

Educational Reforms In Praise of Folly

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Abstract

Erasmus of Rotterdam, who was a 16th century humanist, wrote a thought-provoking little book, *In Praise of Folly*. Erasmus' book presents the thesis that mankind is more inclined to chase after the goddess Folly than to pursue wisdom. Erasmus lived in a time of heightened religious conflicts, Protestant and Catholic. Though we live in a more secular and secure world, there are no shortage of conflicts demanding our attention. One of these is educational reform. Have any of the reforms of the past century been "In Praise of Folly?"

Keywords: traditional education, progressive education, new curricula, multicultural education, test-driven instruction, common core standards

Introduction

Erasmus of Rotterdam, who was a 16th century humanist, wrote a thought-provoking little book, *In Praise of Folly*. Erasmus' book presents the thesis that mankind is more inclined to chase after the goddess Folly than pursue wisdom (Erasmus, 1511/1960, pp. 372-375). Erasmus lived in a time of heightened religious conflicts, Protestant and Catholic. Though we live a more secure and secular world, there are no shortage of conflicts demanding our attention. One of these is educational reform. How best to educate America's youth? If Erasmus were to pay us a visit today, he might very well come to the same conclusion that he arrived at 500 years

ago. Educators have been pursuing Folly, short-term gains, rather than cultivating wisdom, long-term solutions. Folly tempts us to become swept away by the passion for some new and novel idea. Wisdom, on the other hand, cautions us to build constructively on the achievements of the past. Which course of action will educators adopt to follow in the 21st century?

Public education has experienced six distinct phases of schooling: the traditional school, which extended from the colonial period through the 19th century; the progressive educational movement, which characterized the first half of the 20th century; the post-Sputnik, new curricula reforms of the 1960s and 1970s; the multicultural programs of the 1970s and 1980s; test-driven instruction of the 1980s and 1990s; and the present debate over the Common Core of State Standards. Though all of these reform movements have left their mark on American education, none has become the dominant motif for schooling America's youth.

Traditional Education. The traditional school was rooted in the 15th century Renaissance. It derived its inspiration from classical humanism, which held that ancient Greece and Rome represented the Golden Age of mankind. The present could do no better than emulate models of perfection from the past. Renaissance schools aligned their curricula with the seven Liberal Arts—grammar, rhetoric, logic, music, astronomy, mathematics, and geometry. Boston Latin School (1635) established the academic standard for its time, which included a bit of Bible reading. Schools featured a fixed, time honored curriculum where book learning, memorization, recitation, and drill all played a central part in a day's activities. Classroom seating was arranged in uniform rows that were fixed to the floor. The teacher's role, says French (1964) "was not so much to enrich the presentation . . . but rather to hear lessons recited and to keep order" (p. 76).

A series of new textbooks were written by American authors in the 19th century. Among these were Noah Webster's "Blue-back speller"; Jedediah Morse's *American Universal Geography*; and Thomas Dilworth's books on arithmetic. "The series of books outselling all the others for use in the common schools were the famous *McGuffey Readers*" (French, 1964, p. 72). The six eclectic readers were compiled by William Holmes McGuffey. Quick (1970), who attended public schools in the 19th century, says about the *McGuffey Readers*: "These text-books constituted the most influential volumes ever published in America" (p. 516). The readers were "intensely moral, soundly religious, and addicted to the inculcation of habits of industry, mercy and most of the virtues" (p. 517).

The study of Latin and Greek were considered to be central subjects in American secondary schools during the 19th century. The importance

of the classical languages was linked to the humanist belief that Latin and Greek supported the sacred scriptures. The *New Testament* had first been recorded in Greek. A revised translation of the *Old Testament*, the *Vulgate*, had been made by St. Jerome in the 4th century (Artz, 1954, pp. 79-80). Latin and Greek were thought to be the keys to unlocking the true meaning of the scriptures. This rationale was still alive and well in the early years of the 20th century. A study conducted by the American Classical League (1924/1951) provided data on the teaching to Latin and Greek in America's secondary schools during the 1923-1924 school year. "About 83% of the 20,500 secondary schools of the country offer Latin, a slightly larger percentage than in the case of all other foreign languages combined" (p. 530). The total enrollment of students studying Latin was estimated by the United States Bureau of Education to be 940,000. The enrollments in Greek were estimated to be around 11,000.

Dewey (1938/1959) has given us a critical description of the traditional school. It was a place where subject matter consisted of knowledge and skills worked out in the past. The role of the school was to transmit established knowledge and skills to each new generation. Pupils were to be docile, receptive, and obedient. "Books, especially textbooks, were the chief representatives of the lore and wisdom of the past, while teachers were the organs through which pupils were brought into effective connection with the material" (p. 13). Dewey's (1938/1959) strongest indictment of the traditional school was held for its imposition of knowledge and skills from above and outside the realm of experience of the pupils. The gulf between the adult standards and the level of experience of the young was so great that it excluded, "much active participation by pupils in the development of what was taught" (p. 4). The traditional school, in short, was a place where the curriculum-centered approach to instruction was out of step with children's growth and development.

Reform Movements

Progressive Education. The traditional school was replaced by progressive schools during the first half of the 20th century. The Godfather of the new education was Jean Jacques Rousseau (1762/1979), whose book, *Emile*, provided educators with a romantic theme for thinking about the education of children. Nature, or so the Romantics believed, contained within itself a spirit of wisdom and goodness. People could tune into this spirit through intuition. The heart, not the head, offered the proper guidance for instruction. Learning should not be an imposition from without; it should grow organically from within. Children, given time and freedom to explore on their own, would devise their own best course of study.

The 1930s were the hay day of progressive education. The Progressive Education Society had more money, membership, and prestige than at any other time in its history. The progressives built onto the ideas promoted by Francis Parker, who implemented language-experience reading in the schools of Quincy, Massachusetts; G. Stanley Hall, who initiated the child-study movement in the United States; and William H. Kilpatrick, who advocated organizing all lessons around projects. Teachers were no longer to act as drill master, but rather as guides or resource persons whose major role was one of assisting children in organizing their experiences. Movable chairs and desks became the norm in most classrooms. Teachers repeated the slogan: "We teach children, not subjects." Progressive educators like Rugg and Shumaker advised teachers to "take the lid off youth." They argued that "every child is born with the power to create"; consequently, "the task of the school is to surround the child with an environment which will draw out this creative power" (Cremin, 1961, p. 207).

What effect would "taking the lid off of youth" have on preparing them for college? Would students who had attended a progressive high school perform as well in college as students who had attended a traditional high school? That was the question the Eight-Year Study set out to answer. The study became the largest and most expensive piece of education research ever conducted in the United States. It ran from 1932 to 1940, and it involved 30 different progressive high schools and 1,475 matched pairs of students from progressive and traditional high schools. The Progressive Education Association was successful in getting 300 different colleges to waive traditional entrance requirements. To fund the study the Carnegie Foundation made grants totaling \$70,000 and the General Education Board contributed a million and a half dollars to the project (Cremin, 1961, pp. 255-258).

What were the findings of the study? The evaluation team found that graduates from the progressive high schools when they were enrolled in college: (A) earned slightly higher grade point averages; (B) received slightly more academic honors; (C) showed more curiosity; (D) demonstrated more objective thinking; (E) had a clearer conception of the purpose of education; (F) were more resourceful; (G) were equally well adjusted; (H) had more group participation; (I) earned more nonacademic honors; (J) made a better choice of vocation; (K) and showed more concern for national and world affairs (Cremin, 1961, pp. 255-256).

Unfortunately, The Eight-Year Study never received the close scrutiny it deserved. By the time the experiment ended, America was on the threshold of entering into World War II. The national interest had become focused on events taking place in Europe. Furthermore, tradi-

tionalists never really accepted the results coming from the study. They complained they had never been asked to participate in the design or in the evaluation of the data coming from the study. Also, the study did not control for the Hawthorne Effect: the knowledge of participating in an experiment increases interest and consequently the performance of those participating in any study. Cremin (1961) says about the experiment, “there was all the thrill, the vigor, and the commotion that attaches to any reform enterprise—so much so that probably anything attempted would have succeeded better than what had come before” (p. 255).

Educational movements come and go in relationship to the fickle nature of public taste. That was certainly true for progressive education. During the 1950s critics of progressive education gained a popular hearing. Arthur Bestor was among the most vocal critics. He argued the central purpose of the school was to promote intellectual training or the deliberate cultivation of the ability to think. The best way to promote thinking was through studying the academic disciplines such as history, literature, science, and mathematics. Why had the public schools strayed away from their historic mission? There had been a great subversion conducted by professors of education, school administrators, and state departments of education. The educational subversives had required teachers to take classes in professional education at the expense of courses in the liberal arts. The answer to the problem was for the whole university to take over the training of teachers (Cremin, 1961, pp. 343-346).

New Curricula Reforms. In 1957 the Russians placed a satellite into orbit around the earth, which came as a shock to the American people. The nation, much to everyone’s chagrin, was suddenly behind in the space race. What does it take to place a satellite into orbit around the earth? Scientists and engineers! The Russians must have been doing a better job of educating technically minded people. Who was to blame for cheating America’s youth to their right to receive a scientific education? Why the progressives, of course.

The summer of 1959 witnessed the gathering of an elite group of psychologists, scientists, and educators at Woods Hole, Massachusetts. Among the group was Jerome S. Bruner (1965), who told the group exactly what they wanted to hear: “That any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development” (p. 33). The whole idea of readiness, Bruner asserted, was a half truth. Students could be gotten ready to study abstract subjects far sooner than had previously been thought. The Woods Hole group concluded that the problem with American education was outdated curricula. They knew they were smart, and they thought the children were smart. (Very few

members of the group had experience in teaching public school children.) The reformers, however, had grave doubts about the intellectual abilities of most public school teachers. Their answer was to write new “teacher proof materials.” Their efforts resulted in the creation of fanciful and unworkable curricula. The professors intended through new curricula to speak directly to the students. The blind were leading the blind.

Why did the post-Sputnik reforms fall short of their intended objective? The answer lies in who was left out of the instructional equation. The professors of science and mathematics wrote the new curricula, and they turned around and expected public school teachers and students to implement what they had created. One group of educators cannot write instructional materials for another group of educators and expect everything to work out well. Will Rogers worded the case about as well as anyone: “You can’t teach something you don’t know any more than you can come back from someplace where you’ve never been.” The reformers were naïve when they believed, “If they built good curriculum then science teachers would adopt them, thus replacing traditional programs” (Bybee, 1998, *FEd Newsletter*). The new curricula proved to be over the heads of many of the teachers and beyond the range of understanding of most of the students. The teaching of mathematics became a particular problem. Participation in the mathematics program declined very rapidly over the years. “Although 30% of districts reported using NSF supported mathematics programs in the early 1970s, only 9% reported using NSF programs in 1976/77” (Bybee, 1998, *FEd Newsletter*). The scientists and mathematicians would have done better if they had involved a few experienced public school teachers in their deliberations.

Multiculturalism. In 1968 America’s youth went off to Woodstock, where they shared freely in drugs, sex, and rock music. The attendees came back from the experience determined to transform the world. “Make love not war,” became the slogan for the 1970s. The war in Vietnam became a source of civil disobedience. All the traditional norms of American society were called into question. Western Civilization was condemned as a form of cultural imperialism. The “White Race” was charged with repressing ethnic peoples around the world. Cultural pluralism became the universal yardstick for judging the worth of America’s institutions. Ethnic and minority groups acquired new, hyphenate names—Native-Americans, African-Americans, and Mexican-Americans. What it meant to be an American would never again be quite the same.

During the 1970s and 1980s, multiculturalism found its way into all levels of American education. Cultural relevance became the watchword by which to reorganize the curriculum. Shakespeare was suddenly judged to

be no longer relevant. The writings of Malcolm X, on the other hand, were right up-to-date. Universities rushed to add course work on ethnic studies to their catalogues. Multicultural education was going to call to task the historic racism of American society, and it was going to prepare students to live in a pluralistic world. How to incorporate a slice of everyone's ethnic experience into the curriculum? No one seemed to know for sure. Public schools generally fell short of the mark. Too often mere scraps of disjointed information were substituted for a coherent course of study. Adding Black history month to the school calendar was insufficient time to cover the tragic events of slavery and segregation. Most teachers were not prepared to enlighten their students about the treatment of the various Native-American tribes. Given the demands for more instructional time to be devoted to the study of science, mathematics, and computer science, social studies came out on the short end of the stick.

Multicultural education as a term is fraught with ambiguity. It has been ascribed a wide variety of different meanings. "Multicultural education," says Garcia (1980), "is the generic term for broad-based programs to confront ethnocentric or exclusionary educational practices and programs" (p. 4). Banks (1999), on the other hand, defines it as "an education for freedom that is essential in today's ethnically polarized and troubled world" (p. 4). One of the more popular definitions comes from Hunter (1974), "Multicultural education is education which values cultural pluralism" (p. 21). Reciprocally, cultural pluralism is an ideology that values multicultural education. What is Hunter's proposition trying to tell us? Reduced to logical terms, it reads: multicultural education = cultural pluralism. A tautology, pure and simple.

Multiculturalists wish to rewrite American history—playing up pluralism and playing down assimilation. Schlesinger (1991) questions the validity of the multiculturalists' interpretation of American history. The genius of America, he argues, lies in its success at combining different races and ethnic groups into a common culture. In a world filled with ethnic antagonisms, America has managed to escape the divisiveness that haunts other multiethnic societies. "The U. S. escaped the divisiveness of a multiethnic society by the creation of a brand new national identity. The point of America was not to preserve old cultures but to forge a new, American culture" (p. 21). No institution has played a more instrumental role in forging the new American identity than the public schools.

Ravitch (1991) presents the argument that, "The historic mission of the American public schools—the common schools—has been to help forge a national identity that all Americans share" (p. 9). The increasing diversity of American society makes this mission all the more important. Ravitch believes multiculturalists are mistaken when they claim that the

common culture is an Anglo-Saxon melting pot: "It is an amalgam of the contributions of all the different groups that have joined American society and enriched our shared culture" (p. 9). The common culture is really multicultural. Schools must necessarily teach children to identify with the common culture and the values that support it. "It is the job of the schools to promote a generous appreciation of the common humanity that transcends skin color, religion, language, and other accidents of birth" (p. 11).

Test-driven Instruction. As the calls for accountability and testing grew, the interest in multicultural education waned. *E Pluribus* lost out to *Unum*. No one knew how to construct standardized tests based on an ethnic studies model. Test-driven instruction captured the imagination of state legislators. The State of Texas in the 1980s was among the first to buy into comprehensive testing. The legislature decided to improve the quality of Texas schools. When they looked at the cost of a quality program, all thumbs went down. Wasn't there a cheaper way of obtaining higher test scores? The answer came in the form of high-stakes testing. The state contracted with a number of testing agencies to design and implement criterion-referenced tests. Teachers were cajoled into teaching directly to the new tests. (Teachers generally referred to the new program as drill and kill.) During the early years, students' scores on the criterion-referenced tests continually went up. Politicians were pleased; superintendents were happy; and parents were overjoyed. There was, however, one small catch. When Texas students took nationally standardized achievement tests, they still made the same abysmally low scores.

George W. Bush, who was Governor of the State of Texas during the 1990s, gave his stamp of approval to test-driven instruction. Bush, when he ran for President, eagerly shared the "Texas miracle" with the rest of the nation. One of his first acts as President was to pass a signature piece of legislation, No Child Left Behind. The mania for testing quickly became nationwide. Newspapers printed lists of good schools where students made high test scores. Teachers were pressured by their principals to bring the scores of low performing students up to passing. The hay day of quantifying educational goals had arrived with a vengeance.

In 1990 Texas created its own criterion-referenced tests, TAAS. The TAAS tests were created in order to demonstrate accountability by showing how much students were learning in school. Early reports on the tests showed Texas students were making "miraculous" progress. However, writes Haney (2000), "analyses comparing TAAS reading, writing, and math scores with one another and with relevant high school grades raise doubts about the reliability and validity of TAAS scores" (pp. 2-3).

Between 1994 and 1997, TAAS results showed a 20% increase in the

number of students passing all three exit levels of the TAAS tests (reading, writing, and math). However, when the TAAS scores were compared with the scores Texas students made on TASP (a college readiness test), results showed a sharp decrease (from 65.2% to 43.3%) in the number of students passing all three parts (reading, writing, and math) of the TASP test. The same pattern of declining scores was found on other tests. SAT scores made by students in Texas had not improved since the early 1990s. NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) scores did not support the gains shown by Texas students' TAAS scores (Haney, 2000, pp. 2-3).

"What we now know," says Ravitch (2011), "is that there never was a 'Texas miracle.' At best, it was wishful thinking, at worst, it was a lie." Eight grade reading scores, which were drawn from the National Assessment of Educational Progress Test, showed that Texas' 2009 scores were exactly where they had been in 1998. The scores made by students in Texas are nowhere near the top of scores made by students in other states like Connecticut. Ravitch (2011) sums up her thoughts by saying: "There was no miracle. We have a national education policy built on a myth, on a fabrication. Texas confronts the same problems as every other state."

The irony of high-stakes testing is that it is a self-defeating activity. The worth of any test revolves around its validity. Does the test really test what it purports to test? High-stakes testing by using a test over and over again destroys the test's ability to serve as a valid indicator of the knowledge or skill that the test was originally intended to measure. Madaus (1988) offers the following explanation of the problems inherent in a program of comprehensive testing: "Measurement-driven instruction, particularly in the form of high-stakes testing, can destroy a test's ability to represent the domain of interest, thereby abrogating the validity of any inferences, decisions, or descriptions made from the test's performance" (p. 34).

Jason Stanford, a journalist working for the *Dallas Observer*, attended a number of sessions held by the Education Subcommittee of the Texas State Legislature. One of the witnesses who testified before the subcommittee was Walter Stroup, an Associate Professor of Testing at the University of Texas, Austin. Ostensibly, the committee wanted to know why students were passing Texas' criterion-referenced tests, but they were not passing other standardized tests. Stroup explained that all the tests were performing exactly as they had been designed. The tests, as they were presently designed, were not going to give the legislators the answers they wanted. The tests were not broken or poorly designed. They were simply the wrong tools for performing the job that the legislature had in mind. The tests were not designed to measure how much knowledge students had acquired in school (Stanford, 2014).

If the tests were not measuring what students had learned in school, what were they measuring? Stroup told the subcommittee that the tests do not measure 72% of what is learned in school. What are the tests actually measuring? The tests primarily measure test-taking ability. The tests are so insensitive to what is covered in school that it is possible to switch science questions with mathematics questions without altering a student's score. Indeed, according to Stanford (2014), "the American Statistical Association condemned the use of student test scores to rate teacher performance. Most studies find that teachers account for about 1% to 14% of the variability in test scores." If teachers are not the primary agents responsible for students' scores, how can they be rewarded or punished for students' test performances?

Standards-driven Instruction. Why is the United States so keen on having a second go-round with standards and testing? The story goes back to George W. Bush's *No Child Left Behind* and Barack Obama's *Race to the Top* initiatives. Both administrations bought into standardized testing programs. Schools were expected to demonstrate that students were proficient in basic skills. If schools could not show students were making higher test scores, they could be faced with the threat of being closed. These same practices have been continued under the current Common Core Standards. Teachers are encouraged to teach to the test, stressing reading and mathematics. The whole testing complex is linked to big business. Test construction companies, computer sales businesses, and data processing firms have all made substantial sums of money under the Common Core program. Strauss (2014, January) quotes Ravitch as saying that the promotion of Common Core has had nothing to do with, "creating equality of opportunity but everything to do with cutting costs, standardizing education, shifting the delivery of education from high-cost teachers to low-cost technology" (p. 4).

The Common Core has bought into the standards fallacy. The inner logic of the fallacy runs something like this: If schools raise the bar for performance, students will reciprocally work harder and make better grades. Simple, but not true! Achievement does not take place in a vacuum. Students' performances show a high correlation with the socio-economic family backgrounds from which students come. Students from upper middle class families tend to make higher grades at school. Students from lower class families, on the other hand, tend to make lower grades at school. If we wish to have low performing students make higher standardized test scores, we should assist their parents in moving into the middle class.

Kern (2014, Fall) takes the Common Core to task for having made a less than sterling review of the literature before announcing its standards

on reading. She cites the following shortcomings: "There are no references that address diverse learners, such as students with individual differences, English language learners, or culturally or linguistically diverse populations" (p. 2). The standards pay less than adequate attention to early childhood education. Here, for example, is what the Common Core calls for Kindergarten children to be able to perform. "Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to compose informative/ explanatory texts in which they name what they are writing about and supply some information about the topic" (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012, p. 145). What do you imagine Friedrich Froebel, who was the founder of the Kindergarten, would think of what the Common Core has done with his "Children's Garden?"

What have been the preliminary results coming from those states that have introduced Common Core testing? Strauss (2014, January) cites Ravitch as offering the following statistics. The tests, wherever they have been introduced, have caused a sharp decline in students' scores. In New York State, which administered the tests in the spring of 2014, only 30% of the students across the state passed the tests. Fewer than 20% of African Americans and Hispanic students were able to pass the tests. Only 3% of English language learners and 5% of students with disabilities were able to score high enough to pass the tests. What will happen to the 50% of students who will never be able to pass the tests (pp. 6-7)?

Of all the problems contained in the Common Core Standards, the most telling is its lack of balance. It goes without saying that reading and mathematics are highly important facets of knowledge. But should they be taught to the detriment of all other skills and subjects? What of history, science, and the arts? Learning to think is not the sole province of literary analysis. Indeed, it is doubtful if critical thinking skills can be learned outside the mastery of specific disciplines. Literature teachers teach critical thinking about Shakespeare; history teachers teach critical thinking about the Great Depression; and science teachers teach critical thinking about the structure of the atom. One shoe does not fit all feet. Thorndike demonstrated years ago that transfer of training cannot be marketed wholesale. If we wish students to know a particular piece of knowledge, then we had better teach it directly.

Conclusion

The present inquiry began by noting Erasmus' *In Praise of Folly*. Erasmus presented the thesis that mankind is more prone to chasing after the goddess Folly than in pursuing wisdom. Erasmus' insight has provided the underlying theme for the present review of educational

reform movements in the United States. America is a restless nation. Its people are easily bored. They delight in trying new and exciting things. This taste for dreaming up novel solutions to basic human problems has found its counterpart in public education. Just as the political winds of the nation have shifted from one political party to the next, so have educational reform movements changed from one set of classroom practices to entirely different modes of instruction. Lying behind the plethora of innovations that have excited educators during the past 100 years has been the seductive voice of Folly, whispering “follow me.”

The traditional school served American society well for many generations. It prepared a select group of young men to learn Latin and Greek and to enter college, becoming ministers, merchants, and civic leaders. Rural America never imagined there would come a time when a college degree would become the ticket to economic success. The problem with the traditional school was not its lack of rigor, for it certainly drove its students to their studies. The traditional school simply outlived its time in history. It did not adapt to the changing nature of American society at the turn of the 20th century. Industrialization had brought scores of people out of the countryside and into the new cities. Change was in the air; it was time to take a new look at education. Latin and Greek were quickly become artifacts of the past. Immigration and compulsory attendance laws brought throngs of new students flooding into the nation’s schools. The curriculum, classroom practices, and educational objectives all demanded revision. The humanist philosophy that had underscored the teaching of Latin, Greek, and the classics no longer held sway. Pragmatism was rapidly becoming the philosophy of the emerging age. Trying to hold onto an outmoded system of education seemed like more poor advice from *Folly*.

The progressive movement brought a new burst of energy into the realm of the public education. The reformers released all of their pent up enthusiasm, which they had been holding in reserve for years to the task of making learning a meaningful experience for children. The practice of memorizing one’s lessons from a textbook and then reciting them in front of the teacher was replaced with sharing and little group work. The formal study of history and geography gave way to units in social studies. Latin and Greek were replaced with basic communications. Cohen (1971) says about the progressive movement: “The child, too, was to be freed—freed from the restraints of the traditional teacher and the shackles of the authoritarian school” (p. 35). Progressive education was in many ways the victim to its own successes. The funds that flowed into the association as a result of the Eight-Year Study turned it into a professional organization. When the funds dried up, the society faltered. No sooner had the Eight-Year Study been completed than public

attention shifted to the war in Europe. After the war, American politics took a sharp turn to the right. America's experiment with child-centered education had come to an end. Where was Folly all of this time? Dewey (1938/1959) stated the case about as well as anyone. "It is a cardinal precept of the newer school of education that the beginning of instruction shall be made with the experiences learners already have I am not so sure that the other condition, that of orderly development toward expansion and organization of subject-matter through growth of experience, receives as much attention" (pp. 88-89).

The New curricula reforms coming on the heels of Russia's Sputnik set out to correct the problem of outdated curricula in the public schools. The professors of science and mathematics who wrote the new curricula were inexperienced when it came to teaching children in the public schools. Consequently, they overshot their mark. The new instructional materials were beyond the understanding of many teachers and most students. The professors of science and mathematics were simply naïve when they assumed if they wrote scholarly, "teacher proof" materials educators would be eager to adopt them. (What a Folly!) The fanfare with which the movement began soon ran out of steam and schools settled back into teaching in old and more familiar ways. Bruner (1983), looking back on the whole experience, says: "If I had it all to do over again, and if I knew how, I would put my energies into reexamining how the schools express the agenda of the society and how that agenda is formulated and how translated by the schools" (p. 198).

Multiculturalists have actively promoted the idea that minority group children fail to achieve at the same levels as majority group children because the curriculum they experience at school is not relevant to their life experiences. Vann's and Kunjufu's (1993) article, "The Importance of an Afrocentric, Multicultural Curriculum," makes just such a claim. What is the validity of such a proposition? The story of New York City's Rainbow Curriculum affords us one possible answer to the question. The Rainbow Curriculum was specifically designed to present minority group children with "relevant" learning materials. The Rainbow Curriculum, according to Dunn (2001), failed because it was based on a set of faulty assumptions. The cultural nature of the learning materials was not why children succeeded or failed. "What determined whether students mastered the content was how the content was taught, not the content itself" (pp. 61-64). Culturally sensitive materials, by themselves, do not promote higher levels of achievement. Dunn believes her approach to teaching learning styles holds the key to school success. Educational research, however, does not support such a rosy conclusion (Wang, Haertel & Walberg, 1993/1994, pp. 74-79). Teaching and learning are highly individualized matters.

What works for one teacher or group of students may fail for the next. Marva Collins, for instance, achieved remarkable success with her African American students in Chicago by teaching a classical curriculum using the old fashioned methods of memorization and group recitation. Similarly, Jamie Escalante taught calculus to Hispanic students in south Los Angeles using highly idiosyncratic methods, most of which cannot be found in any textbook on pedagogy. Those who believe that a specific program of studies or mode of instruction holds the answer to why minority group children perform poorly in school are guilty of listening to *Folly*.

High-stakes testing is based on a false premise—that if teachers are held accountable for students' standardized test scores, students' academic performance will rise. Rotberg (2001, October) tells us that: "It is an illusion that high-stakes testing creates high academic standards" (p. 170). Standards are actually weakened when test preparation becomes the academic program. "The emphasis on cramming for the test is inevitable as long as teachers and students are held accountable for test scores" (p. 170). Parent, educator, and legislators ascribe too much value to standardized test scores. "Standardized achievement tests," Popham (1999, March) tells us, "should not be used to evaluate the quality of education. That's not what they are supposed to do" (p. 10). Why is that the case? There is very likely going to be a mismatch between what is taught and what is tested. Standardized tests are designed to disperse the scores. They perform this task by writing items that half of the students will get right. Consequently, says Popham (1999, March), "the better the job that teachers do in teaching important knowledge and/or skills, the less likely it is that there will be items on the standardized achievement test measuring such knowledge and/or skills" (p. 12). To evaluate teacher or students using tools that deliberately avoid important content would be the height of *Folly*.

What kind of society do Americans wish to have? Do we want an open democracy where there is opportunity for everyone or do we wish to have a meritocracy where only an elite few can rise to the highest positions? Ravitch sounds a note of alarm about the direction our educational system is taking. "I fear the Common Core and testing will establish a test-based meritocracy that will harm our democracy by parceling out opportunity, by ranking and rating every student in relation to their scores" (Strauss, 2014, January, p. 11). A democratic society treats every human life as being of equal worth. Correspondingly, it also believes that the highest cultural experiences should be commonly enjoyed by all of its citizens. American society has already concentrated far too much wealth and power in the hands of too few people. The Common Core only helps to contribute to this antidemocratic trend. America stands at

the crossroads. Will we chose technology and testing or democracy and equal access to education? The two paths lie clearly before us. Hopefully, our choice will not be one selected by *Folly*.

Education is part of the art of statecraft. The political philosophy that animates a nation will be reflected in its schools. America's democratic philosophy has grown up over the past four centuries. The fact that the nation is now committed to democratic values does not mean that the nation has been successful in eradicating all of its non-democratic practices inherited from the past. Racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination continue to present challenges to the nation. The important thing is that the nation needs to continue to honor and teach its core values. The pursuit of truth, the inherent dignity of every individual, the quest for justice, equity before the law, and the rational solution to common problems are among the core values. Any social, political, or educational movement that ignores or thwarts these core values is guilty of listening more to *Folly* and to wisdom. Plato (1968) warned us against just such a situation 2,400 years ago.

Does not the worst evil for a state arise from anything that tends to rend it asunder and destroy its unity, while nothing does it more good than whatever tends to bind it together and make it one? And are not citizens bound together by sharing in the same pleasures and pains, all feeling glad or grieved on the same occasions of gain or loss; whereas the bond is broken when such feelings are no longer universal, but any event of public or personal concern fills some with joy and other with distress? (p. 163)

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