



Literacy with an Attitude

**Educating Working-Class Children
in Their Own Self-Interest**

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Chapter 3

HARSH SCHOOLS, BIG BOYS, AND THE PROGRESSIVE SOLUTION

Daniel Resnick¹ tells an interesting story about the history of American schools and how we got to where we are today. His story begins with the history of the catechism. If you didn't go to a parochial school or attend Sunday school, you might not know what a catechism is. It's a book that teaches religious doctrine in a question-answer format. I still remember the first catechism lessons I memorized, I think in first grade.

Who made you?

God made me.

Why did God make you?

God made me to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this life and to be happy with Him forever in the next.²

Through memorizing page after page of such questions and answers I was taught those doctrines of the Catholic church that were deemed appropriate for children my age.

Catechisms appeared in the earliest days of Christianity and continued to be produced throughout the middle ages. Even after the Reformation the catechism continued to be a favored way of teaching religious doctrine. Luther's *Little Catechism* was translated into all the major European languages within a generation.

Similar books and methods were used in the first schools in Europe and in colonial America. *The New England Primer* with its hundred plus questions and answers was the most widely used reader in American schools before 1820. It sold more than two million copies in its many editions. Other school books followed suit, such as *A Political Catechism, Intended for Use in Schools in the United States of America*, which was published in 1796.

Early schools did not permit, let alone encourage, children to generate ideas or to argue about the truth or value of what others had written. Teaching from a catechism discourages questioning, interpreting, or reflecting on the significance of what was presented. "Writing" instruction consisted of copying portions of texts written by others—literally, in "copy books." The schools had no interest in recognizing or developing the independent authority of the student's mind, and they placed a great deal of importance on confirming the authority of received texts.

The frame of mind that gave us the catechism is the same frame of mind that gave us the American schools in the Traditional Era—from colonial times until after the Civil War.³ The dominant aim of traditional education was to develop character and intellect in the young by teaching them long-established knowledge. The curriculum was narrow—reading, penmanship, spelling, arithmetic, plus a little history, English, grammar, and geography. Subjects were divided into small "teachable" parts and taught in rigid order—from easy to hard or according to some logical idea of what must come before what. Each subject was taught in its own time slot. Little attention was paid to common elements or similarities from one subject to the next. Emphasis was on learning facts and rules.

There was no attempt to relate the curriculum to the children's lives. The curriculum was fixed and followed down to the last detail year after year. The same material was given to all pupils, without regard for individual differences. The school day consisted of lectures, drill, memorization, recitation, and examinations. Interaction between pupils was limited to competition. Cooperation in doing lessons was likely to be seen as cheating. The teacher and the textbook were the only source of information. Students not occupied directly with the teacher were expected to keep quiet. Desks faced the teacher and were kept in straight rows. They

were often bolted to the floor. Play was permitted only during recess.

If this all sounds pretty familiar, I'm not surprised. Traditional education has never disappeared, but the worst nightmare versions of it found today pale in comparison to the schools of the Traditional Era. These were the days of the schoolmaster. Before 1830, few women taught school. Women did not become the majority in the teaching profession until 1870.

The concept of educating a person to be a teacher was unheard of during the Traditional Era. People who could read and write set themselves up as schoolmasters. They were sometimes paid by individual parents, but almost from the beginning of the colonial period, some communities provided free schooling to those who wanted it and could take advantage of it. The teacher's continued employment did not depend on whether he had any particular talent for teaching; it depended on whether he could control the students.

Severity was considered a virtue. Teachers used a three-foot ruler and a flexible sapling about five feet in length "with force and frequency" upon both boys and girls, young and old, when they did not know their lessons or broke rules. During an inspection tour of the Boston schools in 1844, board members found that whippings in a "representative" school of four hundred pupils averaged sixty-five a day. They found "severe injuries" sometimes resulted from these beatings and that the offenses were often "very trifling." A famous historian commented that "There was little 'soft pedagogy' in the management of either town or rural schools before the Civil War."⁴

"Spare the rod and spoil the child" was a Bible text that received the most literal acceptance both in theory and practice.

Even the naturally mild-tempered man was an "old-fashioned" disciplinarian when it came to teaching, and the naturally rough and coarse-grained man was as frightful as any ogre in a fairy tale.

In summer, unless the teacher was an uncommonly poor one, or some of the scholars uncommonly wild and mischievous, the days moved along very harmoniously and pleasantly. In winter, when the big boys came in, some of them grown men, who cared vastly more about having a good time than getting learning, an important requisite of the master was "government." He ruled his little empire, not with a rod

of iron, but with a stout three-foot ruler, known as a "ferule," which was quite as effective. The really severe teacher had no hesitation in throwing this ruler at any child he saw misbehaving, and it is to be noted that he threw first and spoke afterward. Very likely he would order the culprit to bring him the ferule he had cast at him (it was a common occurrence to see in schoolroom walls "dents made by ferules hurled at misbehaving pupils' heads with an aim that sometimes proved untrue"), and, when the boy came out on the floor, would further punish him. Punishment by spattering the palm of his hand with a ruler was known as "feruling." The smarting of blows was severe while the punishment lasted, but this was as nothing to a "thrashing." The boy to be thrashed was himself sent for the apple tree twigs with which he was to be whipped. Poor fellow! Whimpering, and blinded by the welling tears, he slowly whittles off one after the other of the rough twigs. This task done, he drags his unwilling feet back to the schoolroom.

"Take off your coat, sir!" says the master. The school is hushed into terrified silence. The fire crackles in the wide fireplace, the wind whistles at the eaves, the boy's tears flow faster, and he stammers a plea for mercy. Then the whip kisses through the air, and blows fall thick and fast. The boy dances about the floor, and his shrill screams fill the schoolroom. His mates are frightened and trembling, and the girls are crying. . . .⁵

"Big boys" were often the teacher's nemesis. Two fairly commonplace forms of disruption often cost the teacher his job and caused the school to be closed until another teacher could be found. The first was referred to as "putting out" or "turning out" the teacher. In 1837 more than three hundred schools in Massachusetts were "broken up" by rebellious pupils—and Massachusetts was always a leader in education. The situation was probably worse elsewhere in the country. Turning out the teacher was described by Horace Greeley, of "Go west, young man" fame.

At the close of the morning session of the first of January, and perhaps on some other day that the big boys chose to consider or make a holiday, the moment the master left the house in quest of his dinner, the little ones were started homeward, the doors and windows suddenly and securely barricaded, and the

older pupils, thus fortified against intrusion, proceeded to spend the afternoon in play and hilarity. I have known a master to make a desperate struggle for admission, but the odds were too great. If he appealed to the neighboring fathers, they were apt to advise him to desist, and let matters take their course. I recollect one instance, however, where a youth [the teacher] was shut out who, procuring a piece of board, mounted from a fence to the roof of the schoolhouse and covered the top of the chimney nicely with his board. Ten minutes thereafter, the house was filled with smoke, and its inmates, opening the doors and windows, were glad to make terms with the outsider.⁶

It seems that in the Traditional Period of American education, the schoolmaster needed to earn his wings every day.

Another widely reported problem was assaults upon the teacher. These sometimes resulted when the teacher's thrashing of a student got to such a pitch that the miscreant or others (the older boys again) began to protest. When shouts failed "forcible, if not indeed armed, intervention might be the result."⁷ But assaults arose over other matters as well. One benighted soul was reported to have lost his job over a plan to demonstrate his physical prowess that went awry. He challenged several boys to wrestle during recess. "[H]e was downed successively by two or three and soon, as a result, lost control of the school, as they found they could handle him, and so concluded to have their own way."⁸ The teacher was fired.

And brutalizing and humiliating students carried with them certain risks. And as we will see, these were not abandoned for purely altruistic reasons.

This was a time when public schools were not expected to include everyone. In 1850 fewer than half the nation's whites between the ages of five and nineteen were in school, and the number of nonwhites in school was negligible. This was before immigration from eastern and southern Europe and the white population was vastly more homogeneous than it is today.

The concept of individual differences was unheard of. If a student failed or dropped out, it was no reflection on the school. The student was thought to be stupid or lazy. In schooling, blaming the victim is not a new concept.

After the Civil War things began to change. Between 1850 and 1900 the population of the United States tripled. Nine percent of the population lived in cities in 1830, 25 percent by 1870, and 50 percent by 1920. With industrialization and urbanization, the extended family of the rural setting gave way to nuclear families living among strangers in an unfamiliar setting. Children who had commonly worked on farms, now worked in factories. But as sentiment against child labor in industry mounted, child labor laws were enacted, and children became unemployable. In Philadelphia in 1870, it was reported that "upward of 20,000 children not attending any school, public, private or parochial, are running the streets in idleness and vagabondism."⁹

Concern over delinquency, workers' fear of competition from cheap child labor, and some genuine regard for the welfare of children prompted a rising demand for compulsory education. Only Massachusetts had compulsory education laws before the Civil War. Vermont was the first state to follow suit, in 1867. By 1919 every state had compulsory education laws. It was now the responsibility of the schools to take in all children and keep them.

Enrollments soared and schools became overcrowded. Playgrounds, which had been all outdoors in the country, were confined, overcrowded areas in cities as the country urbanized. The student body was no longer homogeneous. Students varied in ability, religion, social status, place of birth, and language. Differences among white Americans, who had hailed largely from northwestern Europe before the Civil War, were dwarfed by differences among immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, Asia, Latin America, and the newly freed African Americans after the Civil War. By 1910 the proportion of students with foreign-born parents topped 50 percent in the nation's thirty-seven largest cities.

With compulsory education, control became the central problem of schools. Older children with no means of escape were even more prone to violent resistance toward the traditional teaching and discipline methods of the past. The assumption that a child who was not ready to recite lessons perfectly was simply lazy and deserving of a thrashing or expulsion no longer worked. Differences in what could be reasonably expected from different students became too apparent to ignore. Finding other means of control became essential.

Industrialization offered more promising kinds of employment for educated men than "keeping school." At the same time, with compulsory education, schools were becoming a big ticket item for taxpayers, and women could be paid less than men. By 1870 the majority of teachers were women and by 1920 more than 80 percent of teachers were women. The school staff was becoming more and more female. Simultaneously, or perhaps in response to the impossibility of continuing business as usual, public attitudes toward brutal treatment of children were changing and prohibitions against corporal punishment were written into most school districts' rules. Something had to happen, and it did. "Progressive" ideals were invoked, but ultimately subverted, to calm the troubled waters.

The ideas upon which progressive education is built can be traced to the seventeenth century and the period referred to as the Enlightenment. Until this time the prevailing view was that human beings are inherently sinful. Enlightenment philosophers argued that man is not inherently good or evil; only his environment makes him one or the other, and so if you could make the environment consistently favorable, there would be no limits on the achievements and virtue of which individuals were capable.

Rousseau (1712–1778) applied this idea explicitly to childhood. He believed that children are endowed with potentials that should be nurtured and permitted to grow naturally in a healthy environment. Pestalozzi (1746–1827) and Froebel (1782–1852) took Rousseau's ideas and translated them into practice in elementary schools and in kindergarten. These ideas found their way to the United States as early as 1808, in a book by Joseph Neef, and found an influential champion in Horace Mann (1796–1859).

In an 1843 report to the Massachusetts Board of Education, Mann criticized the schools and called for reforms, including methods based on Rousseau's ideas and discipline based on love. Mann was immediately attacked by ministers who opposed his beliefs about human nature and by teachers who opposed his educational beliefs. The controversy succeeded in drawing widespread attention to Mann's ideas.

In the 1890s Joseph Rice toured schools in thirty-five cities and wrote a series of muckraking articles that attacked methods of

*Progressive
Education*

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teaching that were designed to "immobilize, automatize, and dehumanize students." Lawrence Cremin, a distinguished educational historian, credits Rice's articles with starting the progressive movement in the United States.¹⁰ About the same time, John Dewey (1869–1953), probably the best-known proponent of "progressive education," started the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago.

There are two central concepts of progressive education. First, schools should deal with the whole child—his or her personality, social skills and attitudes, and physical well-being—rather than focusing exclusively on his or her ability to master a narrow, traditional curriculum and parrot back answers. Therefore, education should be interesting, exciting, and enjoyable. Second, children are different. They have different experiences, abilities, and interests. Therefore, although the knowledge and skills included in a progressive curriculum might be quite traditional, they are not likely to be taught in a rigid order dictated by some concept of easy-to-hard or the logic of the subject. They are instead taught in an order dictated by the experiences, abilities, and interests of the individual children. Children are given some choice in determining what they will study and even in how they will go about learning. Because progressive schools deal with the development of the whole child and recognize individual differences in students' experiences, abilities, and interests, traditional school activities such as reading, writing, and reciting are joined by expressive, creative, physical, and social activities. Art, music, crafts, shop, cooking, sewing, dramatics, and physical education all become part of the regular curriculum. Subjects are "integrated" whenever possible. For example, reading, writing, geography, history, and arithmetic lessons might be incorporated into an ongoing project determined by the students, such as studying the origins of ethnic groups represented in the classroom. Children's activities and learnings will vary. Courses of study (in history, for example) are viewed, not as something that must be covered by each child in a fixed and thorough manner, but as guides for facts, concepts, skills, understandings, and attitudes that might be developed as the teacher deems appropriate for the class and for individual students.

The teacher and textbook are no longer the sole sources of knowledge. Pupils go on field trips, utilize the library and audio-

visual presentations, interview local citizens, and so on. Memorization and drill are replaced with efforts to lead students to discover general principles. Pupils are permitted to work independently and in small groups, move about the room, and engage in interesting projects, and a variety of methods and materials are used, including plays, murals, models, projects, games, audio-visual equipment, computers, and field trips.

When children do not do their lessons or don't do them correctly, teachers question whether students have the necessary background or previous knowledge, or they question their own methods or consider how they might capture the students' interest before deciding that the students are lazy or stupid. When, at last, punishment appears to be necessary, it is not physical; instead, it usually involves the loss of some sort of privilege and it is accompanied with sympathetic and constructive suggestions for behavioral changes and explanations of why they are necessary. The ideal is not discipline from above, but self-discipline. Willinsky defines "new literacy," a recent form of progressive education, as "those strategies in the teaching of reading and writing which attempt to shift the control of literacy from the teacher to the student."¹¹ Teachers strive to be democratic and friendly. The classroom is informal. Desk and chairs are movable and they are frequently rearranged into circles, clusters, or lines depending on the activity. Distinctions between the school and other spheres of the students' life are minimized. Schools attempt to build on home and community activities with which children are already familiar. But, as we shall see, progressives had fairly upscale homes and communities in mind.

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Progressive education unintentionally offered the school an escape hatch from the crisis precipitated by compulsory education laws. Invoking principles of progressive education, schools were able to continue teaching the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic in grades one through six, but there were now *flexible standards*. Less could be expected (and less demanded) of some students based on their "aptitude" or "intelligence." Everyone in the fourth grade class would move on to the fifth even though there might be a wide range of achievement among them. As early as seventh

grade the curriculum would be diversified by adding such courses as shop, art, music, cooking, sewing, and auto mechanics.

The adoption of flexible standards and a diversified curriculum dovetailed with the growing testing movement and created a new profession—school counselling. Intelligence and achievement tests were used to assign students to “tracks” or “streams.” An elementary school with sixty or seventy students in each grade might divide them into “low,” “middle,” and “high” classes, often based on their scores on standardized reading achievement tests. High schools developed academic, commercial, and vocational programs, which, despite protestation to the contrary, soon became identified as “high” and “low” tracks in the minds of everyone. Where schools during the Traditional Era selected students by a process of exclusion, schools in the Progressive Era selected students by differentiating them into different tracks or streams.

There are those who argue that the adoption of progressive ideas was the result of convincing philosophical arguments from scholars such as Dewey. There is no doubt some truth to this, but I generally favor the “escape hatch” theory, because after the dust settled we had arrived at the present system, which is pretty well described by Anyon’s study of gentrification, middle-class, and working-class schools reported in the last chapter.

Anyon’s affluent professional school is about as good as it gets in terms of progressive philosophy and methods and her executive elite school had a progressive feel about it in terms of discipline, student autonomy, and teachers’ attitudes toward the students. I would describe her middle-class and working-class schools as traditional schools with a “softened pedagogy,” ones where lessons are a little less rigid, but not much, and the brutal assaults have all but disappeared.



I would estimate that today about 20 percent of American schools, those attended by the offspring of the gentry, those whom Reich describes as symbolic-analytic workers, could be described as progressive. The remaining 80 percent, those attended by the offspring of the middle and working classes, are best described as traditional schools with a somewhat softened pedagogy. And I would

expect the degree of “softening” to be related to the status of the parents—the higher the status, the softer the pedagogy.

But why aren’t progressive methods, curriculum, and philosophy used in all schools? There is not a single reason. There are a lot of them. They’re subtle and interconnected. I’ll discuss them in the next several chapters.