

# KETTERING REVIEW

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A journal of ideas and activities dedicated to improving  
the quality of public life in the American democracy

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# Public Education and the Education of the Public

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by Lawrence A. Cremin

*The proper education of the public will not go forward in our society until we undertake anew a great public dialogue.*

**T**he most notable distinction between living beings and inanimate things, Dewey tells us, is that living beings maintain themselves by renewal.

Among human beings, that renewal takes place through a process of cultural transmission, which Dewey refers to as “education in its broadest sense.” Education in its broadest sense is a process that is continuous, ubiquitous, pervasive, and all-powerful—indeed, so powerful that Dewey draws the moral that the only way adults can consciously control the kind of education children get is by controlling the environment in which they act, think, and feel.

Dewey goes on to tell us that there is a marked difference between the education everyone gets simply from living with others and the deliberate education offered by the school. In the ordinary course of living, education is *incidental*; in schooling, education is *intentional*. In developing the argument, Dewey takes the familiar early-20th-century tack of going back to the origins of institutions in some primordial state of society. The family, he tells us, began in the desire to gratify appetites and secure the perpetuity of a line. Religious associations, he continues, began in the desire to ward off evil influences and obtain the favor of supreme powers. And work began in the simple enslavement of one human being to another. Any education that might have derived from participation in these institutions, he points out, was at best incidental. And, indeed, he tells us, by way of illustration, that savage groups have no special devices or materials or institutions for teaching the young, with the exception of initiation ceremonies. For the most

part, they depend on the kind of incidental learning that derives from shared activity.

As civilization advances, however, life becomes more complicated, and much of what adults do is so complex that simple participation no longer suffices for the transmission of culture. At this point, Dewey suggests, intentional agencies, called schools, and explicit materials, called studies, come into being. And the task of transmitting particular aspects of life is delegated to a special group of people called teachers. Dewey is careful to point out that schools are an important means for transmitting culture, but only one means among many, and when compared with other agencies, a relatively superficial means. Although schools are the only means adults really have at their disposal for going systematically and deliberately about the education of the young, in a modern industrial society, with its multiplicity of political and educative agencies, the school could never be the main determinant of political, intellectual, or moral change. The best the school could do would be to form the understanding and the dispositions necessary for movement toward a changed social order.

**D**ewey revealed the dilemma beautifully in an address he gave to a conference on early childhood education at Teachers College in the spring of 1933. The address began with one of Dewey's great aphorisms: "The most Utopian thing about Utopia is that there are no schools at all." Education in Utopia, Dewey went on to say, is carried out without benefit of schools, since children learn what they have to know in informal association with the adults who direct their activity. But Dewey did not go on from that point to describe a Utopian society whose values were so pervasive and whose institutions were so cohesive as to

form the young through the very process of living. Rather, he went on to describe a society in which there were schools, but essentially activity schools of the sort Dewey and his daughter Evelyn had written about in *Schools of To-Morrow*. Dewey was trying to reconcile the dualism between school and society, but he was for all intents and purposes the victim of his own theoretical polarity. And, indeed,

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that polarity persists right down to the present time. We see it in the ambivalence of the educational reform movement of the 1960s, with its free school proponents on the one side and its de-school proponents on the other. And we see it also—and in a more dangerous form perhaps—in the vast pendulum swing of American opinion during the 1970s, from a century-long overreliance on schooling as



a general instrument of social aspiration to a period of widespread disenchantment with schooling.

Dewey went awry, it seems to me, where he dwelled on the origins of institutions rather than their functions. What matter that the family may have begun in the desire to gratify appetites and secure the perpetuation of a line? What matter that religious associations may have begun in the desire to ward off evil influences and secure the favor of supreme powers? What matter that work may have begun in enslavement to others? For one thing, we can't really know how they began; for another, the question of origins may not be central to the argument. The important fact is that family life does educate, religious life does educate, and work does educate; and, what is more, the education of all three realms is as intentional as the education of the school, though in different ways and in different measures.

Every family has a curriculum, which it teaches quite deliberately and systematically over time. Every church and synagogue has a curriculum, which it teaches deliberately and systematically over time—the Old and New Testaments, after all, are among our oldest curricula, and so are the Missal and the Mass, and so is the Book of Common Prayer. And every employer has a curriculum, which he teaches deliberately and systematically over time; and the curriculum includes not only the technical skills of typing or welding or reaping or teaching but also the social skills of carrying out those activities in concert with others on given time schedules and according to established expectations and routines. One can go on to point out that libraries have curricula, museums have curricula, Boy Scout troops have curricula, and



day-care centers have curricula, and most important, perhaps, radio and television stations have curricula—and by these curricula I refer not only to programs labeled educational but also to news broadcasts and documentaries (which presumably inform), to commercials (which teach people to want), and to soap operas (which reinforce common myths and values).

We have a theory of education in which each of the major educative agencies performs a meditative role with respect to the others and with respect to society-at-large. The family mediates the culture, and it also mediates the ways in which religious organizations, television broadcasters, schools, and employers mediate the culture. Families not only engage deliberately and systematically in the teach-

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ing of knowledge, values, attitudes, skills, and sensibilities; they also screen and interpret the teaching of churches, synagogues, television broadcasters, schools, and employers. Similarly, the school not only engages deliberately

and systematically in the teaching of knowledge, values, attitudes, skills, and sensibilities; it also interprets the teaching of families, churches, synagogues, television broadcasters, and employers. One can go on and work out all the permutations and combinations. What is more, these various institutions mediate the culture in a variety of pedagogical styles—and the different combinations of these styles that pertain in different situations at different times. Further, these various institutions mediate the culture via different technologies for the recording, sharing, and distributing of symbols. In effect, they define the terms of effective participation and growth in the society. The theory of education becomes the theory of the relation of various educative interactions and institutions to one another and to the society-at-large.

**O**f the implications of this analysis for policymaking in education, I would put forward three assertions: first, that we have to think comprehensively about education; second, that we have to think relationally about education; and third, that we have to think publicly about education. Let me take each of these up in turn.



First, thinking comprehensively, we have traditionally assumed in the United States that the public school, for more than a century, created and re-created the American public, virtually singlehandedly, and endowed that

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Whatever judgment is made of any particular educational program must always be made in light of what is going on elsewhere.

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public with its unique capability of working cooperatively on social problems, despite its ethnic, racial, religious, and class heterogeneity. The assumption, of course, is not without foundation. The public school has labored mightily over the years to nurture certain common values and commitments and to teach the skills by which a vastly variegated society can resolve its conflicts peacefully rather than by the methods of guerrilla warfare. Indeed, the public school has actually come to symbolize the quest for community in American society. But the public school has never functioned alone or in isolation. Where it has succeeded, it has functioned as part of a large configuration of institutions, including families, churches, Sunday schools, and reform schools, committed to essentially complementary values. When the configuration has disintegrated, however, as it has from time to time in our larger cities, and when the centrifugal forces of heterogeneity have overbalanced the centrifugal forces of community, the public school has been less successful. My assertion is not the powerlessness of public schooling—far from it—but rather the limita-

tions of public schooling. And the moral is simple: The public school ought never to take the entire credit for the educational accomplishments of the public, and it ought never to be assigned the entire blame.

**T**he fact is that the public is educated by many institutions, some of them public and some of them private, and that public schools are only one among several important public institutions that educate the public. There are, after all, public libraries, public museums, public television, and public work projects, the most pervasive, perhaps, being the military services. Other societies, of course, have used quite different agencies to educate the public. The Soviet Union, for example, used the *Komsomol*, a network of youth organizations, as an important instrument of public education, while the People's Republic of China used communes in public factories and on public farms in similar fashion. And the Indians, the Australians, and the Venezuelans have used public radio to teach the skills of literacy in areas too remote for schools.



A kind of obverse of these propositions is the recognition that all educational transactions have both private and public consequences. Family nurture that encourages independence, church teaching that condemns family planning, television news programs that dramatize the human consequences of military ventures—these are but a few examples of private educative efforts with profound public impact. In sum, then, we must consider policies with respect to a wide variety of institutions that educate, not only schools and colleges, but libraries, museums, day-care centers, radio and television stations, offices, factories, and farms. Education must be looked at whole, across the entire life span, and in all the situations and institutions in which it occurs. Obviously, public policy will not touch and ought not to touch every situation with equal intensity—that only happens in totalitarian societies, and even in totalitarian societies it never happens quite as efficaciously as the leaders would prefer. Indeed, there are some situations public policy will not touch at all. But it must consider each so that wise choices can be made as to *where* to invest *what* effort to achieve *which* goals with respect to *which* clientele. The United States Congress already does this when it decides to allocate so many dollars to children's television rather than schooling, and incidentally in dealing with children's television it inevitably affects the family. And local communities already do this when they decide in a period of budgetary stringency to close a public library rather than a public school. I would only insist that the range of possibilities be understood far more explicitly than it has been in the past and that public authorities approach these questions of allocation rationally rather than whimsically, and with a full awareness of educational consequences.

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**F**irst, then, we must think *comprehensively* about education. Second, we must think *relationally*. To do this means in the first instance to be aware of the problem of allocation of financial and human resources, as indicated above, and of resultant educational outcomes. And it means, in the second place, that wherever an effort goes forward in education, it must go forward not in isolation from other educative institutions but in relation to them.

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## The courts have been our most influential agencies of educational policymaking since World War II. But courts tend to stress our differences.

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In some subject areas, of course, the school originates much of what it teaches. Mathematics is an example. In mathematics, the student learns much of what he needs to learn for the first time in the classroom (though that may become less and less true). But in other realms, in languages and literature, for example, or in social studies or hygiene, or the arts, or the domain of values and morals, the child has his first learning and possibly his most persuasive learning earlier and elsewhere. In these realms, it may be that the best the school can do is engage the instruction of the other educators and seek to strengthen or complement or correct or neutralize or countereducate, or, most important, perhaps, try to develop in students an awareness of the other educators and an ability themselves to deal with them.

For day-care workers, pastors, editors of children's encyclopedias, and directors of senior citizen's centers, the message is the same: Whatever is done, to be effective, must be done with an awareness of what has gone on and what is going on elsewhere. Incidentally, the principle has special relevance for evaluation and accountability because whatever judgment is made of any particular educational program must always be made in light of what is going on elsewhere that affects that program. This to me is not that the school is *powerless* but that the family is *powerful*: An immense contribution by the school is frequently reflected in a comparatively modest showing on an achievement scale, since with respect to the understanding or behavior being measured by the achievement scale, the child started out not at ground zero but with a deficit, at least as defined by the scale. Or, conversely, as is frequently the case with highly selective institutions, a very modest contribution by the school is reflected in an admirable showing on an achievement scale, since the child has already learned elsewhere a good deal of whatever it is the scale is measuring.

**F**irst, then, we must think *comprehensively*; second, *relationally*; and third, *publicly*. By this I mean several things. To begin, it means we must be aware that public thinking about education and public policymaking for education goes on at a variety of levels and in a variety of places. It goes forward at the local, state, regional, federal, and international levels, and it proceeds in legislatures, in the courts, in executive agencies, and in private and quasi-public civic organizations. What's more, the growing reliance on the courts during the past quarter-century to develop policies through the definition, asser-

tion, and claim of certain social and educational rights is also profoundly relevant. It is an oft-repeated truism that the courts have been our most influential agencies of educational policymaking since World War II. But courts tend to stress our differences: They tend to affirm the rights of individuals or groups to dissent from agreed upon policies. Legislatures, on the other hand, tend to deal with the definition and advancement of that which is common. And hence the growing recourse to the courts in matters of educational policy

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is fraught with significance for substance as well as procedure. And it is fraught with significance for the policy itself. As my former teacher Henry Steele Commager, certainly second to none in his insistent espousal of the cause of civil liberties, pointed out some years ago in a discussion, *Majority Rule and Minority Rights*, recourse to the courts, particularly in the realm of constitutional law, is an immensely powerful tool in a democratic society for the achievement of short-term goals, especially with respect to the redress of civil and political inequity. But recourse to the courts short-circuits certain processes vital to a democratic society. There is, after all, little opportunity for appeal once the court of last resort has handed down its ruling, and there is precious little political education for the public in appellate proceedings. The legislative

process and the public debate surrounding it is a surer and more fundamental long-range educator of the public than the judicial process.

The distinction between the politics of the courts and the politics of legislatures brings me to my final point, namely, that given the range and variety of institutions that educate the public, some of them public, some of them quasi-public, and some of them private, simplistic notions of “public control” become untenable. Control, after all, varies in character and intensity from the kind of direct supervision one sees in the management of public school systems or public libraries, to the kind of regulation exercised over the television industry by the Federal Communications Commission, to the kind of influence tax policy exerts on the size and structure of families, and hence on the character of familial education. And if one looks at the power of the educative agencies farthest removed from the public reach, one is led not to deny the need for effective public regulation of public schools, public libraries, and public television, but rather to affirm the need for public discussion in the realms beyond the reach of direct public control. And hence we are thrown, inevitably, back to the politics of persuasion and to the public dialogue about educational means and ends that is the essence of the politics of persuasion.





**W**e live in an age that affirms individuality and plurality, and given what governments, including democratic governments, have done with their power in our time, one can understand and sympathize with the attractiveness of such affirmations. Yet, if Dewey taught us anything, it was that the public good is something more than the sum total of private goods and that a viable community is more than a collection of groups, each occupying its own turf and each doing its own thing. Indeed, Dewey's own position is strikingly clear: There must be ample room in a democratic society for a healthy individualism and a healthy pluralism, but that individualism and that pluralism must also partake of a continuing quest for community. In fact, individuality itself is only liberated and fully realized as the individual interacts with an ever-widening variety of communities. Recall Dewey's classic paragraph:

A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that

each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity.

These more numerous and more varied points of contact denote a greater diversity of stimuli to which an individual has to respond. . . .

They secure a liberation of powers which remain suppressed as long as the incitations to action are partial, as they must be in a group which in its exclusiveness shuts out many interests.

How do we achieve the educational balance between individualism and community suggested in this formulation? I have a very simple starting point, to which I think there is no alternative: We talk. The proper education of the public and indeed the proper creation of publics will not go forward in our society until we undertake anew a great public dialogue. I would maintain that the questions we need to raise about education are among the most important questions that can be raised in our society, particularly at this juncture in its history. What knowledge should "we the people" hold in common? What values? What skills? What sensibilities? When we ask such questions, we are getting at the heart of the kind of society we want to live in and the kind of society we want our children to live in. We are getting at the heart of the kind of public we would like to bring into being and the qualities we would like that public to display. We are getting at the heart of the kind of community we need for our multifarious individualities to flourish.

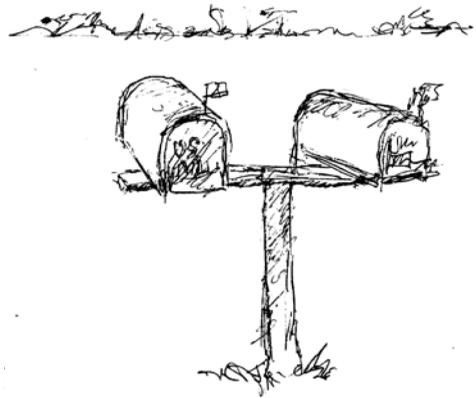
Two thousand years ago, Aristotle wrote that when we educate we aim at the good life; and since men and women disagree in their notions of a good life, they will disagree in their notions of education. It's as true today as it was 2,000 years ago. Obviously, men and women of good will are going to disagree about education. What's important about public education is that we work through to certain agreements about values and policies. We don't simply Balkanize the world; we also decide on common ground. We do that in the public schools, in public libraries, and over certain programs on public television because we have a notion of the kind of society our children are going to grow up in and live in. It's not that we're going to do away with different lifestyles and different beliefs or with the educational institutions—both public and private—that keep

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those different lifestyles and beliefs alive. It's that we must practice those different lifestyles and beliefs within a common framework of mutual respect and understanding. So often in recent years we have cast the choice as one between a fullblown and segregationist ethnicity on the one hand and some plastic, lowest common-denominator community on the other. I would reject both in favor of new modes of thought that permit—nay, encour-



age—maximum variation within certain common policies. I think we have the models in the alternative programs that have grown up in our contemporary public schools, public libraries, and public television systems, and I think we should develop, share, and publicize those models. In the last analysis, the most important dimension of the politics of education is the business of debating and defining the various forms those models might take and the various curricula they might teach. Moreover, the public debate itself over what knowledge, what values, what skills, and what sensibilities we might want to nurture in the young and how we might want to nurture them is more important than the particular decisions we happen to arrive at during any given time. For the debate itself educates, and that education will affect the entire educational apparatus of the society and therefore the principal apparatus for creating the public.

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