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Reviewed Work(s): The Paideia Proposal by Mortimer J. Adler

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Source: *Journal of Thought*, Spring 1984, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Spring 1984), pp. 81-91

Published by: Caddo Gap Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42589052>

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Book Review Essay

The False Promise of the Paideia:
A Critical Review of The Paideia
Proposal

by **Mortimer J. Adler**

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The Paideia Proposal is offered as an educational prescription for all of America's children. It is based on two major premises: that "the shape of the best education for the best is not unknown to us" (p. 7) and that "the best education for the best . . . is the best education for all." (p. 6) Surely no humane and decent person finds it easy to counsel against a proposal that promises to provide the "same quality of schooling to all," and thereby to educate all of our children to their fullest potential. Hard as it is, however, I believe that we should reject the recommendations in *The Paideia Proposal*. I will argue that "equality of quality" in education cannot be achieved by forcing all students to take exactly the same course of study, nor can the ideal of a democratic, classless society be actualized by establishing only one model of excellence.

The *Paideia's* recommendations fall into two major categories: content and method. Those on method will be discussed at the end of this essay. The recommendations on content are encapsulated in this paragraph from the *Paideia*:

The course of study to be followed in the twelve years of basic schooling should, therefore, be completely required, with only one exception. That exception is the choice of a second language. (p. 21)

There is little use in arguing directly against the *Paideia's* recommendations, because they follow inexorably from Mortimer Adler's two basic assumptions. But both of Adler's premises may be called into question as well as his strategy of persuasion; linking John Dewey and Robert Hutchins together as though no disagreement separated the two should cause thoughtful educators considerable uneasiness. I will start by examining that strategy, and then I will examine each of Adler's premises in turn.

1.

The Paideia Proposal is dedicated to Horace Mann, John Dewey, and Robert Hutchins, "who would have been our leaders were they alive

today.’’ This is a lovely dedication, but Adler fails to mention that, if Dewey and Hutchins were alive today, they would almost certainly be engaged in the continuing battle of method and principle that they so vigorously mounted during their actual lifetimes. Mr. Hutchins would be an eloquent and outspoken advocate of the *Paideia*; Mr. Dewey would be a softer spoken but rigorously thoughtful opponent of the program. To suggest, even tacitly, that the *Paideia* fulfills the dreams and recommendations of both John Dewey and Robert Hutchins does a monumental disservice to John Dewey. The man and his educational thought deserve better. Further, Adler is thoroughly informed on the differences I shall point out, and one wonders why he chose to omit their discussion. Perhaps he believes that it is high time for reconciliation between Hutchins and Dewey and that this reconciliation holds promise for real improvement in the system of public education that both men loved (in some ideal form) and that is now so terribly beset with problems. Granted this generous motive, he still cannot responsibly attempt to effect reconciliation by assimilating a worthy opponent to the position of his adversary without even mentioning the problems that opponent would encounter in considering such a reconciliation.

Dewey and Hutchins are linked in Adler’s arguments through their manifest interests in democracy and ‘‘equality of quality’’ in education. But their views on both concepts differed radically. Adler refers to Dewey’s *Democracy and Education* when he says:

A revolutionary message of that book was that a democratic society must provide equal opportunity not only by giving to all its children the same quantity of public education—the same number of years in school—but also by making sure to give to all of them, all with no exceptions, the same quality of education. (*Paideia*, p. 4)

Now, it is clear that Dewey did advocate a substantial ‘‘equality of quality’’ in education for all children. But his ideas on this were very different from those of Hutchins. In *The School and Society*, Dewey said:

What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy. (1899, p. 3)

Clearly, we have to ask what Dewey meant when he referred to ‘‘the best and wisest parent.’’ It is crystal clear at the outset, however, that he meant by ‘‘best’’ something very different from the ‘‘best’’ of Hutchins in the initial premises cited by Adler. Yet Adler throws them together in the same paragraph as though both were advocates of the program under construction. He says:

There is no acceptable reason why trying to promote equality should have led to a lessening or loss of quality. Two decades after John Dewey, another great American educator, Robert Maynard Hutchins, as much committed to democracy as Dewey was before him, stated the fundamental principle we must follow in our effort to achieve a true equality of educational conditions. “The best education for the best,” he said, “is the best education for all.” (*Paideia*, p. 6)

Dewey would certainly challenge this premise if “best” is interpreted as “intellectually best”—as it surely is in the writings of Hutchins and Adler. Further, Dewey *did* challenge both premises in direct rebuttal of Hutchins. In a series of 1937 articles in *The Social Frontier*, Dewey criticized the program of higher education that Hutchins proposed in *The Higher Learning in America*. Dewey made it clear in the ensuing exchange of views that, while he accepted and admired some of Hutchins’ analysis, he rejected the proposed remedy. He said:

The essence of the remedy . . . is emancipation of higher learning from . . . practicality, and its devotion to the cultivation of intellectuality for its own sake. (1937, p. 103)

Dewey’s objections to the remedies suggested in *The Higher Learning* centered on two matters that he thought were at the heart of Hutchins’ ideas: belief in “the existence of fixed and eternal authoritative principles” and the separation of “higher learning from contemporary social life.” It is not an exaggeration to say that Dewey’s voluminous writings over a lifetime of effort attacked these ideas again and again from a wide variety of perspectives. The separation of learning from contemporary social life was, indeed, a favorite target of his criticism. Exactly the same objections may be brought against the *Paideia*: It elevates intellectual life above that which it should serve (the social communion of human beings), and it assumes an essential sameness in human beings and values that suggests, logically, a sameness in education.

It would be fun (and instructive, too) to follow the Dewey-Hutchins debate further, but I cannot do that here. Suffice it to say that these two great educators did not really communicate with each other. Hutchins, indeed, began his rejoinder to Dewey by saying that he could not “in any real sense” respond to Dewey for

Mr. Dewey has stated my position in such a way as to lead me to think that I cannot write, and has stated his own in such a way as to make me suspect that I cannot read. (1937, p. 137)

This sort of wit was a favorite gambit of Hutchins. He did not engage in

dialogue with Dewey and continually side-stepped Dewey's most telling points, preferring to display verbal pyrotechnics and to persuade through rhetoric. The same charade is now being replayed. Adler offers us a tightly argued program based on rhetorical premises, themselves entirely unsupported by logical argumentation. Accept his premises and he has you, because he does not make errors in the logic of *developing* his program. What is sad is that so many educators are listening to Adler without a murmur of logical protest. He is right about one thing—and, paradoxically, it is working for him—the education of educators is not all that it should be.

2.

Let me raise a murmur of logical protest. Put aside for the moment the premise that makes claims about the “shape of the best education,” and let's concentrate on the other: The best education for the best is the best education for all.

The word “best” is used three times here. All three uses invite scrutiny, but the second deserves special attention. It is used elliptically as a noun. If we insist that the ellipsis be filled and that “best” be used as an adjective, what noun will it modify? It is clear that “best” is not meant to modify such nouns as “life” or “effort” or “performance” or the like. Both Hutchins and Adler are talking about *people* when they refer to “the best.” Now what noun shall we insert: people? students? minds? It is eminently clear that Hutchins meant to refer to an *intellectually best* when he used the word and that an accurate filling in of the ellipsis would be, “The best education for the intellectually best students is the best education for all.” Further, because the two premises have influenced each other historically, “intellectually best” has been narrowed to “academically best” in the traditional sense. Adler wants all children to receive an education that is, in content at least, the education designed for our academically best students.

Why should we consider doing this? Are the academically best the only group that should provide a model for school learning? Is the mission of the school to provide training or “education” only for the mind? Or are there many models of excellence that must be recognized in both society and school? In my own secondary schooling, I participated in a program very like the one Adler outlines. I loved it. I was completely captivated by Caesar's Gallic Wars, geometry, trigonometric identities, and even Cicero's essay on old age. It was not until years later that I learned about the utter misery most of my classmates endured in the “same” environment. Mr. Adler, to his great credit, would try to alleviate that misery by better classroom teaching and individual coaching, but he is mistaken in what he believes would be effected. No special effort or even genius in teaching would have brought most of my classmates into fair competition with me.

Whatever they did, however they improved, I would have done more of it and at a higher level. It is not that I was “better” than they. I was *interested* in the sort of material the school wanted me to learn. Now one might claim a special benefit in this side effect: the academically able would be pushed through increased competition to surpass themselves. But then they would be engaged in academics (if they remained engaged) for largely the wrong reasons and with loss of the joy that accompanies doing what one has chosen out of love to do. We should consider *The Paideia*’s proposals, then, if we want this sort of effect.

Giving all of our children the *same* education, especially when that “sameness” is defined in a model of intellectual excellence, cannot equalize the quality of education. When parents and their children want the sort of education prescribed in the *Paideia*, it seems right to accommodate them, but to impose a plan such as this on all children in the name of equality is wrong. It proceeds in part from the stated assumption that we are “politically a classless society” and that we should, therefore, be an “educationally classless society.” Mr. Adler has the cart before the horse. We are *not*, in any but the most technical sense, a classless society and to impose a uniform and compulsory form of education on all children is likely to aggravate an already unhealthy condition. When children must all study the same material and strive to meet the same standards, it becomes infinitely easier to sort and grade them like so many apples on a conveyor belt. Some children will be in the top quartile and some will be in the bottom quartile. Are we to say, then, that they all had an “equal chance” and that the “classes” thus established are, at least, objectively and fairly established?

To put the horse properly before the cart, we would have to ask what education might do to help the society arrive at the classless ideal it has stated for itself. Many theorists insist that the schools can do very little to change the society. As institutions *of* the society, they are instruments for the reproduction of society as it is. We can certainly take a more hopeful view than this, but whatever view we take must be realistic at the outset. People in our society perform a huge variety of tasks, have hundreds of different interests, hold a variety of precious values. We do not offer equality when we ask them to model themselves after the traditional profile of an “intellectual best.” What the schools need to do, instead, is to legitimize multiple models of excellence, e.g., mechanical, artistic, physical, productive, academic, and caretaking. Standing over all these should be the ethical, for what we need far more urgently than intellectual prowess is ethical goodness.

Many thoughtful planners shrink from the notion of “multiple models” of excellence because they believe the schools are already asked to accomplish too much. John Gardner, for example, in his influential *Excellence* (1961),

lauded excellence in all its forms at the level of societal activity, but he charged the school with the task of promoting only academic excellence. It seems entirely right in a society such as ours to value “excellent plumbers above mediocre philosophers,” but must we not also value the budding plumber—the youngster who will be a craftsman—while he or she is still a student? Gardner argued that the schools cannot do everything and that they are best organized to achieve *academic* excellence. The weakest part of his argument was revealed when he admitted that some youngsters (probably many) would not do well in a program so oriented. They would have to understand, he said, that the failure they had experienced in school was only *one form* of failure and that they might still achieve excellence in other enterprises. But I ask you this: How is a youngster who has been at the bottom of the heap for twelve years going “to understand” that his or her failure so far is only “one form” of failure? Surely, if we value plumbing, and farming, and dancing, and writing, and repairing electronic devices at the societal level, we can find ways of valuing the talents that lead to these occupations during school years. We really *have* to do this if our talk of equality is to be anything more than *mere* talk.

To be reasonable, however, we do have to consider Gardner’s concern that demands on the schools have so proliferated that they cannot achieve any sort of excellence. I suggest that it is not subject and activity demands that have overburdened our schools but, rather, demands to solve the problems of a society unwilling to bear its burdens where they should properly be shouldered. A society unwilling to rid itself of racial prejudice asks the *schools* to achieve desegregation. A society unwilling to talk with its children about love, delight, and commitment asks the *schools* to teach sex education. A society unwilling to recognize the forms of excellence that Mr. Gardner identifies asks the *schools* to teach everyone algebra. The greatest burden of the schools, as a result, is trying to find some way to teach to adequately intelligent students things that they do not want to learn.

Acting on the *Paideia* would not produce a “classless education.” The *Paideia* selects a form of education traditionally associated with an academically privileged class—“education for the best”—and prescribes it for all children, regardless of home influences, individual interests, special talents, or any realistic hope that all can participate in the sort of professional life that such an education has traditionally aspired to. Even if we were to deny the existence of classes in our current society, we would inevitably produce them under the *Paideia*. In this system, *everyone* is to be judged by the standards usually applied to the academically talented. I object to this. I object as a teacher, as a parent, and as a thoughtful human being. There is more to life, more to excellence, more to success, and more to devotion than can be captured in a single intellectual model of excellence.

To provide an equal quality of education for all our children requires, first, that we hold the variety of their talents and legitimate interests to be equally valuable. This does not mean that schools should provide no common learnings. Of course the schools should teach all children to read, write, and compute. But the schools should also teach all children how to operate the technical machinery and gadgets that fill our homes and offices; to care responsibly for living things; to develop their bodies for lifelong physical grace; to obtain and convey information; to use their hands in making and finishing things; to develop their receptive capacities in the arts; to develop a commitment to service in some capacity. This sounds like an impossible list—and it is almost certainly incomplete. But the beautiful truth is that when we take all of the valuable aspects of life into consideration and when we respect all of our children's legitimate interests in our educational planning, it becomes *easier* to teach the basic skills. They become obviously necessary to the satisfaction of real problems and actual tasks. The answer is not to spend more and more time on "basics" but to revitalize the basics in a broad scheme of general education that is laid out boldly along the entire continuum of human experience.

Now, I can imagine at least some of the advocates of *Paideia* saying: But that is exactly what we mean to do; that is what education for the best has traditionally done! It provides a broad, general education that aims to liberate the human mind; it conduces to the "examined life." It . . . "Whoa up!" I'd have to say. You are still talking about an essentially abstract and bookish sort of education. Consider this: Is it not at least possible that academic talent is *per se* a somewhat specialized talent? If it is, and I believe there is evidence to support the contention, then so long as our schooling is highly "intellectualized," we have a specialized curriculum no matter how many traditional subjects we force people to take in the name of breadth. Such a program can hardly meet the criteria for "equality of quality."

3.

Now, consider the second premise. Adler claims that "the shape of the best education for the best is not unknown to us." If he means by this that we know what has been provided for an intellectually and socially privileged class in the past, the claim seems reasonable. The force of his argument would then be, "Let us now give all our children what we have given these privileged few in the past." But is the traditional "education for the best" really the "best" even for our academically most able students? On what grounds is it so judged? The *Paideia* aims at an education that will enable all children

to earn a living in an intelligent and responsible fashion, to function as intelligent and responsible citizens, and to make both of these things serve the purpose of leading intelligent and responsible lives—to enjoy as fully as possible all the goods that make a human life as good as it can be. (p. 18)

“To achieve these three goals,” Adler writes,

basic schooling must have for all a quality that can be best defined, *positively*, by saying that it must be general and liberal; and *negatively*, by saying that it must be nonspecialized and nonvocational. (p. 18)

There are at least two difficulties here. One has to do with the word “vocational” and its uses. Another is the meaning of “nonspecialized.” I have already argued that the sort of abstract and bookish education recommended by the *Paideia* is itself—in spite of its internal breadth—a specialized curriculum. It is designed for those whose further education will be academic, and there is little evidence that it will promote continued learning across other fields of endeavor. One could design a “mechanical-technical” education every bit as broad (internally) as the *Paideia*’s “liberal” education (thus avoiding the rapid obsolescence of skills), and most of us would still consider it too highly specialized to be used exclusively and for all our children. One can imagine, however, several such beautifully designed curricula, equally valuable, each characterized by internal breadth, offered on equal levels and freely chosen by well-informed students. This sort of plan might realistically avoid premature specialization. Further, the freedom of choice provided seems appropriate preparation for democratic life.

In its own effort to prepare children “equally” for participation in “democracy,” the *Paideia* sacrifices a first principle of democracy: In the pursuit of eventual freedom, it denies students any freedom whatsoever in the choice of their own studies.

The one-track system of public schooling that *The Paideia Proposal* advocates has the same objectives for all without exception. (p. 15)

Further,

All sidetracks, specialized courses, or elective choices must be eliminated. Allowing them will always lead a certain number of students to voluntarily downgrade their own education. (p. 21)

Think what we are suggesting in making or accepting such a recommendation. Why should electives in cooking, photography, or science fiction constitute a “downgrading” of education? Is James Beard a failure? Is Edward Steichen? Is Ray Bradbury? Now I am not arguing for premature

specialization. I am simply pointing out what John Dewey counseled again and again: Any subject freely undertaken as an occupation—as a set of tasks requiring goal-setting, means-ends analysis, choice of appropriate tools and materials, exercise of skills, living through the consequences, and evaluating the results—is educative. Cooking can be approached with high intelligence and elegant cultural interests or it can deteriorate to baking brownies and cleaning ovens; similarly, mathematics can be taught so as to require deep reflective and intuitive thinking or it can be taught as a mindless bag of tricks. It is not the subjects offered that make a curriculum properly a part of education but how those subjects are taught, how they connect to the personal interests and talents of the students who study them, and how skillfully they are laid out against the whole continuum of human experience.

We see in this discussion another area of great disagreement between John Dewey and the perennialists, and this involves the difficulty I mentioned concerning the word “vocational.” It is true, as Adler points out, that Dewey argued against something called “vocational education.” But Dewey was arguing against a narrow form of specialization that tended to downgrade the participants *as persons*. He was arguing against a form of schooling, not education at all, that labels some children fit only to do Vocation X, where X itself may be held in disdain. More importantly, however, he wanted all children to experience education *through* occupations or vocations more broadly construed. He said:

A vocation signifies any form of continuous activity which renders service to others and engages personal powers in behalf of the accomplishment of results. (1916, p. 319)

Dewey insisted that education could be conducted through occupations or vocations in the important sense we are considering here. He insisted upon the organic connection between education and personal experience and, thus, between education and contemporary social life. Students do not have to study exactly the same subject matter nor need they be deprived of choice in order to be truly educated. Dewey spoke favorably of Plato’s fundamental principle of tailoring education to the abilities of students, but he drew back from the hierarchical evaluation connected with this form of education, saying:

His (Plato’s) error was not in qualitative principle, but in his limited conception of the scope of vocations socially needed; a limitation of vision which reacted to obscure his perception of the infinite variety of capacities found in different individuals. (1916, p. 309)

Dewey wanted us to avoid two equally pernicious ideas in education: first, that education must consist of a set of prespecified material to be transmitted to everyone regardless of personal interest; second, that education should consist of a hierarchically ordered set of curricula—the “highest” given to the “best,” the “lowest” to the “least.” To provide “equality of quality” in education for all our children requires that we start with equal respect for their talents and aspirations and that we help them to choose wisely within the domain of their interests.

My main aim in this section has been to cast doubt on Mr. Adler’s claim that “the shape of the best education for the best is not unknown to us.” On the contrary, I believe that far more reflection and responsible experimentation are required before we can support such a claim.

4.

I promised at the beginning of this essay to say something about the recommendations the *Paideia* makes concerning methods of instruction. Three modes of teaching are prescribed, and they are all useful. Each mode of teaching is connected to a mode of learning: for the acquisition of organized knowledge, didactic instruction is recommended; for the development of intellectual skills, coaching is to be employed; and for the enlargement of understanding, insight, and aesthetic appreciation, “maieutic” or Socratic methods are to be used. All three methods, properly implemented, are sound and useful, and education would take a giant step forward if teachers were skilled in each of them.

But the methods as they are described are somewhat warped by the prescribed subject matter. There is no mention of the enormous skill required of teachers in setting the environment so that children will formulate purposes and thus *seek* to acquire segments of organized knowledge. Nor is the choice of coach or the relation between coach and student mentioned. These are oversights that I need not belabor. The attitude of which I complain pervades the *Paideia*: Students are treated as “minds” to be filled equally with the same quality material. Nowhere is there proper consideration of the *persons* who are, in their essential freedom and infinite diversity, central and instrumental in their own education.

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Note

This paper is built upon an address to the Association of Colorado Independent Schools. Their sponsorship is gratefully acknowledged. It does not imply their endorsement of the ideas within.

ERRATUM NOTICE

—Volume 18, Number 4, Winter 1983

In Hugh G. Petrie's article, "Ontological and Epistemological Realism," the last four words of the article, on page 62, should read

“. . . as fallible human knowers.”

We at the *Journal* regret the error.