

From The “Learning-Centered” Rhetoric of School Reform: A Philosophical Commentary

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OPENING REMARKS

As a teacher educator working in a predominantly undergraduate institution, I particularly welcome this opportunity to discuss topics that relate philosophical inquiry to educational practice, and promote conversation within the broad educational community. For years, educational philosophers as a group have often been challenged, and sometimes frustrated, by a seeming reality that we have not been particularly recognized for our role in the educational decision making process.¹ Our work, perceived by the American public and our colleagues in the educational community, seems remote, to say the least, to what is going on in the real life of schools.

Attempting to alter that perception, this essay focuses on a rather practical phenomenon in current educational reform, a powerful return of the “learning-centered” rhetoric which characterizes the “third wave” of contemporary educational reform as we have witnessed since the early 1980s. The spreading movement of creating and implementing standard curriculum from coast to coast, the call for performance-based assessment of teaching and learning, the publicity of various models of restructured schools and the teaching profession, and the increasing body of literature in learning theories and their application to practice, all seem to firmly presume a “learning-centered” effort of reform. In her recent book, *The Right to Learn*, Linda Darling-Hammond explains how this learning-centered reform is the challenge of the twenty-first century to American education — schools must “ensure for all students in all communities a genuine right to learn.”² Building a system of schools that focuses on learning, continues Linda-Hammond, requires two things US schools have never before been called upon to do:

First, to teach for understanding. That is to teach all students, not just a few, to understand ideas deeply and perform proficiently. And second, to teach for diversity. That is, to teach in ways that help different kinds of learners find productive paths to knowledge as they also learn to live constructively together.³

Later in the same book, Linda-Hammond presents an example of such a learning-centered school, as envisioned by the New York State Council. I quote in length here:

The schools we envision are exciting places: thoughtful, reflective, engaging, and engaged. They are places where meaning is made. They are places that resemble workshops, studios, galleries, theaters, studies, laboratories, fields research sites, and newsrooms. Their spirit is one of shared inquiry. The students in these schools feel supported in taking risks and thinking independently. They are engaged in initiating assessing their ideas and products, developing a disciplined respect for their own work and the work of others. Their teachers function more like coaches, mentors, wise advisors, and guides than as information transmitters or gatekeepers. They offer high standards with high levels of support, creating a bridge between challenging curriculum goals and students’ unique needs, talents, and learning styles. They are continually learning because they teach in schools where everyone would be glad to be a student, or a teacher — where everyone would want to be — and could — both.⁴

To a philosophically sensitive ear, this description of the learning-centered school sounds in many ways like what John Dewey advocated nearly a hundred years ago for the progressive school model.⁵ It also echoes Paulo Freire's view of education for liberating the human mind which is both rigorous and joyous.⁶ Indeed, much can be said in philosophizing learner-centered schooling. Within the limit of this paper, I begin with the student's role as learner, particularly, how this role is different from that in two often-heard and often-used metaphors, namely, the student as worker, and the student as consumer. To view school as workplace, student as worker, and student learning as working, I believe, would compromise the essential meaning of learning and therefore democratic schooling. Likewise, to parallel student as consumer in a market-controlled economic system, that is, to value education in terms of economic efficiency, would encourage individual students to seek their private good of education at the expense of the public welfare, which consequently jeopardizes the public purpose of education in a democracy.

STUDENT AS WORKER

The metaphor of student-as-worker, in its many presentations, is so widely and frequently heard or used in schools at all levels that many of us have stopped thinking of the implications. We assign work to students: homework, paperwork, group work, and individual work. We are quick in praising students who settle down to work without wasting time, who work hard, and get good grades. We teach students good work ethics: do not disturb others, share fairly in group work, and respect other people's work as well as your own. In every instance we refer to student work, we compare, intentionally or unintentionally, the student's role in school to the adult's role at workplace, and what children do to "figure things out to what adults do in offices and factories to earn money."⁷

Granted, there are striking similarities between a workplace and a school in contemporary society. In the best of both cases, the goal-oriented organizational structure and management are highly valued, individual responsibilities are clearly defined, and collaboration among individuals and structural units encouraged. These similarities, however, often obscure one fundamental difference between the two — the nature of a workplace and of a school. As professor Alfie Kohn rightfully points out, even for the best workplace where decision-making is handled democratically, its ultimate goal rests on the product, the bottom-line of the success measure of the workplace. The worker is valued for his "productive force," or the capacity and potential for producing the most desirable quantity and quality product. Thus, the worker is merely a means to an end — corporate profit.

Applying this factory model to school directs the very nature of schooling in the wrong direction. It lures students and teachers to mistake grades and scores as the only "measurable" quality of student "work," and worse, as the gauge for learning and teaching. In a school where learning for understanding and for diversity are encouraged, as seen in the previous example, students learn the dispositions, knowledge, and skills of inquiry. They are guided to practice thinking critically, creatively, imaginatively, and most importantly, thinking for themselves. In this learning, mistakes are allowed, diverse views are recognized, and inconclusions to

some science projects and reading questions are accepted. The learning process itself is seen as valuable and important as the results, and it is seen as not only vital for students' intellectual development, but also indispensable for students' character building and their moral development. Unlike workers in a workplace who serve as means to corporate profits, students in schools are learning, as Dewey says, for the sake of more learning, and their growth, for more growth.

STUDENT AS CONSUMER

This leads to another related metaphor, the student-as-consumer, which, similar to the student-as-worker metaphor, is widely assumed and used but also, in my view, conceptually misleading. This metaphor assumes the economic role of schooling as increasingly important in the modern global economy. Schools are where "human capital" is produced in order to contribute to the nation's economic power in the world order. "The Nation at Risk" released in the early 1980s clearly manifests the government's position in affirming this role of schooling. Recommendations made in that document such as more rigorous curriculum, higher expectations from all students, higher standards for high school graduation, and longer school day and year, are all aimed to promote the notion of "competitiveness." In this spirit, participants in the school system are mobilized to obtain quality goals of what they do in schools. The benchmark of this quality, again, conveniently falls upon grades and test scores. The higher the scores, the better quality of education; the greater the number of students with high scores, the better chance the school stands as a "school of excellence."

In light of the learning-centered notion of schooling, this competition-driven student-as-consumer metaphor shares the same problem with the metaphor of student as worker. If the test results or grades are taken as the only accountable measure of education, then the true meaning of learning gets lost. If students are taught to compete for getting ahead of others, and are systematically rewarded for doing so, then learning for understanding and for diversity becomes secondary to obtaining a good grade. Such an external reward system is creative in its presentations from school to school, and state to state. Every time we praise a student's writing for its mistake-free quality in front of the class, everytime we hand students with "A" and "B" grade average a Pizza Hut certificate for a free meal, everytime we award a student for high GPA at a school assembly, everytime we openly rank students by their scores from SAT or ACT or other standard tests, we send students the message that getting a good grade, by all means, is more important than getting an education.

The student as consumer metaphor, in comparison with the student as worker metaphor, however, seems to be more students-centered, for it takes students' individual needs and interests more seriously. In a society instituted with a market-based economic system in which "customers are first," educational resources such as teachers, curriculum, and school facilities serve students in the ways that customers may expect from the marketplace. Schools are to supply a wide range of goods and services to satisfy a variety of demands made by their consumers. Changes in schooling, from the governance structure to curriculum, from teaching

methods to instructional activities, must be tailored to keep students and their families happy. Ideas about charter schools, tracking, the voucher system, among many others, can all find an interpretation of the “consumer as king” slogan that makes consumers’ interests the key in school operations.

To be sure, the customer-first mentality has a double-edged appeal to both the provider and consumer of the commodity. It is aimed at attracting more gains from the provider’s perspective, be it a small privately owned grocery, a franchised hardware store, or a gigantic banking institution. At the same time, consumers are satisfied because they receive a variety of choices in quality and price. Their private goal of purchasing is achieved. As well, schooling based on the student-as-consumer concept may have the same appeal to the education provider, the school system, and student consumers. Student achievement may indicate a higher value for “human capital,” which consequently serves the good of the school system and the society, while individual students win personal gains: admission to an ivy league college or getting a better-paid job opportunity, meeting their idiosyncratic life goals. Education becomes the vehicle for both public and private good. The questions we may now ask are: How has this double-edged goal of education, as it is reflected in the student as consumer metaphor, become accepted? And, what is the harm of this acceptance?

THE PUBLIC VERSUS PRIVATE VALUE

It is evident in the research literature that there have been a number of efforts to capture the goals of American education. David Labaree, an education professor, adds to these efforts with a discussion of the historical root of the goals of education along the line of public *vs* private good.⁸ In his recent article titled, “Are Students ‘Consumers?’” Labaree delineates three goals for American education. The goal of democratic equality, originating from the very beginning phase of the American public school system, holds that the purpose of schooling is to provide competent citizens. The goal of social efficiency, rising in the progressive era during the turn of the century, contends that the purpose of education is to train productive workers. And the goal of social mobility, taking an individual point of view, maintains that education is for a person’s upward mobility in the given social/economic society. Historically, the pendulum swings between the first two goals, democratic equality and social efficiency. Neither, however, can hold the pendulum long and firm enough without being in alliance with the third goal, the goal of social mobility.

When Thomas Jefferson envisioned a public education system for his home state of Virginia in the early nineteenth century, he had in mind a three-year free education for all, rich and poor, men and women. An equal education for the masses was important to Jefferson because only the educated people would be able to function freely and rationally in the new representative democracy, and only they were able to openly and fairly choose the “wise and virtuous” to lead such a democracy. This educational proposal was so bold and unheard of by his countrymen that it was never materialized in his lifetime. Shortly after, however, the first education secretary of the State of Massachusetts, Horace Mann, trumpeted the absolute necessity of a free public education for the existence and preservation of a

democratic way of life, or, in his own words "republican institutions of self-governance." Mann believed that the capacity of men and women for self-governance can only be made a reality through an educational system called the common schools. "Education is our *only* political safety; outside of this ark is the deluge"⁹ (*italics mine*).

The democratic equality goal of education envisioned by Jefferson and Mann laid a foundation for the traditional school curriculum emphasizing liberal arts and science courses and the concept of neighborhood schools, until it met the challenge of the goal of social efficiency emerging as the American society moved into the modern era, when industrialization and urban development became the reality, and rapid accumulation of material wealth marking the nation's economic growth became the top item of the nation's agenda. Influenced by the "scientific management" movement, schools became a sorting machine to meet the nation's economic need for different types of workers. The invention of the "IQ" test supplied schools with a "scientifically based" assessment for sending students to divided curricula that would prepare them for specific jobs and different roles in society. Many educational practices, such as vocational/career education, tracking, and gifted/talented programs, were created under this goal of social efficiency.

The differences between the goals of democratic equality and social efficiency are obvious. One emphasizes the political role of school, the other the economic role. One calls for an equal common curriculum for all students, the other a differentiated, disintegrated curriculum. Both goals, however, are concerned about the public good, that the primary purpose of schools is to serve the common welfare of the community, politically or economically. All members of the community benefit from such schools, even those whose children are not attending. It is quite simple to understand: A strong democracy provides a forum that encourages an equal participation of the people and includes the voice of everyone. By the same token, a better economic environment produces more job opportunities and a lower inflation rate by which everyone is better off.

If we consider the goal of schooling from the perspective of the individual, as Labaree suggests, we are more concerned about what schools can do for me, for my children and my family, instead of what they can do for the community. Schooling becomes primarily for my private good, not the public. The goal of social mobility has been witnessed historically as more durable than the first two goals because, in combination with either of the two, it survives the changes of our understanding of the goal of schooling.

The social mobility idea began when schooling was first connected with the economic development of the society. Its history is as long as the goal of social efficiency. When, in the early days of the progressive era, Frederick Taylor trumpeted his innovation of "scientific management" by displaying documented observations of the impressively increased amounts of pigiron that the worker, Smith, was able to load on a truck in one day, due to the use of innovative management methods, the increased wage earned by Smith was also precisely calculated. It was assumed that without the benefit accruing to Smith, efficiency in

production would have no guarantee. Similarly, when Charles Elliot, then President of Harvard, later advocated for the “efficient operation” of schools by sorting students into different tracks for vocational training or for higher education, his rationale necessarily included how such operation could serve everyone’s personal interest by preparing for them an “appropriate slot” in the job market. Recent educational reform witnesses a new height of stressing the economic efficiency of schooling with a variety of approaches including school choice, vouchers, and others. Yet none of these alternatives would sustain unless a clear connection to individuals’ private good is demonstrated. I remember a recent CNN news report on the higher education tuition rise for the new school year. “Going to universities costs too much?” asks the reporter, “then think again.” The most recent national statistics show that the average hourly wage for a new college graduate is nearly \$17, as compared to about \$8 for those who have a high school diploma. The difference is obvious.

Those who adhere to the democratic equality goal of schooling as a public good find it necessary and natural to include as an integral part of how the goal may serve individual advancement. Dewey, for example, in criticizing the aim of social efficiency as “narrow” and maybe “dangerous,” nevertheless willingly accepts the importance of students having “industrial competency” as a result of education. A democratic education, Dewey says, should result in students’ having the ability to “make one’s way economically in the world,” because otherwise “one misses for oneself the one of the most educative experiences.”¹⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, known as a radical advocate for a “pull” approach to black education by focusing on the need for black leadership in the black community, voices a view of children’s education which takes the child’s individual interests as the object:

Children must be trained in a knowledge of what the world is and what it knows and how it does its daily work. These things cannot be separated: we cannot teach pure knowledge apart from actual facts, or separate truth from the human mind. Above all we must not forget that the object of all education is the child itself and not what it does or makes.¹¹

Among the many more recent educational theorists, Amy Gutmann advances a cogent theory of democratic education in the liberal tradition. Writing about cultivating the “democratic characters” as the first and foremost purpose of primary education, she nevertheless says that as legitimate as moral purpose in a democracy is for the school, children learn to live a good life in the “nonmoral” sense by learning knowledge and appreciation of various subjects.¹² This “nonmorally” good life for children, in my understanding of Gutmann, includes the meaning of a sufficient materialistic and economic life for individual students.

THE METAPHORS MISLEADING

What goals, among the above three, would the metaphors of student-as-worker and student-as-consumer tend to promote? The connection of both metaphors with the goals of social efficiency and social mobility is not difficult to see. Both, being originated in the progressive era in which “scientific management” triumphed its way to almost every social institution including the public school system, reflect the goal of social efficiency in the shared tendency of drawing students’ attention to the “end product,” grades and test scores, and leading students to compete among

themselves for getting the most of that "end product." In doing so, both award students with something self-satisfying. While the student-as-worker metaphor may be implicit in its capacity connecting school work to students' personal gain, that is, motivating students for doing a "better job," the student-as-consumer metaphor certainly sends out the message that individual interests and needs are the primary basis of school operation.

What becomes invisible in these two metaphors is the goal of democratic equality, which is exactly the one that carries out most of the meaning of learning-centered schooling. Led to be concerned more with getting good grades than learning, students ask the question, "What do you (the teacher) want me to do in this essay?" instead of the question, "What should I do to make this essay more interesting and unique?" Students naturally settle for a good grade with a minimum effort for understanding. Minimized with that effort is the excitement and joy one experiences in the outcome of learning and the sense of camaraderie shared by members in a learning community. Life in schools becomes for students an imposed life they have to endure, rather than the life they desire or enjoy.

Given the obvious conflict among the three goals, it is not the point of this essay to argue which of them ought to be accepted as the foundation for educational policy. Taking the risk of being philosophically vague, I assume that the public may want to entrust schools to serve simultaneously all three goals. We want all students to have the mind and skills of the democratic citizen, to contribute to the economic prosperity of the community, and to reach their individual potential. Under this assumption, the two metaphors mislead us in thinking not only that the goal of social efficiency of education is more important than the goal of democratic equality, but, given their inherent connection to the goal of social mobility, education for the private good precedes the public good. When in the everyday life of school, students are consistently getting this kind of message from teachers and administrators, they are led to believe that education is just for their own interests and has little to do with the interests of others or that of the community and society. Who will be attending to the public interests? Too often when we use metaphors like student-as-worker and student-as-consumer, we are in danger of making that belief accepted.

Caution must be taken when metaphors about schooling are used. If we believe in a learning-centered education in which all students acquire knowledge, skills, and dispositions for constructive living in American democracy, too much use of the metaphors of student-as-worker and student-as-consumer may lead us astray from adhering to that goal. As a final note for clarification: Emphasizing grades and test scores does not necessarily stand in antagonism with the goal of democratic equality. On the contrary, in schools where learning is characterized by, for example, Jane Ronald Martin's 3 C's, caring, concern, and connection, learning in subject contents is only more challenging and rigorous, and its outcome can very well be evaluated by grades and scores.¹³ This assessment, however, is not treated as the predictor for the individual student's later success in the economic world, but rather as a diagnostic instrument for teachers to guide students in learning for understanding and learning collaboratively, and toward its moral goals for democracy.

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1. Tony Johnson, *Discipleship or Pilgrimage: The Educator's Request for Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995).
 2. Linda Darling-Hammond, *The Right to Learn: A Blueprint for Creating Schools that Work* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publisher, 1997).
 3. *Ibid.*, 5.
 4. *Ibid.*, xiv.
 5. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1944).
 6. Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1972).
 7. Alfie Kohn, "Students Don't 'Work' — They Learn," *Educational Week*, 3 September 1997, Commentary Section.
 8. David F. Labaree, "Are Students 'Consumers'?" *Educational Week*, 17 September, 1997, Commentary Section.
 9. John Dewey, "The Challenge of Democracy to Education," in *Philosophy of Education*, (Ames: Littlefield, Adams, 1958), 46.
 10. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 119.
 11. Henry Lee Moon, *The Emerging Thought of W.E.B. Du Bois* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 125; as quoted in Gerald L. Gutek, *Historical and Philosophical Foundations of Education: A Biographical Introduction*, 2d ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1997), 390.
 12. Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 51.
 13. Jane Ronald Martin, *The Schoolhome: Rethinking Schools for Changing Families* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 34.