

“All the Ends of the Earth Terminate in These United States”:

The Need to Accommodate Children of Immigrants in New York City Schools

by Stephan F. Brumberg

New York is a city of immigrants and migrants. From the earliest years of the American republic, New York has been the major entry point for immigrants, many of whom have settled here, and the destination of migrants from all parts of the country. A critical concern for New York’s leaders was and still is how to incorporate these newcomers into the life stream of the city. The welcome has not always been warm and embracing. Open reception and inclusion of newcomers has often given way to animosity and efforts to limit their number if possible or, if not, to segregate them. Whether the city’s leaders and the tenor of the times favored or opposed newcomers, schools have been central to the process of city/newcomer encounters and to the fractious process of accommodating and integrating migrants and immigrants.

In 1800 New York City was a large and rapidly growing town of some 60,000 inhabitants. Within a decade its population had increased by 60 percent, due largely to immigration. The established leaders of the city, concerned for political, social, and economic stability, were disturbed by the growing number of poor residents whose children were for the most part unschooled. At that period there was no free “public” education; all schooling was private and for-pay, with the exception of a meager number of charity schools. Of especial concern to New York’s establishment was the moral corruption that

infected the life of the city, and the poor who, they believed, were the carriers of such infections. Men such as De Witt Clinton, John Murray, and Thomas Eddy established a private philanthropy, the Free School Society (later the Public School Society), in 1805 to address impoverished children’s need for basic education, especially moral instruction, and the city’s need for social control and stability. The three men sought to employ their schools as a means of shaping and informing the moral lives of these impoverished children and of severing the children from the perceived dissoluteness of their parents’ culture. These men acted out of benevolence toward the children of the poor and out of a desire to render a service for the public good.

In 1842 the state legislature compelled New York City to create a free public-education system. At this time the city’s residents numbered more than 300,000, and the proportion of immigrants, primarily Irish and German, was approaching half of the population. The need to address the rapid influx of “foreigners” was felt with particular acuteness by the evangelical Christians, who saw themselves severely challenged by the large percentage of Catholics among the immigrants and by what they felt to be the newcomers’ assault on the moral life of the city. They argued that the recently created public-school system had to carry the light of Christian faith and morality to the benighted,

Issues of UNCENSORED have typically included Historical Perspective essays and occasional opinion pieces in what we call the Guest Voices column. This issue offers something of a combination of those two features: an essay that looks to the past in expressing a view about contemporary times. Stephan F. Brumberg, professor of education at Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York, is the author of Going to America, Going to School: The Jewish Immigrant Public School Encounter in Turn-of-the-Century New York City and of many education-related book chapters and articles.

for their own sake and for the city's survival. Many religious conservatives believed that New York and other cities were cesspools of evil and vice that grew in proportion to the cities' immigrant populations. In the view of the Protestant religious establishment of the city, the schools could not be neutral in this situation. If the public schools did not provide proper religious instruction and did not shape the moral character of their students according to "Bible truth," they would become party to the evil and breeders of vice and crime.

Moral instruction was central to the mission of the schools, including "public schools." Benjamin Peers, an early-nineteenth-century American educator and Protestant minister, succinctly sets forth the argument for moral instruction and expresses the need for America's schools to embrace the Bible. Writing as systems of common schools were beginning to appear, he argued that society "has more occasion for the moral, than the intellectual education of its members. This is uniformly and practically acknowledged by our legislators, since law is generally addressed to the moral faculties of man." Peers maintained that public morals were crucial to the success of the American republic, but that it could not be assumed that public virtue would be included in the spread of popular knowledge. Learning to read was not equated with acquiring virtue. "The popular virtue which is essential under a government like ours, can be produced only by means of the Christian Religion engrafted upon our system of popular education," which required that the Bible be "enthroned" in the schools. Note that Peers and the evangelicals, who pressed for attention to moral instruction, had no inhibitions when it came to imposing a religious position that might have been anathema to many parents of the children attending the city's public schools.

The central role of the public schools in the acculturation and integration of immigrants in mid-nineteenth-century America can be seen in arguments that a Baptist minister from Newark, New Jersey, Henry C. Fish, directed against Catholics seeking a share of public-education funds to finance their own parochial schools. Fish maintained that the American common school served a critical integrative function. Sectarian schools, wrote Fish,

*tend to perpetuate among us national distinctions, in feeling, and sentiment, and action. We are made up of strange and as yet, unaffiliated elements. **All the ends of the earth terminate in these United States.*** [italics Fish's; boldface added] ... Now what we need is some powerful and rapid process of amalgamation ... Indeed, it would seem obvious that this is almost a condition of success in the great experiment of American republicanism.

Fish argued that the common school, more than any other institution in society, was capable of synthesizing the disparate peoples who populated America:

It is framed for the masses. Jews, Greeks, Pagans, Europeans, Africans, Asiatics and Americans, all here meet; and meet in *childhood and youth*; just when in the formation period. Then if ever, and by these schools, if by any means, are they trained for a common destiny. Here they become **Americanized** [boldface added]. Here the future actors on the state are brought together, and made acquainted with each other. They see each other face to face, and grow up side by side. Thus are prejudices and bitter animosities worn away, or softened down, so as not to produce irritation. Thus are the children of all other nations run into the new mould [sic] of our institutions, with our own children, and thus is there formed one consolidated body politic.

Fish concluded that if the Catholic Church chose to separate its children from the American public school, then it should not ask for public funds to do so.

The great wave of immigration at the turn of the twentieth century helped to raise New York City's population to more than 3.4 million. The city's leaders felt that immigrant parents were unable to properly raise and educate their children and continued to believe that immigrant and other impoverished children suffered from moral and social degeneracy. These two perceived failings served as a call to action and as the justification for the broadened functions and scope of elementary education in New York City. In seeking to reshape immigrant youth, school leaders ran the risk of creating a rift between immigrant parents and their children. While they gave lip service to the biblical maxim of honoring thy mother and father, the schools themselves, through their institutional, cultural, and instructional programs, only widened this gap.

In our own day, the schools of New York City enroll large numbers of immigrant and migrant children. Over a third of New Yorkers are foreign-born, and their children represent another 17 percent of the population. Well over half of our public-school students are either immigrants or children of immigrants.

Yet our schools have not adapted themselves to this reality. Throughout the city's educational history, the child has been asked to adapt to the school and not the school to adapt its educational program to the child. The official bureaucracy, whether called a school board or the Department of Education, imposes its will upon all, regardless of the wishes of those it

purports to serve—the children and their parents. Let us look at one central example of such imposition that seems to signal an obliviousness to the particular needs and wishes of students: the Common Core State Standards.

The Common Core English-language arts and mathematics standards, now adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia, are at the center of efforts to reform our schools today. They set ambitious learning standards with a focus on students' abilities to analyze, understand concepts, and acquire skills needed for college and beyond. States and school districts are racing to construct curricula consistent with these goals and, not coincidentally, prepare students for the examinations which will measure their learning (and the schools' effectiveness). The curricula comprise a common core of prescribed learning for all students: children from well-established families and newcomers, students of affluence and of poverty, students who enter school speaking English and those who do not.

In many respects we are back to the beginning of the nineteenth century: newcomers and outsiders, be they immigrants or migrants, English speakers or not, from families with adequate incomes or those living in poverty, comfortable with American culture or not—all are required to achieve similar learning outcomes and in the same time frame. Little is built into contemporary reforms to address the needs of newcomers—issues arising from poverty or from differences related to language or culture. We no longer speak in terms of “Americanization” nor make an explicit effort to transform the children of immigrants into upright, productive, English-speaking, fully acculturated Americans. However, implicit in the goals and timetables of the Common Core is the goal of such “Americanization.” Yet little if any instructional effort is directed to the realization of that goal among newcomers. Bilingual and bicultural education is offered in some cities and schools, but how are these programs to be integrated into the Common Core? If a school is to be judged on Common Core–related student performance, how will bilingual/bicultural and dual-language programs be accommodated and supported?

Reflecting on contemporary reform, Paul Reville, former secretary of education for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, argues “that schools alone, conceived in our current early-20th-century model, are too weak an intervention, if our goal is to get all students to high levels of achievement ... today's schools have not proven powerful enough by themselves to compensate for the disadvantages associated with poverty.”

Reville's analysis helps us to connect contemporary problems confronting reformers with the experiences of educational

reformers in the past. “Our ‘modern’ school system,” he writes, “is a fortified version of an educational model designed [in the early twentieth century] to batch-process large numbers of immigrants and migrants with a rapid-turnaround model set to socialize and prepare them for useful roles in a burgeoning low-skill, low-knowledge, manufacturing economy.” The old system, as heavy-handed and as unsavory in some ways as it was, worked for many under the social and economic conditions of a century ago. Those conditions are not present today.

In any conversation regarding a “new” model of education for America, we must take into account the diverse nature of the population we serve. All the ends of the earth still seek their terminus in America. We must find ways to open a dialogue with newcomer parents, to understand their needs and wishes as we try to communicate to them our educational goals for their children. We must be alert to the dangers of insinuating the schools between parent and child. Those in authority must temper the impulse toward imposition (“We know what is best for you”) with the rights of parent and child to their own agency, i.e., to make their own choices and work toward their own ends. We need to work collaboratively with parents to underline and reinforce the shared responsibility of parent and school for each child's education. We do not want to exacerbate the gap that is often the consequence of parent and child coming of age in two distinct cultures.

We must keep in mind that over half of the children entering public schools in New York City are immigrants or children of immigrants, the majority of whom do not speak “standard” English as their first language, and that many do not speak English at all. Yet we still plunge these children into English-language reading instruction before they know the language they are asked to read; we teach them phonics to help them to decode English words they may not know, even when a large number of them will not yet be able to aurally comprehend the phonemes of English.

We need to design an instructional program that acknowledges the child's first language (whether or not we seek to sustain his/her fluency in that language), and which explicitly teaches the English language through songs, poems, plays, word games, and so on before we introduce the child to English reading. Oral/aural fluency in English needs to precede reading. We need to devise a means of teaching American culture without denigrating the culture a child brings with him/her to school. We need to find a way to bring the newcomer inside American society, and to create schools that can provide the best means of doing so. We must learn to rejoice that all the ends of the earth terminate in these United States, and especially in the City of Greater New York. ■