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15

Education

Elisabeth Rose Gruner

In both *Keywords* (Williams 1983a) and *New Keywords* (Bennett, Grossberg, and Morris 2005), "education" (*Keywords* has "educate") is primarily an institutional practice, which, after the late eighteenth century, is increasingly formalized and universalized in Western countries. Bearing the twin senses of "to lead forth" (from the Latin *educere*) and "to bring up" (from the Latin *educare*), "education" appears chiefly as an action practiced by adults on children. The *Oxford English Dictionary* thus defines the term as "the systematic instruction, schooling, or training given to the young in preparation for the work of life."

Education may be primarily vocational, leading children into their futures as productive adults, or more holistic, nurturing children into, variously, adulthood, gentlemanly status, and/or citizenship. This latter sense of education is often called "liberal education." Either view of education focuses "on the formation of individuals to the benefit of society" (Ferguson 2000)—and, in either case, the concept is intimately connected with children's literature, which is also a product (primarily) created by adults for children. Serving both senses of education, literature for children offers (at the very least) a medium for literacy training—a prerequisite for more and more vocations since the industrial

revolution—and provides "morals" or lessons in citizenship and life.

Children's literature as such arises out of an increasingly formalized educational system; Seth Lerer (2008) links the development of a specialized literature for children with education from its very beginnings (for Lerer, in classical antiquity and the education of the elite through adaptations of Homer, Aesop, Virgil, and others). Most histories, however, focus especially on the link between John Newbery and John Locke. In *Some Thoughts concerning Education* (1693), Locke prescribes a regimen of physical fitness, self-denial, and lessons in manners, among other things, to the sons of the gentry as more essential to their education than the classical reading most often emphasized at the time. His emphasis on pleasure in reading, and his rejection of "promiscuous reading" of the Bible, certainly influenced Newbery and other publishers in developing books to both "delight and entertain" child readers. A century later, Mary Wollstonecraft (also the author of an early children's book, *Original Stories, from Real Life* [1788]), in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1793), made an early claim for education as a "grand national concern." Her prescient argument for coeducational, government-run day schools stresses the importance of universal education for the development of a free citizenry, though it still preserves class distinctions in prescribing vocational training after the age of nine for "girls and boys, intended for domestic employments, or mechanical trades," while "young people of superior abilities, or fortune" would pursue a more Lockean liberal education.

The tension between vocational and liberal education is omnipresent in the history of the field. While the sons (and later, daughters) of the wealthy have always had access to some kind of education (usually, until the nineteenth century, based on the classics), education for the poor was rudimentary and primarily religious and/or vocational until the eighteenth century. In the British and, later, the Anglo-American tradition, formal education was predominantly religious in nature: between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, children first learned their alphabet from hornbooks or primers, and moved very quickly into metrical versions of the Psalms and Bible stories (Avery 1995). Those destined for labor left school (if they attended at all) quite young, and received the remainder of their education in the form of on-the-job training. A gentleman's education, by contrast, served to consolidate class status by providing him with the cultural capital his position demanded. Thus, for Locke and even to some extent for Wollstonecraft, education is primarily a matter of manners and morals; curriculum is secondary.

In eighteenth-century England, charity schools taught reading and writing in order to facilitate religious instruction; similarly, slaves in the United States occasionally learned to read along with their religious instruction, though for most slaves reading was forbidden (see "Literacy," below). Efforts to impose compulsory education in the modern era seem to begin in Scotland in the seventeenth century, though the idea

is present in Plato; Massachusetts was the first American state to enact compulsory education legislation (1852), and Mississippi the last to do so (1918). In 1948 the United Nations included compulsory elementary education as a fundamental human right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 26.1). Most nations now provide primary and even secondary education freely to their citizens. The content and form of that education continue to be contested, though the Declaration makes liberal education its centerpiece, focusing on "the full development of the human personality" and "the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms," and linking them to the promotion of peace. The Declaration also recognizes a potential conflict between the demands of the state in education and the demands of the family, declaring further that "[p]arents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children" (Article 26.3).

As the framers of the Declaration may have anticipated, the more the state becomes involved in education, the more certain elements of society are likely to opt out. While in the United States and the United Kingdom, as in other countries, independent schools offer one alternative to state-run schools for the elite and educated classes, their pedagogy and curriculum are markedly similar. However, progressive pedagogies such as Montessori and Waldorf methods, as well as homeschooling and "unschooling" offer alternatives to standard educational models. Put simply, "traditional" institutional education, whether in state-run, religiously affiliated, or independent schools, tends to emphasize control, while Montessori, Waldorf, and especially unschooling methods tend to focus on developing children's agency. (For a discussion of the social functions of institutional education, see Winch and Gingell 1999.) Even the control-oriented institutional education in state-run schools, however, has had the effect of creating opportunities for social mobility, especially in the United States. As Richard Shaull notes in his foreword to Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000), education either helps the younger generation conform to the logic of the present system, or it helps them "deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world." We might, more radically, suggest that education has always done both things: integration and transformation.

Literature's role in the curriculum mirrors education's dual function. Until the twentieth century, rote learning figured prominently in the school curriculum. In the United Kingdom and the United States, children memorized the "classics," first in Greek and Latin, later in English, as part of the set of "accomplishments" expected of the gentry. As satirized in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), the poetry selected for memorization most often delivered pat morals, behavioral models, or nationalist sentiment. Even so, as both the Alice books and Angela Sorby's *Schoolroom Poets* (2005) make clear, students "read . . . (and then rewrote [the poems they learned]) in ways that served their own local interpretive communities."

While children's literature and other books adapted for children have been the medium of education for centuries, in the nineteenth century education itself became a central theme of children's literature. In addition to the satires of education in the Alice books, Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's School Days* (1857) popularized the genre of "school story," in which the school setting provides theme, structure, and plot. Books set in schools continue to be a popular subgenre of children's literature; although they rarely focus on curriculum or specific subjects taught, the school setting and the implicit didacticism of the form make them in many ways a school themselves, an education about education for the children who read them. As Beverly Lyon Clark (1996) notes, "School stories lend themselves to didacticism because they are about schooling. . . . Schooling is, in part, a metaphor for the effect that the book is supposed to have, whether it endorses traditional schooling or tries to school us in subversion." By depicting students within an educational system, books as different as Harry Allard and James Marshall's *Miss Nelson Is Missing* (1977), Andrew Clements's *Frindle* (1996), J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series (1997–2007), and John Green's *Looking for Alaska* (2005) all advocate certain ideas about the form and content of education. Whether the tone is nostalgic, celebratory, or critical, these and many other stories set in schools generally endorse a liberal educational model with the future-oriented goal of producing a competent citizenry.

In the twenty-first century, debates over both the form and content of education continue. A growing homeschooling movement draws on several strands of education theory as justification: some homeschoolers reject compulsory public education on religious grounds, preferring to isolate their children from modern secularism; others, following American educator John Holt, reject the institutionalization of education, preferring a child-led "unschooling." Holt's (1967) central claim is that "[c]hildren do not need to be made to learn, told what to learn, or shown how. If we give them access to enough of the world . . . they will see clearly enough what things are truly important to us and to others, and they will make for themselves a better path into that world than we could make for them." David Almond's *Skellig* (1997) dramatizes unschooling through the character of Mina, whose curiosity and imagination lead to her to make connections between art, science, literature, and her own life—connections that are denied or at least impeded by her neighbor Michael's schooling. However, Holt's claim that children will learn what they and their society need for them to know undercuts the very basis of institutional education and, especially, the contemporary concern with measurable standards.

In the United States, anxieties about American competitiveness (in science and mathematics education especially) have led to a movement for "standards-based education," enacted into law as "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) in 2001. NCLB standards require schools to meet certain benchmarks (usually set by the state) in order to maintain their public funding. While controversial, NCLB has focused public attention on debates

within the educational community on the value of testing, the desirability of standards, and the place of literature in the curriculum.

The rise of standards-based education reveals a never-long-buried fissure in public debates about education: while many educators believe in and try to practice liberal or holistic education, many taxpayers and legislators are (perhaps understandably) concerned with vocational training. Vocationally oriented education can be more easily tested and measured than can the development of an appreciation for literature, a moral character, or a curious mind. Several recent novels speak to this divide without specifically referencing standardized testing. For example, in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* (1999), "Job Day" bears no relationship to any of the courses the students take, while Mr. Freeman, the art teacher, routinely violates school policies (especially regarding assessment and grading) but introduces his class as "the only class that will teach you how to survive." Like many other young adult and children's novels, *Speak* assumes its readers will be familiar with a standard high school curriculum—thus references to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and American suffragists can resonate with the protagonist Melinda's situation without explication. By depicting an internal growth—in John Dewey's (1959) words, a "restructuring of experience"—that remains invisible to (most of) the adults responsible for her instruction and development, *Speak* reminds us that education is often self-directed and takes place alongside, rather than through, the standard curriculum.

Dewey's dictum that "[t]he process and the goal of education are one and the same thing" suggests, perhaps, that the divide between liberal and vocational education need not be impassable. Like the literature that represents it and forms a major part of its content, education forms part of an ongoing process of growth and development, always partial, never complete.