
Education Policy and the Limits of Technocracy

Peter Levine

Introduction

Technical expertise has obvious value. We are all better off because of the specialized knowledge possessed by physicians, engineers, economists, and others. Expertise, however, is such a fundamental organizing principle that we often overlook its drawbacks and limitations—especially for democracy.

First, exceptional knowledge does not entitle anyone to special political rights. Even if we could find brilliant people to govern us, they would still not understand our situations and problems as well as we do. Nor could they be trusted to act fairly, since their interests would differ from those of the people they ruled. Therefore, all citizens have the right to participate as equals in politics.

According to National Election Studies conducted between 1952 and 1992, about 70 percent of the public consistently said that “politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what’s going on.” That proportion did not change much despite dramatic improvements in education for the population as a whole. In some respects, the government *is* complicated, and has probably become more so. For example, global warming, a major issue of the present, is harder to understand than government pensions, which were a salient topic of the 1930s. However, people may underestimate their ability to follow politics because they see experts laying claim to specialized knowledge.

We would like people to have enough confidence in their own understanding of fundamental, contested issues that they feel empowered to participate. Some important public institutions perform better when many people play active roles—presumably because engaged citizens prevent corruption and mismanagement and contribute energy, passion, and ideas. For instance, political scientist Robert Putnam finds that the level of adult participation in communities correlates powerfully with high school graduation rates,

SAT scores, and other indicators of educational success at the state level. “States where citizens meet, join, vote, and trust in unusual measure boast consistently higher educational performance than states where citizens are less engaged with civic and community life.” Putnam finds that such engagement is “by far” a bigger correlate of educational outcomes than is spending on education, teachers’ salaries, class size, or demographics.

Further, experts have no special insight into right and wrong, justice and injustice. On such questions, as philosopher John Rawls wrote, “there are no experts: a philosopher has no more authority than other citizens.” But economists and other quantitative social scientists sometimes *seem* to have expertise about essentially moral questions. That happens because they know something about means: about what measurable variables correlate with, and probably cause, other variables. Frequently, our public discourse submerges questions about what we *should* value and concentrates exclusively on what policies would be most efficient at achieving ends that are taken for granted. An example is the assumption that policy ought to

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maximize economic growth, defined as the annual change in gross national product. But GNP may not measure what we should value most.

Finally, technical expertise has intellectual biases. These are avoidable in theory but widespread in practice. I have in mind the biases toward quantifiable variables, statistically normal cases, and general rules

The Future of Democracy: Developing the Next Generation of American Citizens

Peter Levine

A nonpartisan clarion call for civic renewal to restore American democracy

We need young people to be civically engaged in order to define and address public problems. Their participation is important for democracy, for institutions such as schools, and for young people themselves, who are more likely to succeed in life if they are engaged in their communities. In *The Future of Democracy*, Peter Levine, scholar and practitioner, sounds the alarm: in recent years, young Americans have become dangerously less engaged. They are tolerant, patriotic, and idealistic, and some have invented such novel and impressive forms of civic engagement, as blogs, "buycott" movements, and transnational youth networks. But most lack the skills and opportunities they need to participate in politics or address public problems. Levine's timely manifesto clearly explains the causes, symptoms, and repercussions of this damaging trend, and, most importantly, the means whereby America can confront and reverse it.

Levine demonstrates how to change young people's civic attitudes, skills, and knowledge and, equally importantly, to reform our institutions so that civic engagement is rewarding and effective. We must both prepare citizens for politics and improve politics for citizens.

"Levine's book is a little gem that I will keep on my bookshelf, close at hand. I first met Levine through his work on the Civic Mission of Schools, setting forth a

consensus view of what we can do in our nation's schools to rescue students from the era of civic and historical illiteracy. The Future of Democracy is an apt name for this book. Without taking more aggressive steps as a nation to put our country's civic health on the national radar screen—and to engage families, schools, communities, churches and political institutions in fostering a spirit of civic commitment among our young people—the future of that democracy looks grim. Levine finds innovative ways at all levels of education and governance to rescue it."

—John M. Bridgeland, Former Director, White House Domestic Policy Council & USA Freedom Corps

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that can be applied to many instances. Technical experts lack appropriate tools for making insightful judgments about idiosyncratic, concrete, local situations. They are most likely to consider the rules or incentives that govern whole categories of organization—not the inner workings of particular institutions and communities.

Technocracy in Education

Recent waves of reform in American public education typify technocracy and illustrate how it conflicts with

public engagement. Almost all of today's advocates and policymakers—whether conservative, centrist, or moderately liberal—use technocratic strategies for improving education. They do not debate what goes on inside schools as much as they call for changes in the incentive structure that will motivate students and teachers. In other words, they tinker with institutions from a distance, applying general insights from economics to a process (education) that is all about culture and values.

Traditionally, Americans assumed that the important questions about education were "what?" and "who?"

“What” meant the materials, teaching methods, and curriculum used in actual classrooms. Citizens felt that they had a right and duty to know what was going on in public school classrooms. Much of the debate about education from 1900 until about 1985 consisted of arguments that the content of instruction should be more rigorous or more relevant, more directive or more experiential, more coherent or more diverse. (See, for example, the *Nation at Risk* report of 1983.) These arguments were explicitly normative, having to do with what children ought to know and how they should be treated. Decisions about content were made—in varying proportions—by state agencies, school districts, principals, and teachers, sometimes with considerable input from citizens, especially those

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who served on school boards and PTAs. Thus the education debate was mostly about what should be taught, and arguments were directed to state and local school leaders.

People also debated “Who?,” meaning the identity of the teacher—how he or she was qualified and selected—and the composition of classes. The influential Coleman report of 1966 led people to think that the teacher was relatively unimportant but that the mix of students was crucial. Poor kids needed to be exposed to middle-class students; kids with disabilities needed to be mainstreamed. Thus, for a generation, the main issues in federal education policy were desegregation and integration. There was also much debate about the pros and cons of “tracking” students—separating them by interest or ability level. Again, this was a debate about “who?”

Despite all this attention to “what?” and “who?,” education didn’t change fast enough for many reformers, nor in the directions they wanted. Recently, they have given much more attention to “why?”—in other words, to the incentives that are supposed to motivate administrators, teachers, and students to behave in certain ways. This is (for better or worse) a detached and technocratic approach to education. It is typical of a culture that likes to measure the inputs and outputs of institutions without getting inside them to examine their values.

Three major proposals are especially influential. Each would change the incentive structure in education, thus causing students and educators to answer the “why?” question differently. Some want to

increase funding for schools or equalize funding among districts. Others would impose regular, standardized tests with carrots and sticks. Still others prefer to increase the degree of parental choice and allow funding to follow students.

None of these approaches is completely new. Liberals have been advocating higher teacher salaries for a long time. School choice was first defended (to my knowledge) by the libertarian economist Milton Friedman in 1955. There were high-stakes tests before the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002. Nevertheless, the tenor of the debate has shifted. Politicians and policymakers now seem to agree with the Nobel-winning economist Gary Becker about the futility of looking inside schools: “What survives in a competitive environment is not perfect evidence, but it is much better evidence on what is effective than attempts to evaluate the internal structure of organizations. This is true whether the competition applies to steel, education, or even the market for ideas.” Becker is a libertarian, but liberals who want to pay teachers more to teach in inner-city schools are also interested in competition—they just want schools to compete better in the job market.

It is important to think about incentives; that is one of the main themes of modern social science. We must not simply call for better education or analyze what techniques work best for that purpose; we must also

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find levers that, if pulled, would encourage or compel big institutions to educate better. Asking schools to operate better (or differently) without changing their incentives won’t work. Nevertheless, there are democratic reasons not to ignore the internal policies and choices of schools.

Consider the strategy of imposing accountability through standardized testing. This puts pressure on schools to raise individuals’ factual knowledge and cognitive skills, outcomes that can be measured on exams. It is much more difficult, or perhaps impossible, to create high-stakes assessments of moral values, habits and dispositions, or collaborative projects. Yet a democracy needs people who collaborate and who have civic virtues and habits.

A test must be secret until it is given—so there is no opportunity for broad public participation. In princi-

ple, the public could deliberate about standards, and experts could simply create examinations that measured students' performance on those public criteria. But the process of writing standards and examinations is expensive, so in practice it tends to be done by a few expert employees of national testing firms. Their products are imposed simultaneously in many schools and districts, thereby reducing opportunities for public deliberation. Moreover, much of work of modern test-construction is highly technical, involving questions of statistical reliability and psychometrics. Although the choice of what questions to ask inevitably raises questions of value, technical issues tend to dominate, leaving the public with a marginal role.

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left for citizens to debate are hot-button issues that cannot be suppressed, such as the teaching of evolution or sexuality. I am convinced that we see rather unproductive debates about those matters—which mobilize committed partisans and often end in court—because citizens cannot deliberate about all the other moral questions that evidently concern them more. David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation, reports qualitative research that finds:

Public accountability is more relational than informational. That is, citizens are looking for more than data from schools. They want a face-to-face exchange with educators and a full account of what is happening in classrooms and on playgrounds. They want to know what kind of people their youngsters are becoming as well as how they are doing academically. Americans have said that most legislated accountability measures don't do that; they still leave citizens on the outside trying to look in. . . .

When citizens think about accountability, they are particularly concerned with the moral commitments of educators, not just their professional or technical competence. . . . For example, studies show that people value teachers who can encourage and inspire, who can make learning come alive, who are inventive in their classrooms, and who are patient in one-on-one relationships with students. Legal accountability standards, in contrast, emphasize teacher certification in subject matter and students' scores on tests.

Elsewhere, Mathews has written of the long trend toward professionalizing education and marginalizing citizens. Starting in the 1960s, he thinks, "the public as a real force in the life of schools was deliberately and systematically rooted out. Citizens were replaced with a new group of professionals, true guardians of the

public interest, there to do what it was assumed citizens couldn't or wouldn't do." We can document these trends with statistics. In the 1970s, according to the DDB Life Style survey, more than 40 percent of Americans said that they worked on community projects—which often involved education—but that percentage is now down to the 20s. PTA membership rose to 45 per 100 families in 1960, but then fell to less than half of that in the last twenty years.

Market systems are intended to decentralize power and curb the power of professionals by giving parents choices among schools. Some of the arguments for vouchers are populist and anti-technocratic. However, vouchers do not put communities in charge of civic education. If parents create incentives for schools by choosing where to send their children, then most will seek private goods for their own offspring (such as marketable skills and membership in exclusive peer groups) rather than public goods (such as civic skills, experience with democracy, and exposure to diversity). There may not be forums in which people can discuss what public values the next generation should acquire.

Further, in a market-like educational system, only parents who are well-educated themselves will tend to choose schools that provide demanding extracurricular activities and enrichment programs that generate civic skills. According to sociologist Annette Lareau in *Unequal Childhoods*, participation in extracurricular activities is a function of class not only because middle-class parents can afford teams and music lessons, but also because they fully understand the educational advantages of such activities. In their culture, scarce time must be invested in kids' human capital. As one Mom says, Saturday morning TV doesn't "contribute" anything, so she gets her son out to "the piano lesson, and then straight to choir for a couple of hours." In contrast, the working-class parents regard team sports and other extracurricular activities as forms of entertainment that they will consider only if their kids demand them. Thus, even if they had much more cash, they would not spend their days ferrying their kids from practice to practice. They don't see the point. (One working-class mother takes her son to free football practices, at his request, but finds the process draining and "pray[s] we don't have to do it again.")

Finally, all these approaches to reform (including the liberal tactic of increasing funds for teachers' salaries) involve extrinsic motivations. But people can also be intrinsically motivated to teach and to learn. Democracy needs citizens who understand the intrinsic value of working and learning together. In any case, it is offensive and alienating to treat good teachers and students as if they lacked internal goals and will only respond to carrots and sticks.

Raising teachers' salaries, equalizing school spending, mandating tests that have financial consequences,

requiring that a specific percentage of education funds go to “classroom instruction,” introducing vouchers—these proposals run the gamut from left to right, but all are ways of manipulating incentives. They are technocratic rather than democratic/participatory approaches to reform.

The opposite is the following ideal. Members of a community educate the community’s children. They do not see education simply as a responsibility of the schools, but they do take responsibility for the schools in their area. Many adults (and some youth) play a direct role in education: serving on parents’ associations or school boards, teaching Sunday school, volunteering in a classroom or a youth center, writing an education column for the newspaper, working at the local college. There is a lot of deliberation and debate about the content and methods of education across the community. The purpose of it all is not merely getting kids through a test, but also developing interests, traits of character, and civic skills.

Conclusion

I readily admit that this is an idealized picture of education without technocrats. But it contains at least a germ of truth. Sociologist Nina Eliasoph has found that teachers, librarians, and parents engage in intense and morally serious deliberations about such questions as how boys should act on the playground and whether young children should be exposed to wrenching facts about the Holocaust and slavery. Such conversations are important, but they have limited scope. Broader debates about educational priorities tend to be suppressed by both liberal and conservative technocratic approaches that concern themselves exclusively with incentives.

To get a richer, more normative public dialogue, we may need laws that vest less power in publishing companies, test designers, and state agencies. We may also need to tolerate a wider range of values in different schools and communities. The result will be more public engagement in education (broadly defined)—and hence, I suspect, more and better learning.

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Sources: The point that exceptional knowledge does not confer special political rights is explored in Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). Regarding the National Election Studies survey, of those who felt that politics was understandable, 78 percent voted in the elections between 1948 and 2000. Of those who felt it was too complicated, just 63.6 percent said they voted (National Election Studies, author’s tabulations). Robert D. Putnam, “Community-Based Social Capital and Educational Performance,” in *Making Good Citizens: Education and Civil Society*, edited by Diane Ravitch and Joseph P. Viteritti (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); John Rawls, “Reply to Habermas,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. xcii, no. 3 (March 1995); for more on the point that technical expertise has intellectual biases, see Harry Boyte, *Everyday Politics: Reconnecting Citizens and Public Life* (Univ. Pennsylvania Press, 2004); James S. Coleman, Ernest Q. Campbell, Carol F. Hobson, James M. McPartland, Alexander M. Mood, Frederic D. Weinfeld, and Robert L. York, “Equality of Educational Opportunity,” (Washington, DC: National Center for Educational Statistics, 1966); Gary Becker in the Becker-Posner blog, www.becker-posner-blog.com/archives/2006/02/summers_resigna.html; David Mathews, *Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2006); David Mathews, “Public-Government/Public-Schools,” *National Civic Review*, vol. 85, no. 3 (fall 1996); Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000); Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (Univ. of California Press, 2003); Nina Eliasoph, “What if Good Citizens’ Etiquette Requires Silencing Political Conversation in Everyday Life? Notes from the Field,” Paper presented at conference on “The Transformation of Civic Life,” Middle Tennessee State University, November 12-13, 1999.