America’s current educational battles are about \textit{competing beliefs and commitments}. This may sound like a strange assertion, given the practical nature of the debates on No Child Left Behind, vouchers, teachers unions, the curriculum, and so on. However, beneath such disagreements are deeper and more profound ones that are philosophical and cultural in nature: about the purpose of education, the nature of the child, and the question of authority.

Put differently: educational policy always rests upon particular views about who the child is and what education is for. In this sense, schooling is always about philosophy – explicitly or implicitly. Whose philosophy, though? Why one set of assumptions and not another? How does American public education reflect past debates about pluralism and democracy? Finally, how might our present disputes be improved, and perhaps fresh solutions achieved, by re-visiting these foundational questions?

This task is difficult because of the inescapable nature of culture, the taken-for-granted backdrop to our individual experiences and social encounters. Speaking in sociological terms, “culture” consists of the ideas and institutions in which we individuals operate, the sea in which we swim. Culture evolves, of course; a groundbreaking technology or powerful idea, translated into new systems and vocabularies, causes shifts in the texture of our lives. But once the innovation becomes established, we cease to attend to it, at least until the next technology or big idea comes along. Culture is both liberating and limiting: it liberates us from perpetual deliberation but limits our sense of what is possible.

If you doubt this, ask yourself how long it takes to get from New York to Boston. Three or four hours, right? Yes, if you live in the modern era of planes, trains and automobiles – but not if you are traveling on foot or horseback. Or, when was the last time you heard a vigorous argument for American monarchy? We no longer believe in the divine right of kings or use horses to transport ourselves, and our conceptual universe has adjusted accordingly. Constitutional democracy and automobiles are part of the texture of our lives, and we pay them no particular notice. We forget, of course, that neither was inevitable.
In a similar way, our cultural imaginations have adjusted to the current educational model, and we have forgotten how it evolved. It seems inevitable when in fact it is historically contingent. What is true of culture, broadly speaking, is also true of the subcultures of which it consists; teacher training, state and local educational bureaucracies, and schools themselves possess their own cultural logic. This is neither “good” nor “bad” (culture just is). But to see this clearly, and to envision a different present, requires imagination and perspective, the two-fold process of zooming in to examine core principles and then panning back to look at how other societies have addressed the same issues.

Roughly, and in no particular order, then, these are some of the questions I’d like to raise on this forum. What is educational philosophy, and why does it matter? How do other liberal democracies conceive of public education differently, and why? What is the role that schools play in forming democratic citizens? Why is the question of academic attainment so fraught with controversy? How does culture influence constitutional interpretations on educational matters? Finally, how can such deliberations change the lives of our children?

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