John Dewey and those he influenced and represented challenged the schools to define democracy's future, school systems throughout the nation were, for better or worse, struggling with what had become an importunate democratic presence. Above all, the schools were confronted by the problem of heterogeneity, as a dramatically expanded population, which in cities meant overwhelmingly the children of immigrants, carried their different backgrounds, aptitudes, and behaviors into the heart of the schools and forced educators to seek pedagogical solutions to what were often social problems.

To the problem of heterogeneity, educators increasingly brought what is best described as the organizational solution—a remedy whose essential component was efficient instruction. While it was part of what Michael

Katz described as the bureaucratic tradition already implicit in nineteenth-century school development, the organizational solution drew heavily upon contemporary social developments, especially a faith in science and a new cultural orientation to hierarchical thinking that had a specially pungent influence on matters concerning race and immigration. The concept of IQ and testing for mental capacity which developed in this context became for the schools the most efficient organizational solution to the pedagogical problems posed by heterogeneity.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the schools had been moving toward more systematic forms of organization as they responded to the growing professional self-conciousness of school administrators, especially in urban settings. At the same time, public schools were from the mid- to the late nineteenth century witness to repeated and often explosive conflicts (wars, Diane Ravitch has called them) as different groups hoped to bend the schools to their needs in order to achieve or retain power over the schools' programs and directions. Politicians, businessmen, church leaders, labor unions, teachers, pedagogical reformers, parents, all projected their own perceptions and demands onto the schools. By the late nineteenth century, those demands often appeared under the progressive umbrella. In the end, the conflicts encouraged growth, not only in size, but in significance as the schools became the arena in which various aspirations, for power, for status, for training, for order, were necessarily to be realized.[5]

By the early twentieth century, however, as social reformers added their demands and visions to the schools' burdens, public schools had already taken on basic characteristics that would structure their subsequent development. Most significantly, as David Tyack has demonstrated, American public schools were by the early twentieth century already integrated institutions, administratively centralized, professionally self-conscious, and geared toward systematic expansion. Indeed, most of the school reforms of the period tended to accelerate this process. The reorganization and centralization of the massive New York City school system in 1896 illustrated the phenomenon, and this date may be taken as symbolic of the changes taking place nationwide, especially in the context of accelerating urbanization. By the second decade of the twentieth century, schools had developed sufficiently as complex institutions so that investigators were exploring issues of social efficiency and designing elaborate school surveys modeled on the better-known social surveys of the progressives.[6] The surveys assumed the desirability of professional control and administrative integration and held the central school officers responsible and accountable for the functioning of the schools in their districts. The school survey was meant to be "a study by an impartial outside expert thus freeing the schools from lay domination of professional matters," in order that "an educational pro-

gram might be designed to meet the future needs of the community. . . . More than a method or a technique of inquiry, the survey idea is a part of our education system which had developed in a fundamental way with our whole educational organization."[7] The key words in this description, as they were for managerial reformers generally, are "professional," "expert," "system," "organization." In the schools, this form of progressive reform, in which experts and techniques freed the schools from public interference, often overshadowed the more problematic and visionary demands of social reformers.

The systematic rationalization of the schools that began with administration in the nineteenth century turned toward issues of program development in the twentieth. By then the word "science" had been added to "organization" as the guiding spirit of development. As one investigator noted, "When the science of education shall have become fully formulated we shall have ready at hand complete and verifiable conclusions relating to three important aspects of the educational process: the child, the significant characteristics which mark stages in its growth; the demands of the social group into which the child is born and in which he must live; and the teaching method, whereby economy of time and of effort in teaching and learning is secure." In short, a modern science of education needed to coordinate the psychology of child development, the social context, and the curriculum. The need to rationalize the learning process through minute attention to age, interest, ability, and socially useful learning underlay most discussions of schooling at all levels throughout the early twentieth century.[8] This rationalization was in part the result of the organizational requirements of schools as they grew in size and complexity and a further expression of the bureaucratic systematization which had begun in the nineteenth century. But the attention to a science of education was not simply the result of developments within educational thought or school administration. Rather the schools' choices and concerns reflected their intimate connection with the society which they hoped to serve. Two features of that society were especially crucial to the evolution of the schools, and these developments had also significantly affected progressive social reformers. The first was the reorganization of the work process; the second, the immigrant presence, especially in American cities.

Although the nineteenth century saw the beginnings of an American educational enterprise, both the scope and the significance of schooling were fairly limited for the majority of the American population. Except for the extremes of those who received no schooling and the very few for whom schooling was a fundamental part of professional training or an expression of elite status, the large majority of Americans received little more than the fundamentals of literacy and the rudiments of what was believed nec-

essary to the exercise of responsible citizenship. Certainly, some students went to school longer than was required for the basics, and some did so because they expected to reap various social and economic rewards, but, in general, minimal attendance—from three to five years—was all that was either required or considered desirable throughout most of the nineteenth century. Indeed, before 1880 no state even had an effective compulsory education law,[9] and education was ambiguously and marginally related to an individual's future opportunites. Some Americans certainly did achieve a higher status and position than that occupied by their parents, but this was not normally the function of schooling. Instead, status and success were related to a host of factors that grew from the network of community, kin, politics, and church which dominated nineteenth-century social relationships during the early stages of industrialization. Mobility usually depended on connections, marriage, capital, skills acquired in a variety of ways, or the demonstration of work habits, industry, sobriety, and ingenuity. Similarly, inheritance, speculation, luck, and grit often defined the much more dominant agrarian economy of the time.[10]

In many ways, the late nineteenth century saw an erosion of this social world. And just as reformers responded to the loosening of the relationship between work and citizenship by placing their hopes in a more socially responsive education, educators, businessmen, and the public began to turn to the schools for their placement services and for the training in skills required by the increasingly impersonally organized modern world. The skills provided by the schools, then or now, ought not to be exaggerated. Nevertheless, in a society where business management, communications, and industrial integration on a large scale were beginning to subordinate entrepreneurship or mechanical know-how, a more refined literacy which the schools, and especially secondary education, could provide became increasingly desirable. Since the schools were also expected to transform unruly youngsters into citizens with regular and dependable habits, they became logical loci for concentrating the informal and promiscuous training which in the nineteenth century had been a function of general community participation.

To respond to these changes, the schools needed to refocus education by replacing the concentration on rudimentary literacy on the one hand and scholastic mastery on the other. They needed to divest themselves of older programs whose logic of development was internal to the disciplines and whose unstated but generally recognized progression was toward greater knowledge in those areas which eventuated in university admissions. The discussions centered on high-school education most acutely reflected these changes, but the rejection of the older perspectives affected all schooling and was fundamental to the reevaluation of educational endeavors at the

turn of the century.[11] This reevaluation required that the schools, above all, shift their attention from the task to the child.

The child was, of course, the central concern of educational progressivism. The progressives expressed the new orientation in education most consistently and called upon a long pedagogical tradition to legitimate their views. Progressive educators hoped to reform education by first of all rejecting what they considered the dull traditional routine whose guiding spirit was subject matter. Instead, they proposed to substitute the needs of the child broadly defined, needs that included physical, mental, and emotional growth, interests and aptitudes, present and future relationships, and the "realities" of the world into which he or she would fit in later life. John Dewey had most carefully described this complex of social, political, work, and personal relationships toward which the schools had an obligation to educate their charges. But almost all school reformers, and indeed by the early twentieth century most educators, expressed their commitment to what they called schooling for "life." In many ways, educational progressivism provided articulate expression, often couched in highly serious pedagogical terms, to the new perspective that the schools had to adopt in order to respond to the realities of the world they hoped to serve. This is not to say that battles did not have to be fought against more conservative forces but only that progressivism tended to confirm and accelerate, not to challenge, the important new role the schools began to assume and the new concentration on child development as the core science.

In addition to the task of designing a modern curriculum to educate all children more attentively, the schools confronted a second and related problem that also emerged from the social changes of the period—the composition of the American population. Wherever schoolmen and women looked in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they saw the children of immigrants and the specific educational problems they posed. According to the 1911 Dillingham Commission investigation of selected American cities, 57.8 percent of all the pupils in thirty-seven cities investigated in 1908–9, were children of immigrants. In that year, 71.5 percent of New York's 500,000 public schoolchildren had foreign-born fathers. Of Duluth's 11,000 schoolchildren, 74.1 percent were of foreign parentage; and in Cleveland, Cincinnati, Detroit, Minneapolis, Buffalo, Boston, San Francisco, and most other large cities, two-fifths, and often much more, of all children in schools were of foreign parentage. The vast majority of these children were in the primary grades, and a very large proportion of them (40.4 percent) were what contemporaries called "retarded"—two or more years older than they should have been for the grade level they had attained in school.[12] The Dillingham Commission, in line with many investigations during the first two decades of the twentieth century (notably

those of Leonard Ayres), showed that school children were overage, not performing, not progressing, not learning. While the problem was not peculiar to the children of immigrants, it was most prominent among these children and most worrisome.

The obvious solution was to keep children in school longer, and that solution was embodied in the two archetypical progressive drives—the campaign against child labor and the concurrent efforts for more effective and stringent school attendance laws. By 1920 the two related battles had resulted in marked success. By that date, only 8.5 percent of all children in the age group ten to fifteen were gainfully employed, while 90.6 percent of all children seven to thirteen and 79.0 percent of those fourteen to fifteen were in school. And the laws were most effective in increasing the attendance of the children of immigrants. By 1930, 90.0 percent of all fourteen- and fifteen-year-old children of native-white parents were in school, while 91.3 percent of the children of foreign or mixed parentage and 92.6 percent of all those who were themselves immigrants were at school.[13] But the child-labor laws brought into the schools precisely those children (of the laboring class and the immigrants) whose frequent academic failure, apparent lack of academic interest, and future economic status were most troublesome and with whom traditional school programs were least able to cope. The issue of retardation had emerged precisely from this context, and it posed a paradoxical problem. As the schools succeeded in incorporating more children, they seemed least successful in educating them.

Retardation underscored several early twentieth-century concerns and was fundamentally related to "scientific" curriculum development. Above all, retardation emphasized age-grade standards, the carefully calibrated grade system, and the accurate coordination of grades into a hierarchy of schools—elementary, junior high, and high school. And it reflected the infatuation with a kind of scientism of numbers which was also part of the school survey movement and the basis of mental measurement. This led to an obsession, not only with efficiency, but with the specific efficiency that seemed to inhere in age-appropriate education. Retardation also led to two very significant conclusions: something was wrong with the schools, and something was also wrong with some of the children in the schools.

While these were school issues and educators addressed them through traditional and revised pedagogical means, the most significant solution came from outside the world of education. The solution, like the problems, came from the peculiar confluence of immigration, science, and reform that affected most aspects of society in early twentieth-century America.