

History Is Catching Up

by Richard Lessner

"Education is the process of driving a set of prejudices down your throat."

—Martin H. Fischer

Why Johnny Can't Tell Right From Wrong: Moral Illiteracy and the Case for Character Education

by William Kilpatrick

New York: Simon & Schuster;
366 pp., \$23.00

Inside American Education: The Decline, the Deception, the Dogmas

by Thomas Sowell

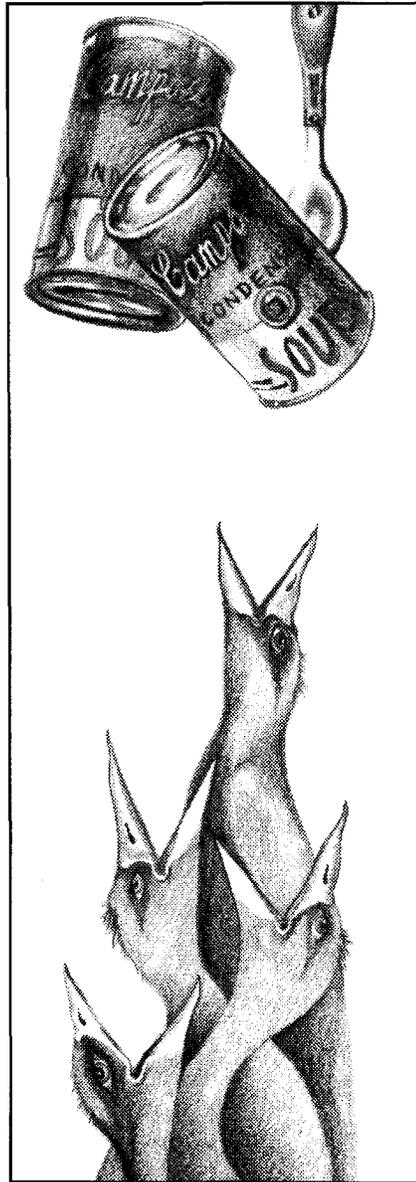
New York: The Free Press;
368 pp., \$24.95

In March 1989, four young men in Glen Ridge, New Jersey, lured a retarded 17-year-old girl into a basement playroom, where they proceeded to rape her, penetrate her with a baseball bat and a broom handle, and generally brutalize her. These young rapists were not the products of modern urban pathologies—poverty, broken homes, dysfunctional families, the gang-and-drug underworld; they were the sons of affluence—handsome, clean-cut preppies, star athletes at their high school, from good homes in a pleasant, upscale suburb. Yet these fresh-faced young men, three of whom were eventually convicted of aggravated sexual assault, were apparently oblivious to the most rudimentary notions of right and wrong.

How could this be? Because most of the institutions of American society, the public schools notable among them, have abandoned such inconvenient, intolerant notions as objective standards of right and wrong, virtue and sin.

Here is everything that is important to know about the state of public education in America. Every month an estimated 525,000 assaults, shakedowns, and robberies occur in the nation's public schools. Annually, about three million crimes are committed on or near school

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grounds—16,000 per school day. Roughly 135,000 students carry guns to school daily, and one-fifth go armed with a weapon. Twenty-one percent of all secondary students do not use a bathroom during the school day for fear of being assaulted or robbed. In a survey taken at the end of the 1940's, teachers said that students talking out of turn in the classroom were their greatest pedagogical difficulty; by the 1990's, talking had been replaced by physical assaults by students.

Such are the stygian depths to which our schools have sunk in fewer than three decades. Despite an avalanche of courses in "values clarification," moral and sex education, "AIDS avoidance," and "drug aversion," the public schools have been utterly unable to stem the rising tide of violence, teen pregnancy, and drug abuse. If anything, every one of these problems has grown worse and, in many cases, been exacerbated by the very palliatives allegedly aimed at ameliorating them.

Only the woolly-minded elites of the education establishment, the *apparatchiki* comfortably entrenched in the nation's universities and government school bureaucracy, continue to puzzle over the etiology of the malaise that has overtaken the schools and the larger society. To the rest of us, and to Professor William Kilpatrick of Boston College, the cause is hardly mysterious: Little Johnny, like those teenage rapists, simply can't tell right from wrong.

The title of Professor Kilpatrick's newest book consciously evokes Rudolf Flesch's 1955 work *Why Johnny Can't Read*. The parallels between what passes today for "moral education" and the government school establishment's continued espousal of the "look-say" method of reading over the objectively superior phonetics approach are as uncanny as they are intentional. Both "look-say" and the so-called "decision-making" approach to "values education" have been, by any standard of measurement, resounding failures. Yet such ideologically driven pedagogical theories persist and proliferate.

Why is it that Johnny can no longer tell right from wrong? Because in the revolutionary 1960's liberal educators succumbed to the philosophical droolings of Rousseau, Nietzsche, and other "naturalists," conflated these leavings with the affective pop-psychology of Carl Rogers and others, and replaced traditional "character education"—teaching children by means of historical examples and classical literature the essential character traits of the moral person—

with the “decision-making” or “moral reasoning” approach. This construct resulted in a “non-directive” method reminiscent of the Rogerian psychoanalytic school and was aimed at “empowering” the pupil to “discover” for himself what is “right” in any given moral situation. This represented, as Professor Kilpatrick notes, the transmutation of education from a didactic exercise into psychology. Teaching became counseling, and learning, self-analysis.

The objective in the avant-garde approach was not to inculcate in the student those traditional and objective ideals of honesty, thrift, self-discipline, moral courage, and the like, and to encourage him to practice them until they became second nature, but to help the adolescent erect *ex nihilo* his own moral system, one that was “right” for him. Moral education, according to this approach, became an odyssey of self-discovery in which there were no fixed moral absolutes, only a universe of equally valid “choices.” “Values clarification” stands as a prime example of the anti-intellectualism rampant today: the elevation of *feeling* over *thinking* in our heavily psychologized society, the supremacy of the subjective over the objective. To advocate the superiority of one moral value over another is seen to be judgmental—one of liberalism’s deadly sins—and a violation of the student’s personal liberties, if not his civil rights.

The flaw here is self-evident to all but the willfully deluded educational ideologues: that a child with an undeveloped moral sense is capable of developing his own moral system, or exercising autonomous moral judgment, without first acquiring a framework, an edifice of values, within which to exercise such judgment. It is plain lunacy to present ado-

lescents with bizarre and profound moral dilemmas—as does so much of the “values clarification” curriculum—and expect them to extrapolate a useful response on the basis of . . . what? A vacuum? Whether something “feels right”? It is sheer madness to present students with the kind of hypothetical moral conundrums that have stumped philosophers since Aristotle—would you have strangled baby Adolf in his crib if you knew what he would become?—which are thoroughly unrelated to the real moral choices they will face in their own lives, and expect such exercises to produce coherent “value systems” able to deal with real world choices. In truth, such curricula are aimed not at helping children cope with the real problems they will encounter, but at conditioning them to the idea that *Alles ist relativ*, that no objective standards of truth and morality exist.

This novel notion that children should be left to their own devices to engage in life’s moral struggles, to “discover” their own standards of conduct without adult guidance or fixed standards of right and wrong, is probably unprecedented in human history. The ubiquity of such a theory in the government schools goes a considerable way toward explaining the condition of barbarism toward which American society is with increasing velocity careening. Ours is likely the first society in history that refuses to view education as the means of cultural conservation and transmission. The government schools—“public” school is a misnomer, as the schools belong not to the public, but to the government—have become one vast acultural shrink’s couch. We are rearing generations of young people who “feel good about themselves” as they merrily do drugs, get pregnant, abort the products of conception, join gangs, punch teachers, and steal from their employers when they grow up and get jobs (when they’re not on the public dole, of course).

Professor Kilpatrick urges parents to reclaim some lost territory for their children from the education professionals. I am not optimistic that they can do it. Four decades after the “look-say” reading method (as though English were a pictographic language like Japanese) was thoroughly discredited, it continues to be inflicted on students by teachers who themselves learned to read by that dubious approach, who are themselves bare-

ly literate, and who wouldn’t know Molière from Madonna. The social-engineering elites never will, never can, admit that they have been wrong. To do so would be a defeat from which such social experimentation would never recover. The reason “look-say,” sex and drug education, and values clarification never seem to produce the promised utopian results, the controlling elites insist, is because such programs have never been “fully funded.” A little more money, a bigger government grab of the nation’s wealth, and the failing programs, failing curricula, and failing schools at long last would succeed.

As Professor Kilpatrick points out, the popular culture does not suffer from the “non-directive,” relativistic educationists’ qualms about advocating a particular set of “values” as superior to all others. Since the schools leave children free to discover their own morality, they do—in rock music, MTV, movies, and all the rest of the sludge the “entertainment” industry spews forth. For children denied them in the schools, values are wherever else they find them, and increasingly that means in the popular culture. And so, while educators fret over how they can help students think for themselves and invent their own standards of morality while blithely ignoring the mounting evidence and social costs of their failure, the TV, music, and movie industries are happily doing the job of “values education.”

Perhaps nothing is so suggestive of what is wrong with the government schools, notes the Hoover Institution’s Thomas Sowell, as the results of a recent international study of 13-year-olds that found Koreans at the top and Americans at the bottom on the scale of mathematical accomplishment. When asked if they thought they were “good at mathematics,” only 23 percent of Korean 13-year-olds answered affirmatively, compared with 68 percent of their American counterparts. Apparently “education-as-therapy” has been a success, at least on its own terms. American 13-year-olds “feel good” about themselves, while being unable to tell algebra from artichokes. Little Johnny not only is incapable of telling right from wrong, he also is incapable of *thinking*. We are, Professor Sowell notes, raising up generations of “confident incompetents.”

Nevertheless, there is little that is new in Tom Sowell’s screed directed at America’s bankrupt educational system. His

Sin’s Lair

by Paul Ramsey

Sin frets the heart.
The loss increases pain
In clumsy fits and starts.
The loss remains,
Until a change of heart.