

FROM THE TRENCHES

## Lack of Consensus on Education: What Are Its Dimensions?

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135

by Edward G. Rozycki

The single biggest problem in American education is that no one agrees on why we educate.

—Diane Ravitch<sup>1</sup>

### **Probable Falsehoods for Public Consumption**

Following long-established tradition in addressing a presumably self-governing, but easily distractible, sparsely intellectual public, Diane Ravitch writes what she must personally understand to be false. But we must not judge her too harshly, since her *New York Times* “article” of a mere three paragraphs is inset within a longer essay by a different author.<sup>2</sup> Venue gives license where academic discipline might not.

For the sake of argument, let’s take her statement above literally. Does Professor Ravitch mean that no existing pair of individuals can or does agree on why we do or should educate? That is obviously false because I, among many, would agree with much of what she says. Presumably she knows that; otherwise there would be no point in her offering the comments cited.

Professor Ravitch continues,

Faced with this lack of consensus, policymakers define good education as higher test scores. But higher test scores are not a definition of good education. Students can get higher scores in reading and mathematics yet remain completely ignorant of science, the arts, civics, history, literature, and foreign languages.

Yes, but even were these domains included within the testing frenzy, most Americans would still remain ignorant in a host of other critical areas of knowledge: animal husbandry, basic law, first aid,

plumbing, food preparation, Roberts' Rules of Order, horticulture, water conservation, budgeting, organizational theory, community development, etc. Again, venue is the determinant: *New York Times* readers would hardly find these types of knowledge, though essential to a complex, modern, democratic society, of more interest than the academic ossifications to which they were personally subjected.

### Dimensions of Consensus

The interesting problem is to determine which consensus on educational issues varies, whose consensus it is, and how and why it varies. Let us analyze consensus on an issue in three dimensions: its breadth, its depth, and its span.<sup>3</sup>

Pick a group and a formulation of an issue, e.g., "Ought public moneys be used to support common schools?" The *breadth* of consensus of the group, either yes or no, is a mere matter of a head count. The breadth of the group's consensus is the agreement captured by the ambiguity or vagueness of either the definition of the group or the statement of the issue. If, for example, we distinguish between *Americans* and *American taxpayers*, we might well expect to find a difference in the consensus on the issue. Further, if we distinguish between public moneys of federal and of local origin, another difference in consensus may result.

That brings us to the next dimension: the *depth* of the consensus. Is the formulation of the issue, should it be agreed upon, specific enough to permit implementation? The number of specifications needed to adjust the original formulation to the level of some kind of implementation is the measure of its depth.

Sloganistically formulated issues generally enjoy wide consensus. Operationalized to implementable form, they tend to lose substantial support as earlier hasty supporters realize more precisely who will enjoy the benefits and upon whom the costs will be visited. We have seen the dynamics of that conflict in the health reform initiatives supported by the Obama administration. Health reform, superficially, appeals to a lot of people. But as the specifics are hammered out, some of the earliest enthusiasts of such legislation begin to drag their feet.

Exploring the depth of consensus risks bringing up disagreement on means. That is why, even in our "democratic" society, leaders of all kinds go with the majority vote, the breadth of a consensus, and leave its depth unexplored. One must avoid "opening cans of worms" with, say, individual personal cost-benefit analysis that could potentially undercut the breadth of the group consensus.<sup>4</sup>

The *span* of consensus is obtained by comparing the agreements across issues for a given group. It considers the effects of priorities. It recognizes that even if people within a group agree on the educational issues in detail, individuals of that same group may differ on whether education takes priority over health care or national defense. There is a tendency—I am tempted to assert, particularly among educators—to assume that sharing some kind of “philosophical” outlook or “common values” about education guarantees consensus on voting issues. That is a mistake.

So here’s what these distinctions tell us: that consensus on an issue can fail to reach fruition in many ways. The consensus may be an illusion of breadth, resting merely on ambiguity or vagueness. The consensus may disappear as the costs of implementation, its depth, are revealed. The consensus on one issue, in the context of restricted resources and competing concerns, may not carry the implementation forward despite persisting through an exploration of its depth.

### **Preaching to Which Choir? With What Authority?**

Here is the nub of the problem: authority of any kind is based on consensus, either “living” or institutionalized in law or tradition. That is the reality of the moral freedom we enjoy as individuals, if only we think about it. (It is also why our institutions, from family, through church, school, workplace, and government, discourage us from such thoughts, except as they support the special agendas of the institution: for example, rejecting school teaching on evolution.)

I can choose, if I am willing to live with the consequences, not to acknowledge any “authority” whatsoever as pertinent to my life. That is no weird, esoteric practice carried out by bald monks on a mountaintop. It is largely what we do when we visit other countries and cultures: we conform to what keeps us out of jail, or avoids social opprobrium, yet often dismiss whatever other inhibitions and concerns a native of that culture might have. Not acknowledging as authority what or whom others do acknowledge is what makes the differences between families, religions, cultures, and nations.

After claiming there is no consensus in the issue “Why do we educate?” Professor Ravitch presumes to speak with the authority whose consensual foundations she has postulated away:

Why do we educate? We educate because we want citizens who are capable of taking responsibility for their lives and for our democracy. We want citizens who understand how their government works, who are knowledgeable about the history of their nation and other nations. We need citizens

who are thoroughly educated in science. We need people who can communicate in other languages. We must ensure that every young person has the chance to engage in the arts.

(I, who recognize Professor Ravitch's authority as an educator and historian, agree with her almost entirely at this vague level of specification; I am concerned, however, about whether "every" young person, no matter the circumstances, must "engage in the arts," whatever that may mean. What depth of understanding will be pursued? How will capability for taking responsibility be determined? What is "our democracy"? And so on.)

Ravitch adds—no minor afterthought:

But because of our narrow-minded utilitarianism, we have forgotten what good education is.

Rhetorically, the last sentence finesses the issue of authority and enfold us into a community of consensus, reestablishing the author's authority as it chides us for *our* "narrow-minded utilitarianism" and consequent lapse of memory. "We have forgotten" means that beneath it all, we all agree with Professor Ravitch.

### **The Practical Investigation: A Quick Sketch**

Is Professor Ravitch's vision—a vision that many of us share in some form—attainable? I don't know. I would venture this much: it will not come about unless we stop deluding ourselves that rhetorical tricks and organizational subterfuges will suffice to achieve that vision. Indeed, many indications are that what small bits of it have been accomplished are disappearing. The testing focus that has captured the public schools in the past thirty years, to the detriment of a nobler curriculum, is an example of that.

To pursue what patches and shards of our nobler curriculum can be accomplished in the institutional environment in which we actually live, I offer some rules of thumb, given below as stepwise fashion; their order is not written in stone.

To accomplish X (plug in your favorite X):

*Step 1:* Identify the people willing to pay for X. (Call them the *funders*.)

Do traditional demographic or political categories catch these funder-consensus groups? You may have to break loose of easily articulable group labels. You will likely find that consensus groups cross over traditional boundaries.

Does low willingness among potential funders necessarily translate into resistance or counterattack? At shallow depths of

consensus, no agreement or disagreement should be taken too seriously. Disregard the pundits.

*Step 2:* Specify how the funders can influence change or stasis within the relevant organizational environments.

Willingness to bear costs does not indicate, per se, ability to get changes made. Very wealthy funders can spend a lot of money and accomplish little. (I predict that the efforts of the Gates Foundation and the Obama administration will suffer that fate unless their efforts undergo major reconceptualization.) “Change agents” who boast they will, for example, close down “underperforming” schools and shift their staffs are likely to accomplish little beyond accelerating teacher abandonment of position—or teacher strikes.

*Step 3:* Operationalize X down to implementable levels.<sup>5</sup>

This is where we get down to essentials and find out who really knows what’s involved in realizing X.

*Step 4:* Determine how funder consciousness of depth and span of consensus affect their status, i.e., willingness to pay for X.

*Step 5:* Carefully consider whether the benefits to be obtained by accomplishing X offset the costs.

Realize there are more than educational benefits to be gained—and likely, more than minor costs to be suffered. Will those benefits be recognized as such by the recipients? Are they willing to tolerate the personal costs of participation in the system? If not, it might be well to consider something else. Recipients of goods and services considered impositions generally work to subvert or sabotage them.

Objection: Wouldn’t following through on these steps possibly force major reconceptions in what we consider public schooling? For example, much of our “noble curriculum” mentioned above may be severely truncated, if it appears at all.

That is so.

In 1994 there appeared a remarkable document called “America 2000: An Education Strategy.” All the considerations raised in this essay were ignored in the process through which it was conceived. The rotting carcass of this vision still litters the educational landscape, despite the mutter of occasional litanies to its passing.<sup>6</sup>

## Notes

1. Diane Ravitch, “Beyond Testing,” *New York Times Magazine*, 27 September 2009, 33.

2. Paul Tough, “The Make-Believe Solution,” *New York Times Magazine*, 27 September 2009, 31–35.

3. See G. K. Clabaugh and E. G. Rozycki, “‘Getting It Together’: The Nature of Consensus,” available at <<http://www.newfoundations.com/Consensus/NatureConsensus.html>>.

4. This can be done to subvert support. Remember Ronald Reagan's questions in 1980 addressed to each individual member of his audience? "Are you better off than you were four years ago?" began the list. See YouTube at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loBe0WXts8>>.

5. For theory and exercises spelling out the steps in operationalizing, see Edward G. Rozycki, "Operationalization," available at <<http://www.newfoundations.com/EGR/Oper.html>>.

6. See Edward G. Rozycki, "America 2000: An Education Strategy—An Artifact of a Society Past," *Educational Horizons* 73 (4) (Summer 1995): 163–165, also available at <<http://www.newfoundations.com/EGR/Am2000.html>>.

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