

## Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School

Theodore Sizer

Boston:

Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984.

—Reviewed by Daniel Tanner, Professor of Education, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey.

Mind, n. A mysterious form of matter secreted by the brain. Its chief activity consists in the endeavor to ascertain its own nature, the futility of the attempt being due to the fact that it has nothing but itself to know itself with.

—Ambrose Bierce

*The Devil's Dictionary*

It is puzzling that the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) should be the co-sponsor of *Horace's Compromise* (the other co-sponsor is the National Association of Independent Schools) because the author's conceptions of the proper role and function of the American high school, and the nature of learning, are so narrowly focused and steeped in the archaic notions of perennialism.

Theodore Sizer, former headmaster of Phillips Academy-Andover and new chairman of the Department of Education at Brown University, sees the proper focus of the high school as "intellectual training," "developing mental powers," helping students to "exercise their minds." He contends that the curriculum should be delimited to those studies that "provide for the discipline and furniture of the mind" (pp. 84-85, 87). A member of the Paideia Group, Sizer drew his curricular prescriptions—the development of basic skills, the acquisition of organized knowledge (limited to the so-called academic subjects) through didactic instruction, and the enlargement of understanding of ideas and values through Socratic questioning—directly from Mortimer Adler's *Paideia Proposal*. The doctrines of mental discipline and learning transfer implicit in these prescriptions were laid

to rest early in this century by research psychologists, but these doctrines periodically rise from the dead in the writings of perennialists and essentialists.

Sizer characterizes his report as a series of word pictures. His métier is a bizarre admixture of documented references, fictional characters, invented dialogues, contrived situations, and homilies—"nonfiction fiction," as he calls it. His study is based upon his visits to some eighty schools beginning in the summer of 1981 and extending through 1982; his colleagues in the study "concentrated their watching and listening in fifteen schools, eleven public and four private" (p. 7). The book's title refers to Horace Smith, a beleaguered middle-aged English teacher in a suburban high school, who is incessantly compromising his work and concealing his bitterness.

Sizer's report is ridden with contradictions. At one point he criticizes the high school for not treating the student as a "whole person" (p. 82); yet his repeated prescription is for the school to concentrate on the student's "mental furniture" (p. 89). Similarly, he criticizes the schools for "mediocre sameness" (p. 6); then he calls attention to the great "school-by-school differences" (p. 207).

Sizer describes the curriculum as an "academic supermarket"; yet he contradicts this by noting that "most schools specifically mandate three out of every five courses a student selects" and goes on to point out that "nearly all of these mandates fall into five areas—English, social studies, mathematics, science, and physical education" (p. 80).

On the one hand, Sizer states that teaching is treated too "mechanistically," as evidenced by the use of metaphors that derive from the "factory floor" and the "military manual" (p. 3). On the other, he calls for schools to be "engineered" for "efficiency" (p. 217) with "scientific managers" to be "given the task of freshly designing ways and means to become educated" through the creation of needed

"mechanisms" (p. 211).

He calls for the elimination of vocational education on the ground that the students will be better prepared for vocations through the academic studies that stress the use of one's mind (p. 135); yet, one of the three settings he uses in a chapter devoted to describing the work of three outstanding teachers is a ninth-grade vocational class in electricity.

"A political philosophy, essentially that associated with American constitutionalism, is the bedrock of enlightened democratic citizenship," Sizer tells us in stressing the importance of such study in the curriculum (p. 133). Yet, only a few pages earlier, he dismisses the Constitutional principle of church-state separation, which gave us the secular public school, when he states, "By pretending there is a wall between religious issues and their schools, public school people remove themselves from the argument about the ways that religion must properly exist in their schools" (p. 128).

Early in his report, Sizer quotes and endorses Whitehead's attack on "the fatal disconnection of subjects which kills the vitality of our modern curriculum" and Whitehead's view that "there is only one subject-matter for education, and that is Life in all of its manifestations" (p. 114). But Sizer's proposed curriculum is narrowly "academic."

According to Sizer, the comprehensive high school must be replaced by a selective high school concentrated on the uses of the mind. In his words, "high schools cannot be comprehensive and should not try to be comprehensive; there are some aspects of an adolescent's life in which a school has no right to intrude, and helping students to use their minds is a large enough assignment, in any case" (p. 216). This view of the high school harks back to the nineteenth century. Then, the high schools served a small, privileged population. Elementary education was provided for the masses, who needed grounding in the basics in order to become efficient workers in the factories. According to Sizer,

Compulsory attendance in an educational institution should cease when a young citizen demonstrates mastery of the minima, and most young citizens should master these minima before senior high school. As a result, schooling for most adolescents would be voluntary. Few would be compelled to attend high school, though a prudent state would vigorously encourage it. High school would be an opportunity, not an obligation (p. 88).

Apparently, the aphorism, "less is more," is to be applied not only to the curriculum (p. 89), but also to the population to be served by the American high school.

Sizer's call for the elimination of vocational education in the high school echoes many of the reports issued in 1983 and 84 on reforming the American high school. Unfortunately, the establishment of segregated, specialized vocational high schools and shared-time vocational schools since the 60s and 70s has undermined the function of the comprehensive high school and has made it more vulnerable to criticism. As vocational education is removed from the mainstream structure, the high school becomes debilitated, and critics like Sizer are in a position to point to the failure of the comprehensive high school and call for its total elimination.

"Much teaching in high school is abysmal," Sizer tells us. "While some of this clearly is due to teachers' incompetence, insensitivity, and carelessness, some also flows from the conditions of work—giving rise to Horace's compromise" (p. 195). He advocates greater teacher autonomy, a reduction in teacher load (to 80 students daily instead of the 120–150 commonly the case today), a more steeply scaled salary schedule, and added variety in the teacher's career by mixing teaching with counseling, curriculum development, and supervision. In recommending the reduction of the teacher-student ratio, he suggests that "the narrow-disciplinary specializations of teachers can be broken down; perhaps it would be better if Horace taught English and social studies to 60 students than just English

to 120 different young people" (p. 197).

These recommendations resemble some of those offered by Conant a quarter of a century ago. Conant recommended that English teachers be responsible for no more than 100 pupils so that they could concentrate half of the time in English class to theme writing and, further, that block-time English and social studies classes be instituted in the junior high school to enable the teacher to spend more time with the students each day and to perform a guidance function. Unfortunately, block-time teaching did not and will not automatically result in curriculum correlation, fusion, or synthesis. Similarly, reduced teacher-pupil ratios will not automatically result in more personalized attention to students and the enrichment of classroom learning. Curriculum articulation and personalized teaching require concerted commitment and expertise on the part of teachers and administrators. Programs of teacher education and school administration give little consideration to the macro-curriculum and the need for horizontal curriculum articulation. As a result, teachers and administrators fail to see the school curriculum as a whole; and students are unable to relate the various subjects to one another and to their lives. But this is another story, for which there can be no compromise—not even by Horace.

The subtitle of this important book is *The Dilemma of the American High School*. Unfortunately, Sizer provides little insight into the "dilemma" and the means of its solution. His refrain, "less is more," would appear to leave us with less—a lot less.

#### References

- Adler, Mortimer. *The Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto*. New York: Macmillan, 1983.
- Conant, James B. *The American High School Today*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959.
- Conant, James B. *Education in the Jun-*

*ior High School Years*. Princeton, N.J.: Educational Testing Service, 1960.

Tanner, Daniel. "The American High School at the Crossroads." *Educational Leadership* 41 (March 1984): 4–13.

\* \* \*

—Reviewed by Lucien Ellington, University of Tennessee, Chattanooga.

In this modern day fable, Theodore Sizer illustrates the troubles of American high schools through the daily compromises of "Horace," a fictional middle-aged high school teacher. What are Horace's compromises? With 120 students he has little time to give attention to individual student writing or thinking; with p. a system interruptions, students wandering in and out, and classes dismissed for school talent shows, he gamely attempts to keep an intellectual dialogue alive. At the same time, his low salary forces him to use valuable time every day to work a second job. In short, the moral of *Horace* is that even when a teacher tries to do a good job, the structure of the typical high school is not conducive to high quality intellectual activity.

According to Sizer, the typical secondary classroom is boring. Teachers pay lip service to critical thinking while actual classroom activities end up, more often than not, as low level rote learning. Students complete courses by receiving "credits" for spending time in classes; rarely are they required to demonstrate any comprehensive understanding of academics. The result of all this is that high school graduates collect fragments of facts about "things," but have little in-depth knowledge of subject matter or of the relationship between schooling and the outside world.

Sizer offers a number of solutions to these problems. The most promising proposals focus building incentives into the education profession that will improve the general quality of high school teaching. He argues that drastic changes are needed. Salaries must be increased. Class loads for all teachers must be reduced. Sizer also contends that if we want teachers to approach

# Reviews

their craft in an intelligent and deliberate way there must be time for teacher education leaves, nonteaching educational work, and regular interaction with colleagues. He also urges that the Carnegie Unit system be replaced with mastery learning, whereby students would not pass courses until they could demonstrate a true understanding of the subject. The high school curriculum should be reduced to communications, literature and the arts, mathematics and science, and philosophy and history. A reduction in educational bureaucracy would make teachers and schools more responsible for decision making.

What Sizer is really calling for in *Horace's Compromise* is a wholesale restructuring of our educational system with the specific goal of making high schools more intellectually active than ever before. While several of the author's suggestions are questionable, particularly the call for a basic narrow curriculum, few thoughtful people who have spent extensive time in high schools will disagree with Sizer's portrait: the typical high school seems at times designed to *prevent* thoughtful teaching and learning.

Available from Houghton-Mifflin Company, 2 Park Street, Boston, MA 02107 for \$16.95.

---

## Educational Research and Policy:

### How Do They Relate?

*Edited by Torsten Husen and Maurice Kogan*  
New York:

Pergamon Press, Inc., 1984.

—Reviewed by Bill Morrison, Professor of Education, Central Connecticut University, New Britain, Connecticut.

What is the relationship between educational research and education policy? How do their respective interests reflect the interaction, tension, and disjunction generated by both? These and other issues are discussed at various levels and from an international perspective that includes mod-

els, research, and analysis from the United States, Germany, France, and Sweden.

The highly specialized nature of these readings may dissuade educators from reading it, but the loss will be theirs; for this book makes a significant contribution to the fields of educational research and policy.

Available from Pergamon Press, Inc., Maxwell House, Fairview Park, Elmsford, NY 10523.

---

## Ideology & Practice in Schooling

*Edited by Michael W. Apple and Lois Weis*  
Philadelphia:  
Temple University Press, 1983.

—Reviewed by William Schubert, University of Illinois, College of Education, Chicago, Illinois.

In his more critical philosophical writings Apple continually reminds curriculum scholars that knowledge reproduced by schools for succeeding generations perpetuates the inequities that prevail in society. In *Ideology & Practice in Schooling*, he and Lois Weis provide practice-oriented interpretations of the powerful role that ideology plays in schools. The articles by Apple, his colleagues, and former students raise important questions about the school's treatment of gender, race, and socio-economic class. Such diverse topics as textbook content, children's literature, aesthetics curriculum, classroom management, teachers and school structure, business education, and play are studied in-depth. Such diversity is given cohesiveness by consistent attention to the problem of how knowledge should be and is reproduced in schools and the resistance and contestation with which students and teachers respond to it.

It is difficult to read this book without recognizing the need for curriculum leaders and teachers to carefully consider the impact of their attitudes on race, gender, and class on the economic, political, and cultural state

of society and the experience of living within it.

Available from Temple University Press, Broad and Oxford Streets, Philadelphia, PA 19122 for \$34.95 cloth and \$12.95 paper.

---

## Against Mediocrity: The Humanities in America's High Schools

*Edited by Chester E. Finn Jr., Diane Ravitch, and Robert Fancher*  
New York:

Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc., 1984.

—Reviewed by Francis Roberts, Cold Spring Harbor, New York, Schools.

The Commission on Excellence warned us to beware a rising tide of mediocrity, but its general recommendations left most school leaders without paddles. *Against Mediocrity* offers, for the humanities at least, a specific and provocative set of reform proposals to reverse the tide. By the humanities, it is important to note, the editors emphatically do not mean humanistic education; they mean history, foreign languages, literature, and English.

The book consists of 15 generally lively essays developed for a series of conferences directed by the editors and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The common thread, a hawser really, is the goal of more scholarly teaching of humanities courses. The various essays examine each subject field, as well as such common ground as teacher preparation and the role of state officialdom. John Casteen, Virginia Secretary of State, for example, calls for "radical reform of the internal management" of schools by making teachers more responsible for setting standards and judging colleagues, something that has always been the model in higher education, but which has been resisted at the pre-collegiate level by administrators and unions alike.

Most of the book is not about educational practices or structures, however. Its focus is on academic content,

and except for an occasional but predictable whack at educationists and colleges of education, the essays do a nice job of correcting the imbalance between academic content and educational processes. For example, though many social studies proponents will cinch up at the proposals by Keller to get history back at center stage, his case is a strong one especially when he acknowledges that even the discipline of history in the 60s and 70s became "a baffling concentration of mini courses." Similarly provocative is Leon Botstein's demand that more attention be devoted to a language-centered curriculum, involving far more reading and writing than he sees evident in today's schools.

Gilbert Sewell extends the call for more history in his chapter, "The Diminished Past." Bob Fancher of Vanderbilt University says the task of the English curriculum is to "educate the imagination," arguing that the literature curriculum be organized around "crucial themes that animate human life in our culture," while concentrating on close, active reading of literary texts. Carlos Hortas calls for a long-range program that would start foreign languages in elementary schools and lead to language competence for all students, not just the college bound. Peter Pouncey, President of Amherst College, offers an excellent essay on the "Intellectual Lives of Teachers," which in many ways captures the central theme of the book: that teachers need better preparation and continued education in the liberal arts and in their teaching fields. Finally, Maine Superintendent Peter Greer pulls practicing school leaders up by the neck, asking us if we even have the nerve for serious reform of teaching in English, history, and languages; he charges that at the humanities rifle range "most of the time we are firing blank bullets, and we know it." To extend Greer's metaphor, this is a good book for a faculty to read together, and then fight about.

Available from Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc., 30 Irving Place, New York, NY 10003.

## Supervision for Today's Schools (Second Edition)

Peter F. Oliva

New York:

Longman, Inc., 1984.

—Reviewed by Sam Wiggins, Cleveland State University, Cleveland, Ohio

Oliva delivers a good national and historical perspective of the present education scene. Fortunately, he spares us a series of reviews on the spate of 1983 reports on American schools with which most readers, by this time, are a bit weary. He deals, instead, with substantive principles and issues that should help supervisors to make constructive changes.

His writing style is sometimes a bit stilted, for example, "It is axiomatic that supervisors will be evaluated by

their superiors in the educational hierarchy." Yet, Oliva has clearly done his homework, both from the review of literature and from field work in diverse school districts. He is at his best in the major sections on the leadership role in developing curriculum and improving instruction. More explicit attention is needed on implementing the curriculum, especially regarding competency based education. After 600 pages, however, most readers will feel they've "had the course." Despite minor drawbacks, this is a valuable reference, especially for the neophyte, for whom it is primarily intended. It is recommended, as well, for the veteran supervisor as an up-to-date source book.

Available from Longman, Inc., 1560 Broadway, New York, NY 10036.

### Interested in Thinking Skills? Join the ASCD Network

If your school system has developed, or is planning, a thinking skills program, you may wish to join the ASCD-sponsored network. A small fee will probably be charged eventually to cover the cost of publishing a newsletter. Write to:

Dr. John Barell, Associate Professor  
Montclair State College  
Montclair, New Jersey 07043.

### Index to Advertisers

Charles C Thomas-Publisher	47
CTB/McGraw-Hill	22, 79
Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers	93
Learning House Publishers	Cover 2
McDougal, Littell & Co.	17
National/State Leadership Training Institute on the Gifted and the Talented	48, 49
Silver Burdett	Cover 4
Teacher Effectiveness Associates	10, 62
Teachers College Press	85

Copyright © 1984 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.