Our One-Dimensional Schools

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In his classic study of American society and culture, *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), Herbert Marcuse argued that consumer culture exerts an immense flattening effect on our collective and individual aspirations. In the consumerist world, the difference between true and false needs vanishes—we become convinced that ultimate fulfillment can be found in our next luxury purchase or mass-market commodity, and when it inevitably fails to deliver, we seek out another. Like other Frankfurt School theorists, the main institution Marcuse held responsible for one-dimensional life was the so-called culture industry. The idea was that this sprawling complex of light entertainment, mass media and advertisement was launching an almost irresistible assault on our psyche. For the Frankfurt School theorists, there was almost no way out of this predicament. Marcuse alludes to the potential power of a Great Refusal—an organized campaign of principled discontents who commit themselves to nonconsumption—but he gives his readers very little to go on.

Marcuse and his colleagues were right to alert us to the dangers of the amusement-industrial complex. And yet I think they were wrong about two important things. The culture industry is undoubtedly one of the principal actors in this powerful play. But the Frankfurt School consistently overlooked how our education system—and particularly our secondary schools—solidifies and purveys one-dimensional life through the logic of learning it espouses. Relatedly, and more importantly, they failed to perceive how schools can become sites of resistance. By making a decisive shift in their educational mission, schools can help young people cultivate a much fuller capacity for human happiness than they, and perhaps we, thought possible.

Let's begin with the negative side of this story—how schools propagate one-dimensional life. We might, like the Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire, suspect the problem to be the passive role that students often take in classrooms, a role that cultivates the passivity and receptivity necessary for good consumer behavior. Or we might, with pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, think the culprit is the abstraction of school learning from personal experience, a posture that allows us to accept our profound disconnection from the production processes of the goods we consume. These are important aspects of the problem, but they do not go deep enough.

American schools operate under a remarkably simple educational ideology, one that forms the nucleus of countless educational policies and classroom procedures. Schools are engaged in the single-minded project of equipage—that is, of outfitting students with appropriate forms of knowledge and skill that will set them up for later success. At root, we believe that education is about preparation for the future; it should furnish young people with the social and cultural capital needed for "educational advancement" or "political participation" or "digital culture" or "vocational life"; and it should set them on a path of upward social mobility and personal success. Asked to justify these aims,

we invoke the "challenges of the 21st century," the "complexities of modern life," the "demands of multicultural democracy" or simply the "responsibilities of adulthood" that young people will inevitably face.

The subjects students learn in school, then, become a kind of technology, an instrument for achieving something outside of them that is construed not only as shaping the trajectory of their future, but also ultimately deciding their fate. For some students, this means that the entire educational process becomes laced with the anxiety of "making it," along with all the psychological concomitants of that special form of stress. For others, it is cause for resignation, boredom and alienation. In either case, what emerges at graduation is not the person of liberal understanding and feeling that inspired prior generations. If things go well—and that's a big "if"—we get a student decked out with the accoutrements of the Here and Now.

The equipage mentality has nested itself deep within the heart of American education. The summary mission statement of Chicago Public Schools, the third largest school district in America, offers one particularly clear example. Their mission is "to provide a high-quality public education for every child, in every neighborhood, that prepares each for success in college, career, and civic life." The Chancellor of New York Schools employs almost identical rhetoric in his Bold Vision for NYC Schools:

Our schools need to connect our students to the real world and what matters to them. We need to provide meaningful academic experiences that are safe, fun and engaging. Our schools need to prepare our students to excel in our economy when they get out of school. And I mean *all* students, whatever language their families speak at home and whatever special needs or other difficult circumstances they might have.

The philosophy of "provide and prepare"—front and center in both accounts—is not only a characteristic feature of the American educational system. In Germany, where I live and work, a so-called "competency-based" approach to teaching and learning has decisively triumphed over its prior "content-based" counterpart. The language of "competency development" now constitutes the dominant mode of justifying curricular decisions and instructional methods in both official and academic contexts. According to this approach, instead of focusing on the facts and contents we want students to learn, we should concentrate on the specific skills young people will need in order to solve problems in the wider world. In 2016, for example, the ministers of education from around Germany convened to compose and ratify a strategic white paper on Education in the Digital World. This is what the president of this collective had to say in her introductory remarks:

Progressive digitization has become an integral part of our living, working and professional worlds. Digital media such as tablets, smartphones and whiteboards have been making their way into our schools and universities for some time now; they are part of the everyday lives of trainees in public institutions and companies. ... What competencies do children, adolescents and young adults need to possess in order to meet the future demands of the digital world? And what consequences does this have for curricula, learning environments, learning processes or teacher training? The

opportunities for shaping tomorrow's digital world are closely linked to how we prepare young people today in schools, vocational training and universities.

The mantra of "provide and prepare"—here again on full display—is manifestly understandable. No one denies that children need to be ready for the challenges that await them after their school careers. But is this all we hope for in our educational engagements with young people? Is it really true that education could be so mundane, so this-worldly, so *one-dimensional* an affair?

One of the earliest—and still most acute—critics of the equipage mentality in education was Jean-Jacques Rousseau. His treatise *Emile* (1762) is an extended plea for recognizing the goods of childhood over against the supposed demands of the adult world. At one point, he pauses to consider what his critics might say to his proposals. His response cuts straight to the quick of the matter:

What, then, must be thought of that barbarous education which sacrifices the present to an uncertain future, which burdens a child with chains of every sort and begins by making him miserable in order to prepare him from afar for I know not what pretended happiness[?] ... I hear from afar the clamors of that false wisdom which incessantly projects us outside of ourselves, which always counts the present for nothing, and which, pursuing without respite a future that retreats in proportion as we advance, by dint of transporting us where we are not, transports us where we shall never be.

What exactly is the problem with the will to equip in education? For Rousseau, it isn't that education should neglect endowing young people with useful knowledge and skills, nor that it should turn its nose away from helping secure their "success." In fact, it is a common misinterpretation of *Emile* that it defends a radically "child-centered" view of education that would completely dispense with goal-oriented adult direction. Rather, Rousseau alerts us to the deep irony of "pragmatic" approaches to education that presume to know what the future holds for young people. Not only will the future mutate and transform in ways we can never foresee, but by focusing always on future needs and concerns, we cultivate a habit of mind that is perpetually dissatisfied with the present—that sees fulfillment always in the *next* credential, the *next* job, the *next* technology or the *next* purchase, and never in that which our students possess *now*. With a disposition like this, Rousseau observes, the focal point of our desires will always remain just out of reach: "the object which at first appeared to be at hand flees more quickly than it can be pursued. When one believes that one has reached it, it transforms and reveals itself in the distance ahead of us."

The issue with the will to equip, then, is not the desire to prepare students for the future, but the impoverishment of our educational imagination that so often accompanies it. In the grips of the equipage mentality, we forget, first, that the educational experiences of young people can carry their value in themselves and not only for the sake of something else outside of them, to be experienced later in life. Moreover, we tend

to equate educational "success" with future material pleasures, won through the enjoyment of consumer goods, and afforded by maximally lucrative and socially respected occupations. These two tendencies are closely related: we have a circumscribed view of personal success in part because we overlook the kinds of goods that are already available to young people in the classroom.

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There is an alternative to one-dimensional education, and it begins with recognizing a different kind of pedagogical will than the one expressed in one-dimensional education. If we want to educate young people for something more than consumer life, then we will have to reverse the logic of the equipage mentality altogether. In a word, we will have to awaken their aspiration.

The equipage mentality in education works by tapping into the psychology of ambition. We set up a goal in front of students, and we say that their efforts in the classroom will furnish them with the instruments to get there. The ends to be reached are set in advance. Everyone wants money, power, security and social respect, so let's show how learning math or social studies brings these about. Aspiration works differently—indeed oppositely, as philosopher Agnes Callard points out in her book on the subject, *Aspiration* (2018). It engages us in a process of personal striving in which we pursue the good or value of something that we do not understand in a fundamental sense. Aspiration is the desire to discover value.

Many of us can remember a time when we came upon some new activity or way of life that arrested our typical ways of going about life and focused our attention on its potential. We were so inspired by a Picasso that we decided to study art in college; or we got word that our partner was pregnant and began to imagine what kind of parent we wanted to be; or we saw the new photos coming from the Webb Telescope and switched majors from engineering to physics. In these moments, we set out on a path toward a fuller appreciation of the newfound activity and attempt to integrate its value more deeply into our lives. In Callard's words, this is to become an "aspirant," someone who "senses that there is more out there to value than she currently values, and she strives to come to see what she cannot yet get fully into view."

What is strange about experiences like these is not only that we come to value something that we did not previously value, but also that we begin to value something that is barely known to us at all. When we are inspired by a painting and want to learn more about art, we do not actually know what we are going to learn; or when we look forward to becoming a parent, we do not really know what it will be like to be totally responsible for another human being. At best, people who are inspired in these ways have an inkling of what they are looking for. For Callard, they have only an "inchoate, anticipatory, and indirect grasp of some good" in view. It can therefore seem wholly irrational for them to decide to study art or become a parent or switch majors because they do not have enough information to know whether their new personal goals will

actually be worth having. And yet aspiration is not only an instance of rational agency, as Callard argues, but also an integral part of any meaningful educational experience.

The promise of aspiration in education is that students come to see the subjects they study as aspirational projects. Although the concept of "intrinsic motivation" is widely used in educational circles—and there is an entire industry pedaling tips and tricks to teachers for how to make it happen in the classroom—we often overlook that intrinsic motivation only works when it is connected to intrinsic value. Aspiration is the process by which students awaken to this value and resolve to pursue it.

This all may seem fairly abstract, but taking aspiration seriously would require an important shift in our pedagogical practices. In an essay on educational goods, the philosopher Kenneth Strike takes a moment to describe the unique approach that his high school math teacher, Mrs. Smith, took to teaching her subject. Strike's account captures the pedagogical strategy that aspiration implies:

Mrs Smith was my ninth grade algebra teacher. To enter Mrs Smith's class was to enter the Temple of Mathematics. Equations were objects of reverence. There were no attempts to make math fun or 'relevant'. There was no discussion of how math helped one get a good job. Rather, Mrs Smith was able to point to the goods that made math intrinsically valuable. ... I do not recall that Mrs Smith used terms like elegance, simplicity, paradox or power to describe mathematics, but I do know that she showed us that these things were what motivated her about mathematics. ... In effect, her message to us was this. 'Here is what I see in math. There are goods internal to its practice. There are virtues required to realize these goods. Let me help you see them'.

For Strike, the point of learning about what motivated Mrs. Smith about mathematics was not to understand, in ethnographic fashion, why some curious individuals can spend their time immersed in abstractions. Rather, insights like this one helped him to grasp the value of mathematics from the inside, to appreciate its "elegance, simplicity, paradox or power." Mrs. Smith models to her students what it would be like to treat the axioms and ideas of mathematics as objects of reverence and personal significance. She shows them how the subject has profoundly enriched her own life.

Importantly, this approach is not only an entertaining addition to the real work of internalizing mathematical concepts. Mrs. Smith *needs* to draw on her passion for the subject and display her appreciation of its intrinsic value because her students cannot fully grasp this value at their current stage of understanding. If she wants to benefit from the power of intrinsic motivation in her classroom, then she needs to get her students on the same aspirational path that she once pursued herself. According to Strike, Mrs. Smith accomplishes this task not by employing the latest innovations in educational technology or the recent research on instructional design. Rather, she infuses her teaching with a love of her subject and insists that her students can come to love it too.

The aspirational perspective captures something fundamental about the educational encounter. The value of worthwhile educational pursuits—whether in mathematics or

English literature, physics or history—is always initially foreign to the learner. When we find ourselves in this unavoidable predicament as educators, it is all too easy to respond by invoking one-dimensional goods to get students in gear. We talk about how getting good grades will help them get into a good college or get a good job or have a comfortable life. We say that the skills and the knowledge they acquire in class will help them become good democratic deliberators or social problem-solvers. Or we conjure up images of the "critical thinker," who, in being intellectually prepared for all, is prepared for nothing in particular. Though these appeals are understandable, they are also deeply cynical. Focusing on one-dimensional goods makes us miss students' longing for *the* Good. We miss the whole adventure of life as a quest for value and meaning. And we miss how our disciplines can uniquely help students find this value and meaning. At root, aspirational education isn't about preparation for life; it is about learning to affirm it.

The aspirational vision of education may seem less radical—and thus less promising—than other reform alternatives. The pedagogical shift I'm calling for does not need us to profoundly rethink the curriculum, the structure of the school day or the architecture of our educational spaces. It does not require us to switch out blackboards for smartboards, to institute team-teaching, to get rid of grades or even to reduce class sizes. Of course, educational reformers are not wrong to call the conventional aspects of contemporary schooling into question. The problem is that they always seem to say that no meaningful progress can be made until these structural features of schools have been ousted. I think that is a mistake. The aspirational approach is compelling precisely because it can be attempted in the next class period.

There is another reason to find the aspirational approach especially promising. We can create for ourselves any number of innovative educational spaces or laboratory schools that seem to fulfill our principles or ideals about education. But if the teachers that carry out the mission do not have passion, purpose and the capacity to win students' hearts and minds for their subjects, then students' experiences there will almost certainly fail to be deeply meaningful for them. Of course, there are countless teachers already doing the important work of awakening young people's aspirations—and in every kind of school we have. But these are outliers, exceptions to the rule, who do not reflect the values of their schools as much as they do their own commitments to students.

If we wanted to start a real revolution in education, we would make the passion these educators embody the core principle of our educational decisions—from how we frame subject matter in the classroom to what qualities we look for in new hires. We would change how we educate future teachers—focusing less on the science of "methods" or "best practices" and more on the art of animating students with a fascination for their subjects. We would increase the professional autonomy of teachers, improve their

working and living conditions, and find ways to awaken the aspirational potential of those teachers who have not yet shown it. Finally, we would need to collectively reconsider why students spend the most valuable waking hours of their day, during the most formative years of their lives, in the classroom. To my mind, there is only one answer equal to the magnitude of compulsory school attendance: we have to show students that what they are learning is of the deepest significance, not only for what awaits them after school, but for enriching their lives right now.

One of the things that Marcuse finds so troubling about one-dimensional life is what he calls "the rational character of its irrationality." I cannot think of a more fitting account of one-dimensional education. Behind the pragmatism of provide-and-prepare is the irrational belief that this is what teaching and learning is all about. It isn't. "The simplest words," Ralph Waldo Emerson observes, "we do not know what they mean, except when we love and aspire." That seems right to me. We have not even really begun to teach or to learn until we feel the stirrings of love and aspiration.

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