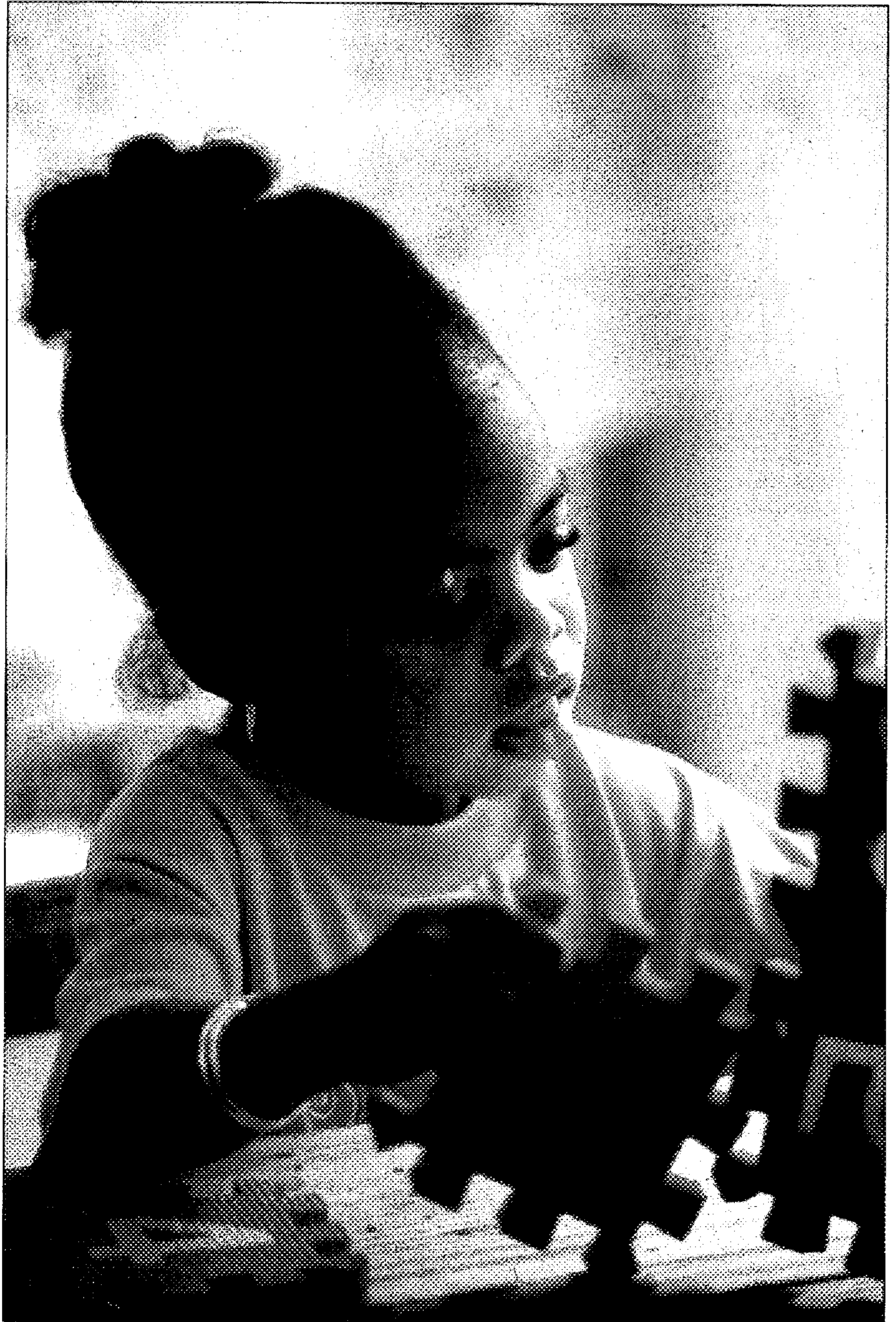
Renewing Democracy in Schools

BY NEL NODDINGS

Ms. Noddings argues that the movement for uniform standards may actually handicap efforts to renew democracy in the schools.



TODAY'S school reform efforts aim almost exclusively at increasing the academic achievement of students. Despite their narrow focus, reform efforts are usually "systemic" in that they address the whole complex — uniform and precise standards, governance, and mechanisms of accountability. But they often fall short in promoting the discourse that lies at the heart of education in a liberal democracy: What *experience* do students need in order to become engaged participants in democratic life? How can education develop the capacity for making well-informed choices? If liberal public discussion is a foundation for democracy, how can schools promote such discussion?[1] What pedagogical methods are compatible with the aims of democratic education?

In contrast to systemic reform efforts, programs aimed at renewal identify the central purposes and processes of democratic education, attempt to interpret them in contemporary terms, and seek to strengthen them.[2] I do not mean to contrast programs of reform and renewal too sharply.

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Many in both camps are fine programs. But the *idea* of renewal is different. It attends to the underlying ideals and purposes of democratic education. It takes seriously the judgment of John Dewey that a democratic society "must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder."[3]

In this article, I will address just two problems that we face in trying to renew democratic education. I will argue that the movement for uniform standards may actually handicap efforts to renew democracy in the schools 1) by eliminating many of the legitimate choices that students should be guided in making and 2) by failing to encourage the sort of rational political discussion that provides the very foundation of liberal democracy.

Making Choices

Choice figures prominently in liberal/democratic theories. Some political theorists make it absolutely central to liberalism.[4] Others name a different theme (e.g., preserving diversity) as primary, but no liberal theorist can deny the importance of choice in liberal democracies. "Liberal," as I am using it here, is not to be understood as, in common parlance, the opposite of "conservative" but rather as reference to a philosophical/political heritage shared by both present-day liberals and conservatives. In liberal/democratic societies, the rights and privileges of individuals are taken seriously; freedom and equality are the watchwords.

It is not simply that citizens of such democracies are expected to make intelligent choices in voting; more important, they are left to their own guidance on a wide range of life choices. Educational theories that put great emphasis on preparation for voting miss the very point of that ritual.[5] Most of us do not care terribly whether those who represent us in government are (temporarily) Republicans or Democrats, although we may work toward the election of one party or the other. What rightly concerns us is the maintenance of a form of government under which our right to make choices is held sacred. The choice of where to live, with whom to associate, what sort of work to do, which professionals to consult, which merchants to patronize, how to spend our leisure time, how to worship, what to read . . . these are choices we cherish. Voting is often little more than a powerful sign that we *do* cherish these choices.

Because we live in a liberal/democratic society (albeit an imperfect one), political education is a necessity. Amy Gutmann puts it this way: "We can conclude that 'political education' — the cultivation of the virtues, knowledge, and skills necessary for political participation — has moral primacy over other purposes of public education in a democratic society."[6]

Most of us can give assent to this statement even though we might disagree on exactly what is meant by "political" or "democratic." Without attempting a precise definition of either term (a task far too large for this space), I want to make it clear that I am using "political education" in a very broad sense. I do not mean by it simply participation in public life, however important such activity may be. Rather, I mean an education that enhances the likelihood that students will have both richly satisfying personal lives and the willingness to promote such lives for others. It is precisely because we live in a democratic society that such a description of political education is essential. We need to have not only the knowledge and skills for public participation but also those for how to "get about" in an environment of political freedom.

Oddly, liberal theorists often have less to say about education than theorists from other perspectives. Totalitarian thinkers, for example, have usually put great and consistent emphasis on education. One reason for this neglect by liberal theorists may be that systematic education seems to require coercion, and coercion is incompatible with the liberal/democratic spirit. John Stuart Mill, for example, excluded children, dependent young, and "barbarians" from the basic liberal principle of noninterference.[7] He seemed to believe that all those people who had not yet reached a mature rationality might reasonably be coerced for their own good.

In contrast with Mill, Dewey wrote extensively on liberalism and the need for an education consistent with liberalism — one that would provide students with the kinds of experience that would contribute to the personal interests and habits of mind needed for democratic life. A main point of contention between Dewey and traditional educators, such as Robert Maynard Hutchins, centered on exactly this issue: Are students best prepared for democratic life by absorbing a rigorous body of carefully prescribed material, or must they have actual experience with democratic processes? The issue generates a whole set of problems ranging over cognitive, affective, and social domains.

Arguments of this sort have raged in the U.S. for more than 100 years.[8] The faculty psychology (or mental discipline) school that was so popular in the 19th century held that the mind had to be exercised vigorously and that the best materials to provide this exercise were the standard disciplines. An interesting variation on mental discipline was suggested by Charles William Eliot, the Harvard president who presided over the Committee of Ten. Eliot defended electives for students on the ground that sustained study — not prolonged study of particular subjects — is what produces the appropriate mental exercise. This theme is echoed in much of Dewey's work. He, too, believed that engaged, sustained study of almost any topic would produce the growth and discipline we seek in education. Further, Dewey held that students' involvement in the choice of topics, projects, and objectives for their own learning was an essential part of what I am calling political education.

The difference of opinion persists today, but the establishment of national standards threatens to suppress discussion. No responsible educator advocates a hodgepodge of unconnected topics as a curriculum, but many of us agree with Dewey that there should be a way to avoid coercion and still provide a rich curriculum that can be varied according to the needs and interests of individual students. Continuity is clearly important, but it can be secured by guidance and discussion; it need not be a product of coercion.[9]

If Eliot was right in his early defense of electives (he seems to have changed his mind later), there is no sensible reason for eliminating them and moving to a "one size fits all" curriculum. However, it has been argued that allowing students to choose their own courses will encourage some to downgrade their own education. The answer to this objection is not to resort to coercion "for their own good" but to ensure that every course offered is worthwhile. An open and rigorous discussion of national standards could be very useful here. Such discussion could encourage educators to think along the following lines: What goals should *all* courses further? Which of many desirable goals does this particular course

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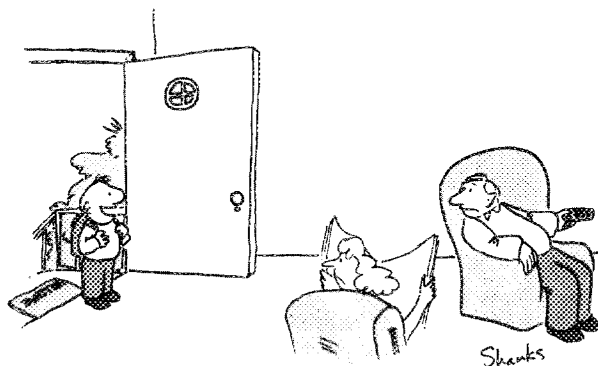
promote? If its content is highly constrained (e.g., jewelry making, introductory algebra), is there a way that it can be expanded to include some history, aesthetics, reading, writing, or other material deemed important? How will the methods of teaching and learning contribute to the growth of democratic character?

If every course the high school offers were to be worthwhile in the sense just described, we would not have to worry about students' making choices that would downgrade their education. We would still face the problem of continuity, however, and we would be required to supply much more information about our courses than we usually do at the high school level. An adequate political education should help students to make *well-informed* choices. I am not suggesting that students be allowed to exercise blind desire. Indeed, it is because a free society makes it possible for people to follow their blind desires (within their means) that education in a democracy must prepare students to make sound choices. To choose wisely among even fine possibilities requires information. In addition, it requires a relationship between teachers and students that will make it possible for teachers to guide each student responsibly. The flow of information is bidirectional. The student needs information about what the school offers; the teacher needs information about the student in order to guide him or her effectively.

Another argument against a curriculum rich in electives is that students may change their minds by the end of high school and regret that they are not better prepared for college. This worry cannot be brushed aside, but it can be answered thoughtfully. Because we live in a credentialed society, students who have chosen nontraditional courses may find themselves "unprepared" for immediate entry into college, but the power they have acquired in controlling their own studies should make it relatively easy for them to gain the further preparation required. Many such students are better prepared for the actual work of college than the sizable number of youngsters who graduate now with "approved" courses that have, in fact, left them totally unprepared for the rigors of college. If we are looking for a national disgrace, it is not to be found in the fact that too few students take "rigorous" courses but rather in the fact that so many take them and learn so little from them. Responsible educators cannot simply declare credentials unimportant, and we have to be sure that students understand the likely consequences of their choices. But we can also launch a campaign to get colleges to experiment a bit by admitting students with nontraditional preparation. Democratic societies have long professed faith in sound scientific practices, and yet our educational efforts are obstinately conservative. Changing one's mind, one's occupation, one's way of life is enormously attractive in a liberal democracy. Schooling should reflect this cherished privilege.

High school students should be encouraged to make well-informed choices not only of the courses they will take but also of the standards they will attempt to meet within each course. Again, teachers should not turn over the entire matter of standards to students, but it is entirely reasonable to establish several sets of standards for a given course, each carefully constructed to match the purposes of the students who choose to take the course. The provision of variable standards does not necessitate tracking; it can be done within heterogeneous classes. The important point, from the perspective of political education, is that students understand how the standards they are working toward fit their own purposes. To urge all students to do equally well in all subjects is foolish. In addition to being impractical, it is an invitation to mediocrity.

A program of the sort I am suggesting here — one in which students get equal credit for well-done work in art, photography, or algebra — is sometimes criticized as anti-intellectual. This criticism, too, has to be taken seriously. Too often the accusation serves as a conversation stopper. Anti-intellectual? Horrors! But what do we mean by "intellectual"? If we mean that creditable school work should invite critical thought, proficient use of language, and an increase in cultural literacy, then, as I argued above, every course should be "intellectual." But if we mean that an accredited course of study must comprise a specified body of content in order to be intellectual, then what I am advocating is clearly anti-intellectual. This too is an old debate — one that may also be foreclosed by the standards movement. Instead of closing down debate with prescribed objectives for all students, a democratic society would do better to make responsible choice available within its public school system.[10]



"The school wants to know which one of you is in charge of damage control!"

Liberal Political Discussion

Several writers have recently noted that democracies seem to maintain themselves and thrive in societies marked by a tradition of liberal public discourse.[11] If this is true, democratic education should give students appropriate practice in such discourse. There is a language to be learned, a form, a whole practice. It could be argued — and has been, at least implicitly — that with sufficient knowledge, the only practice needed is that involved in debating academic questions. Examples of such questions might be: Was Jefferson a liberal? To what extent were the Framers of the U.S. Constitution influenced by economic factors? These questions are interesting to some students, and they certainly can be engaged in a way that introduces students to the forms of public discourse. But they may not matter to many students, and a mark of public discourse is that it arises around *issues,* things that matter to those speaking.

It would seem, then, that the best practice would invite students to discuss issues of current importance — importance to them, if possible. No one can guarantee that any particular issue will be important to every student in a given class, but educators can make an effort to share questions that are relevant both to the general public and to students.

Consider, for example,

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what might be done with the question of whether both evolution and creationism should be taught in public schools.[12] This is a question that is debated by some school boards, but only the decision, in the form of a specified curriculum, is conveyed to students. Why not encourage students to investigate all sides of the question? Are there scientifically defensible objections to evolution? Is there more than one version of evolution theory? What are the issues that separate versions?

Students should also have an opportunity to learn something about the history of evolutionary theory, about the great debates — including the fiery exchange between Bishop Wilberforce and Thomas Henry Huxley, in which Huxley suggested strongly that he would rather share ancestry with apes than with Wilberforce. If students are then convinced that Wilberforce was a dimwitted reactionary, they should be encouraged to learn something about his enlightened social views and his father's fight against slavery. Similarly, when students study the Scopes trial, they should be invited to find out more about both William Jennings Bryan and Clarence Darrow. The biographies of both men are fascinating. Reading about Darrow, for example, students may become interested in the question of determinism versus free will.

The subtopics that arise in a free and full discussion of evolution are almost endless. For example, does human language represent a limitation on the continuity hypothesis? That is, can human language be shown to be continuous with animal communication, or is it what some scholars have called a "true emergent"? Students who are interested in animal behavior might choose to study this topic in considerable depth.

When creationism is discussed, students should be encouraged to examine the two creation stories that appear in Genesis. In one (1:27), God creates "man in his own image . . . male and female created he them." In the second (2:7-23), God first creates Adam and then makes Eve from Adam's rib. Why has this second version been so popular among preachers and storytellers? Why have feminists objected so strongly to it? Does the first version suggest, as Elizabeth Cady Stanton insisted, that God is both female and male? Does the second lead ineluctably to a Judeo-Christian endorsement of the ancient myths that equated the creation of woman with the advent of evil in the world? High school girls often need a special intellectual interest, and this set of topics may thrill many of them. It provides a stimulating introduction to feminist thought.

In addition to the Judeo-Christian creation stories, other such stories should be told. There are wonderful African, Chinese, and Native American creation stories, and these too would provide excellent centers for further study.

Many students will also be attracted to the study of social Darwinism and its pernicious effects on women and non-Europeans. The doctrines of Herbert Spencer, Carl Vogt, Paul Mobius, Edward Clarke, and Darwin himself perpetuated the notions that females are inferior to males, that non-Europeans are inferior to Europeans (northern Europeans), and that most of the poor deserve their misery because of deficient character or constitution. The damage done by these doctrines is incalculable. Again, the number of subtopics that arise from the stem of social Darwinism is impressive.

Instead of battling behind closed doors over whether to teach evolution or creationism, we should bring the debate into the classroom. In doing so, we might begin to see the foolishness of separating school subjects as sharply as we do. Why fight over whether creationism should be mentioned in *science* class? The topics mentioned above are of great human interest. They create an opportunity for interdisciplinary study and team-teaching. But they can and should be discussed in science classes as well. Willingness to do so signals to students that science is a significant part of liberal studies — studies that initiate students into the practices of a democratic society.

Imagine how much "cultural literacy" students might gain in a unit of study such as this. Working on their own projects, listening to others, trying to fit whatever direct instruction they receive with the material they are learning on their own, they will come across names, events, and concepts that will add immeasurably to their store of knowledge. I am not suggesting that we depend on "incidental learning" for the entire curriculum, but I do think we underestimate the power and scope of such learning. Material that we "pick up" while fully engaged in inquiry is likely to remain with us longer than that which we learn for the purpose of passing a test.

The main point to be made from this example is that the practice in liberal public discourse needed for the maintenance of a successful democracy can be provided in such a way that the questions to be debated are relevant, exciting, intellectually challenging, and culturally rich. Judiciously selected topics also offer the kind of choice that students need to become self-reliant learners.

In addition to a host of questions that are current on the public agenda, students should discuss those that are directly relevant to their own condition.[13] Why, for example, are they required to study algebra and geometry? What arguments are offered and how valid are they? Is it true that most occupations today require the use of algebra? Is it true that people who are competent in algebra and geometry make higher salaries than those who are not? If this is true, is it because mathematical skills are actually in demand or is it largely a result of a credentialing system? On a question such as this last, students should be encouraged to recognize and talk about partial truths.

If it is argued that academic mathematics should be studied because it is a great cultural achievement and might even be regarded as one of the foundations on which great modern civilizations have been built, then what about other institutions and practices that have made significant contributions? What role has been played by the development of the *home* as a private place? By the modern family? By changing conceptions of child rearing? Why are these topics not part of the standard curriculum? And if mathematics is so vital to cultural development, why do we not study its history, its uses in warfare and politics, its aesthetics, its appearances in literature, the biographies of mathematicians, the historical exclusion of women from its study, and a host of other topics usually identified with culturally rich material?

We have to be careful when we engage in this kind of political education. We want to encourage free and honest discussion, but we should avoid messages that destroy hope and induce cynicism. Some forms of radical pedagogy are too one-sided and leave students with the notion that everything good about their nation and their schooling is but a myth. Further, radical pedagogies sometimes assume that it is legitimate to enlist students in particular campaigns for social transformation, and some teachers become angry and resentful when students resist their revolutionary messages. In political education for demo-

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cratic living, students should have the right to resist such pressure. We should want them to know that there are groups working hard for (and against) various changes in our society, and we should share with them the strongest arguments on all sides. Such pedagogical generosity should be characteristic of democratic education. It does not require us to be completely neutral. Sometimes, teachers should state frankly where they stand and why, but they should not silence voices that disagree.

Another word of caution is well taken here. Often students who have not yet mastered the standard forms of language and whose cultural practices differ from the rational discussions described here are silenced automatically. Their participation should be strongly encouraged, and classroom conversation should be extended to include this set of problems too. When students use emotional forms of rhetoric, their contributions should be accepted, but further inquiry should be prompted. Who else takes this point of view? What is the logic of the argument? What conditions induce it? What can be said in opposition? If we traded cultural positions, might you react as emotionally as I do? To accept the contributions of marginalized students does not require teachers to abdicate their responsibility for helping these students to learn standard forms. To reject some arguments as unfounded does not require us to reject the students who make them. Political education in a free society must be designed to help students *achieve* freedom in both their public and private lives.

When liberal discussion is used to promote inquiry, critical thinking, reflective commitment, and personal autonomy, students are likely to feel more in control of their own schooling. It won't hurt them to hear that much of what they are taught in schools will be useless in everyday life. They need to know that they are living in a highly credentialed society and that the tie between credential and competence is thought by many to be weak. In an adequately politicized classroom, students may begin to experience school as a place to which they can bring some meaning. School will no longer be experienced as a compulsory act in a theater of the absurd.

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1. See Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 1997, pp. 22-43; see also Robert D. Kaplan, "Was Democracy Just a Moment?," *Atlantic Monthly*, December 1997, pp. 55-80.
2. See Roger Soder, ed., *Democracy, Education, and the Schools* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996).
3. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916; New York: Macmillan, 1944), p. 99.
4. The best-known example is John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971); see also idem, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
5. For one who puts too much emphasis on voting, see Mortimer J. Adler, *The Paideia Proposal* (New York: Macmillan, 1982).
6. Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 287.
7. See John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* and *Utilitarianism* (1859; New York: Bantam Books, 1993).
8. See Herbert Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
9. For some ideas on how to accomplish this, see Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992).
10. Howard Gardner seems to be suggesting something along these lines in his letter to the editor, *Education Week*, 5 August 1998, pp. 45, 53.
11. See Zakaria, op. cit.; and Kaplan, op. cit.
12. See Nel Noddings, *Educating for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993).
13. See Nel Noddings, "Politicizing the Mathematics Classroom," in Sal Restivo, Jean Paul Van Bendegem, and Roland Fischer, eds., *Math Worlds: Philosophical and Social Studies of Mathematics and Mathematics Education* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), pp. 150-61. K

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