CHAPTER 2

Education in the Early Revolutionary and Early National Periods (1776–ca. 1820s)

Abstract This chapter begins with the philosophical examination of idealist and realist origins before detailing the educational founding fathers and beginnings of federal and state support. It argues that the work of Jefferson, Webster, and others was significant in providing the blueprint for our contemporary system of public schools. It concludes with a discussion on the educational legacies of this period and recommendations for further reading.

Keywords Idealist • Realist • Dialectic • Thesis • Antithesis • Synthesis • Tabula rasa • Aristotle • Federalist • Anti-Federalist • Constitutionalist • Noah Webster • Thomas Jefferson • Manifest destiny • Infant schools • Benjamin Franklin

As the 13 colonies were dragged, in some cases kicking and screaming, toward eventual independence, the spirit of revolutionary fervor that swept the country took the schools in its wake. Revolutionary thinkers (who became our founding fathers) began to realize the value of a system of public schooling in our new nation. It was during this era that people began to realize the fate of the nation and the fate of its schools were inextricably intertwined.

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What Were the Philosophical Roots of This Period?

- **Key terms**: Idealist, realist, dialectic, thesis, antithesis, synthesis, tabula rasa
- **Key figures**: Aristotle

English schooling was directly influenced by thinkers from the Enlightenment and Reformation periods; however, as the revolution took place, the nation's thinkers returned to those that inspired Enlightenment thinkers. Philosophically they went back to the roots (the colonial version of going "old school," as it were) to the **idealists** and **realists**.

To an idealist, there exists an absolute state of perfection for everything in the universe; however, there is nothing in this world that achieves true perfection (including ourselves). Since humanity is flawed, we can never truly know what is "really" real. Platonic idealists believe we come to know through a **dialectic** (known as Platonic dialectic)—a process in which two or more people holding different points of view work toward establishing a truth through reasoned argument. Later thinkers came to encompass a more systematic dialectic (known as Hegelian dialectic): we start with an idea, known as our **thesis**; we develop a reaction to it that is in opposition to our belief, known as its **antithesis**; through reasoned debate and discussion, we bring those two concepts together and form a new belief, known as **synthesis**. This new belief—this synthesis—becomes our new thesis, and the process begins all over again.

To idealists, it is this ability to reason—to encounter antitheses and rationally debate them—that defines humanity. It is the dialectic that moves us closer to the ideal states in the universe. It is those who engage with this process most fully who should become our leaders; we should elect the equivalent of "philosopher kings" rather than people who are most like us. Contemporary idealists lament the loss of the dialectic. Modern mainstream media tends to air extremist views from both sides of the sociopolitical spectrum; it seems personalities who either choose to ignore, or lack the ability to engage in, the dialectic become popular while rational thinkers are pushed out of the way or shouted down. Indeed, watching either of the major 24-hour news channels or reading the comments section on any internet article would make Plato weep.

Due to a variety of reasons, there emerged a schism amongst the idealists of Athens. A new thinker, **Aristotle**, founded his own academy that focused on a philosophy almost directly opposite that of the idealists:

realism. To a realist, there wasn't some vague, undefinable, unknowable ideal existing in the universe; what is real is what can be sensed. We are all born **tabula rasa**—blank slates—and it is our job to try and fill our slates with as wide a set of experiences as possible. This notion places a heavy burden on teachers, particularly those in early childhood; carve inaccurate information onto the blank slates that are students and they're marred for life.

It was the quest to fill the tabula rasa with as much as possible that drove one of Aristotle's most famous students, Alexander the Great. It was also this dichotomous set of beliefs—striving to find universal perfection, but simultaneously sensing and experiencing as much as possible to fill our slates—that inspired our founding fathers, pre- and post-Revolution.

Who Were the Educational Founding Fathers?

- **Key terms**: Federalist, anti-Federalist, constitutionalist
- **Key figures**: Noah Webster, Thomas Jefferson

Noah Webster was one of the first to fully realize how close is the relationship between schooling and revolution. Granted, most contemporary readers are more familiar with Webster in terms of the dictionary. Webster earnestly believed if we were to be a truly independent nation from England, we needed an independent language. To this end, he wrote what would become Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language* (today known as *Webster's American Heritage Dictionary*)—a book that set him in direct opposition to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The linguistic differences were subtle, but the usages called for by Webster were markedly different.

From a political standpoint, Webster understood that if the new nation was going to last, its people must have a shared language for use in its popular sovereignty; it must develop a shared culture to unite the disparate colonies. He knew that a new language needed to be diffused among its people. Having worked as a teacher to support himself through law school (and unhappy with the European dominated pedagogies and curriculum), Webster recognized that the schools were the key to forming and perpetuating a national identity. Accordingly, he designed a three volume compendium, titled *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language*, for use in multiple levels of schooling. Webster's "Blue-Back Spellers" infused not only the American dialect but a patriotic fervor in the youth of

the nation; for example, the title page of one of the volumes included the following: "Begin with the infant in its cradle. Let the first word he lisps be Washington."[1]

Webster was not alone amongst the founding fathers to appreciate the potential valuable role schools could play in our nation. During the Revolutionary and Early National eras, another purpose of schooling was added: political. The schools were seen as one tool amongst many to use in nation building. Many citizens of the new Republic recognize the fact that the schools were essential for our new nation, unfortunately, that was about the only thing on which they could agree.

After the Revolution, there was a political split among many of the US leaders. Two main camps formed: **Federalists**, who believed in a strong central government that united multiple states, and **Anti-Federalists**, who opposed a strong central government in favor of empowering the states (to the point of opposing the Constitution). **Thomas Jefferson** emerged from the Revolution as one of the most staunch Anti-Federalists in the new nation. However, Jefferson was also one of the most ardent supporters of education; the philosophically idealist Jefferson believed wholeheartedly that a natural aristocracy was better than hereditary or pecuniary aristocracy, that men should rise to positions of power based on ability, not money; he supported the idealist notion of philosopher kings.

In his attempt at getting the new nation—or at least one state of the new nation—on board with this idea, Jefferson thrice proposed the *Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge* to the Virginia state legislature, and thrice it was defeated. In spite of never being implemented, elements of Jefferson's design provided the blueprint for what would become public school system across the United States. Jefferson's visionary plan divided the state of Virginia into 20 districts (the origins of contemporary politically drawn school districts). Within each district were hundreds of town-supported petty schools. Attendance at these schools for the first three years was free, followed by a set of testing. The best and brightest continued on via scholarship; the remainders were able to attend paying tuition (Fig. 2.1).

From there, Jefferson designated that each district would have a residential grammar school. These schools had a six-year course of study; one student out of every 10 (the highest achieving) coming out of the petty schools got scholarships. After each of the first three years, students would be assessed with the bottom third being sent home each year. Jefferson called this "raking the rubbish"; today we call it high-stakes testing.

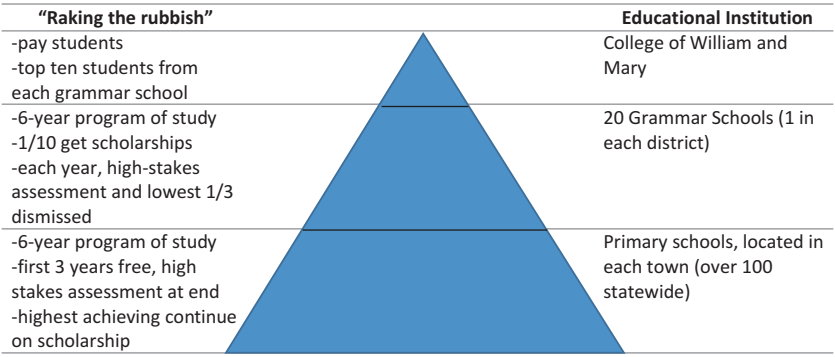

Fig. 2.1 Jefferson's model of schooling presented in the *Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge*

At the end of a six-year period of grammar school study, the top 10 scholars from each of the 20 grammar schools were to attend university at William and Mary tuition free; others could attend who could afford to pay the tuition. However, when William and Mary refused participate in any type of state-sponsored admissions, Jefferson founded a "Harvard of the common person," the University of Virginia. Jefferson's higher education project inspired all states to found systems of their own. From the University of Maine, to the State University of New York system, to the University of California system, universities founded upon Jefferson's vision have become some of the nation's best.

Jefferson had two aims when proposing his Bill. First, Jefferson recognized that an intelligent, literate populace was essential to the nation, and thus wanted to ensure the literacy of the general population. If the masses (and by masses it is meant landowning white males in Jefferson's time) were to be allowed to vote, the masses had to be well-educated enough to make sound decisions. Second, Jefferson wanted to use the public schools as a means of identifying and training future philosopher kings, knowing that the best and brightest might come from all populations, not just the wealthy elite.

The Virginia State Legislature saw it a little bit differently and voted for the bill down three times in 1779, 1790, and 1817. The reasons they voted against it were many. The bill would require taxation to support this school; then, as now, no politician wanted to be the one to raise taxes. With revolutionary fervor still fresh, the idea of centralizing state authority was abhorrent to many who cherished localism. More philosophically,

many argued that while the revolution was political, education was ultimately a social issue—and therefore, no place for the government to get involved. Predictably, but no less sadly, many of the privileged class that was the Virginia state legislature—white, male, and wealthy—were adamantly against mixing classes. This same group was also doubtful of the value of the American commoner. Then, as now, members of the elite classes were quite happy doing whatever they could to ensure they remain class divisions someone to tread upon, socially and intellectually.

While Jefferson initially was an Anti-Federalist, after taking office as president he "softened" into a strict **Constitutionalist**, someone who believed that the federal government is limited in its powers by the Constitution and that its legitimacy lies in strict adherence to those limits. It was under this guise that in his sixth presidential address, delivered December 2, 1806, Jefferson argued for a constitutional amendment creating a nationalized system of schools:

> Education is here placed among the articles of public care, not that it would be proposed to take its ordinary branches out of the hands of private enterprise, which manages so much better all the concerns to which it is equal; but a public institution can alone supply those sciences which, though rarely called for, are yet necessary to complete the circle, all the parts of which contribute to the improvement of the country, and some of them to its preservation. The subject is now proposed for the consideration of Congress … I propose an amendment to the constitution, by consent of the states, necessary, because the objects now recommended are not among those enumerated in the constitution, and to which it permits the public moneys to be applied.[2]

However, he ended his call with the simple admonition that educational funding "would have the advantage of being independent on war, which may suspend other improvements by requiring for its own purposes the resources destined for them."[3] If only recent federal governments recognized that nothing should supersede educational funding in the United States.

What Were the Beginnings of Federal and State Support?

- **Key terms**: manifest destiny, infant schools
- **Key figures**: Benjamin Franklin

Federal intervention in the schools started before the new nation had fully formed. Two years prior to ratifying the Constitution, the Congress of the Confederation passed the Land Ordinance of 1785 which divided all new lands into townships of 6 square miles. Each of these was subdivided into 36 sections of 1 mile each, every 16th of which was set aside for the support of the schools. This was followed by the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, passed after ratification of the federal government as we know it today, which maintained the provisions of the Land Ordinance of 1785 and extended these provisions to territories before achieving statehood, providing the land grants for schools. The culmination of these bills effectively tied together religion, education, morality, and progress in the minds of American citizens for years to come.

States were not to let the federal government trump them in terms of public school support. Massachusetts passed the first state law (in 1789) supporting schools. It authorized towns to create district schools, updating the *Old Deluder Satan Act*. Towns of 50 or more families had to create an elementary school, while towns with 200 or more families had to create both in elementary and a grammar school. New York and Connecticut both began allocating state funds in 1795 to support schools. The New York plan annually set aside a portion of tax revenues to local school committees who in turn provided direct financial assistance to the public schools. The Connecticut plan provided a larger sum set aside from land claims (more than any other state) to this same end. These funds established a permanent school fund and subsidized teacher salaries. Interestingly enough, even though states were funding schools, they did not at that time choose to regulate the schools—such tight oversight and general mistrust would not happen until the twentieth century.

Unfortunately, it wasn't only funding in which that the federal government chose to involve itself. The 1790 Naturalization Act denied citizenship to Native Americans, Africans and African-Americans, Asians and Asian-Americans, and Hispanics and Hispanic-Americans. In fact, if you weren't of European stock (or even if you were a bit too Spanish), you were not considered a citizen, no matter how long you had been in the United States. This act set up a dichotomous social structure—you were a citizen (read: white), or you weren't (read: everyone else). In 1819, the federal government passed the Civilization Act. Originally seen as simply an experiment, this act truly reflected the power most people believed schooling to have—particularly as a means of cultural transformation. This was the act that created dormitory schools particularly for American

Indians in the hopes of "civilizing" them into proto-European beliefs (such as racism, homophobia, sexism, and environmental waste).

Not every member of white society bought into such discriminatory notions—there was resistance almost from the outset. The Quakers, particularly, became strong opponents of governmental discrimination. From 1770 to 1810, the African Free School Society was established, providing funds and teachers to schools devoted to teaching the children of slaves and freedmen. The year 1775 saw the creation of the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery, a movement that spread widely across New York into the New England states.

The Jesuit spirit of religious salvation via deculturalization spread to the Protestants in the aftermath of the revolution. In 1810, the American Board of Commissioners to Foreign Missions (ABCFM) formed amongst the Presbyterian and Congregationalist faiths. These groups sent missionaries to the newly forming reservations in attempts to spread their faith. In a strange fusion of politics and religion, the ABCFM used **manifest destiny**—the belief that America was destined to spread from coast to coast, used to justify the annexation of Texas and war with Mexico—to justify its actions.

What Were the Sources and Purposes of Schooling?

The types of schools in the Colonial and Early National periods remained essentially the same, with marked differentiation between the New England, Middle, and Southern colonies. There were two differences that emerged during this period: the first, an invention of Robert Allen, was the creation of **infant schools**. The reason behind infant schools was somewhat insidious: many leading citizens believed that the poorer members of society were incapable of raising their children properly, thus the children needed to be sent to school to save them from their families. This line of thinking is similar to the **deficit model** of viewing other cultures today. A second difference that came about during this period was that the people began to form politicized districts. Citizens of the states divided themselves up along geographic lines and taxed themselves to support their local petty schools, further blending today's concepts of public and private schools.

Schooling began to become systematized during this period. With the rise of state funding and taxpayer assistance to the schools came the beginnings of the rumblings of public control and regulation over the public

schools. Teachers were part time and itinerant; with the belief of "spare the rod, spoil the child," most of these itinerant teachers were male. The principal "motivator" for students was corporal punishment, which was considered appropriate as the majority of students in the colonial schools were male. There were a wide variety of means of corporal punishment during this time ranging from fairly tame (admonishing students verbally, keeping them after school, making them read a proclamation before the school announcing what they had done wrong and apologizing) to humiliating (students being forced into a cradle in front of the school and rocked throughout the day like a baby, forcing them to spend the day resting on a pillow instead of participating, locking them in a suspended basket in front of the school) to cruel and abusive (forcing students to drink spoonsful of hot tea, locking them underneath a hen coop for the day so they become covered in chicken waste, locking them in shackles, beating them with a rod).

The purposes of the schools expanded with the Early National period as well to include a blatantly political purpose. Schools in the early republic were charged with nation building: the newly independent nation wanted its own language, culture, literature, and tradition, and looked to the schools to create and perpetuate these. Just as to the Puritans it was essential that women were educated in order to teach their children in the house, so too did citizens of the new Republic believe girls should be educated in order that they were able to produce good citizens. Of course, educating women to *become* citizens in their own right was still 150 years away. Politicians realized how tenuous a fledgling democracy could be and wanted schools to help inoculate against corruption and tyranny. Furthering the notion of producing good citizens, the beginnings of a social purpose were in their infancy, as many believed schools could save children from unsatisfactory home influences.

The economic purpose was expanded as well: schools were now expected to get orphans removed from street life. Universities were still mainly training students in theology and the law, but the schools began to absorb some of the vocational responsibilities hitherto left to apprenticeships, beginning by adding science and engineering to the curriculum. **Benjamin Franklin** is considered by many to be the most visionary of the period. Recognizing that more and more students deserved a public school education, he helped open an academy in Philadelphia in 1751 that focused on life and work skills in addition to academics; his model would slowly spread throughout the young nation.

Of course none of these purposes could be fulfilled without a healthy dose of morality, which came from the still-present religious purpose. While not quite as gloom-and-doom, hellfire-and-brimstone as the Jonathan Edwards-inspired *New England Primer*, Webster's "Blue-Back Spellers" still contained lessons taken directly from scripture and reinforced the same puritanical notions of hard work and devotion.

What Are the Educational Legacies of This Period?

The legacies of this era are plentiful. The purposes of education were expanded to include political and social. The beginnings of state funding emerged and with them the beginnings of state control. State control, of course, begets standardization of materials and curriculum. The district structure came about: they were titled "districts" in rural areas, "wards" in urban. Toward the end of the period, grammar schools and academies were displaced in Boston, Massachusetts by a new invention known as the "high school."

The perceived importance of schooling was one of the greatest legacies: the general public began to believe that the public schools were essential to the very foundations of the nation, and education became interwoven with democracy, for better and for worse. In Massachusetts, a lawyer was churning this over in his mind and wondering just how effective the schools could be in not only creating, but preserving, the nation as a whole. Horace Mann would soon become state superintendent of public instruction in Massachusetts, changing the face of schooling in this country.

"Going Old School": For Further Reading

There are a great number of works that helped shape the information shared in this chapter that came together over years of teaching and reading. Many of these works are worth reading in their own right. What follows is a list of recommended works that both shaped the content of this chapter and extend it.

Before *Hamilton: The Musical* presented our founding fathers in a humanizing light, H.W. Brands' article "Founders Chic: Our Reverence for the Fathers has Gotten Out of Hand"[4] attempted much the same (minus the hip-hop references). We tend to ascribe sainthood upon the founding fathers of this nation; Brands' article complicates the fascination, and near reverence, many Americans have for the founding fathers of the

nation. It presents them as complicated men who made mistakes in an attempt to debunk much of the sainthood ascribed to them. It is a good read to fully appreciate the tone of this book.

The Quakers were profoundly influential during the nascent years of our nation's history, yet a thorough history of the faith is hard to find. Howard Brinton's work *Friends for 350 Years: The History and Beliefs of the Society of Friends Since George Fox Started the Quaker Movement*[5] helps fill this gap. Difficult to find as it was essentially self-published, this serves as a well-received overview of the history and influence of the Quaker movement in the United States. It balances teaching the core beliefs of the faith as well as the various social movements with which they were associated.

"The Promise of the American Revolution: 1776–1826," Part I of Freeman Butt's *Public Education in the United States: From Revolution to Reform*,[6] explores schooling in the early national period through the lenses of class and politics, Loyalists versus Patriots. Across three chapters, in theme and structure, he contrasts the goals of schooling (uniting the new nation, forming a national identity) with the diversity of the population (poor, multiple religions, slavery versus anti-slavery, regional differences). He points out the beginnings of capitalist influence on schooling and notes the shortcomings of schooling for African-Americans.

Very often the early philosophical schools of thought are seen as being too disconnected from our current society to be of any worth; many works exploring the early Western philosophies are written as academic texts, not overly readable by a general audience. Thomas Cathcart and Daniel Klein, two sitcom writers, took the challenge and produced *Plato and a Platypus Walk Into a Bar … Understanding Philosophy Through Jokes*,[7] which encapsulates the more universal and profound aspects of European philosophy in an easy-to-read, understandable fashion. While the founding fathers studied Aristotle and Plato, this thumbnail/armchair guide will serve as an entrée to their thinking for most contemporary readers.

Based on three lectures delivered at the University of California, James Conant's *Thomas Jefferson and the Development of Public Education*[8] presents a good introduction to Thomas Jefferson as a thinker in education as well as many of Jefferson's writings on the topic. The main text is broken out into three chapters that detail Jefferson's innovative thinking in education, the mixed reaction to his proposals, and Jefferson's relevance in the twentieth century. The book also includes a large number of appendices of Jefferson's writings on education for those who like to go to the

original sources; included are the full text of the *Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge* and Jefferson's 1806 address to Congress referenced in this chapter, as well as correspondence with other founding fathers.

Part II of his school trilogy, Lawrence Cremin's *American Education: The National Experience, 1783–1876*[9] presents a fascinating, detailed portrait of schooling in the time of the nation's emergence. Cremin clearly shows the link between building our new republic and building our nation's schools. He does an excellent job exploring the evolution of the nation from what was essentially a theocracy to a republic and the role that schools played in this evolution: schooling should foster the prioritization of public good over private interest, should produce citizens who practice independence while maintaining a coherent American identity, and should address how to improve the human condition. It makes for an interesting debate whether today's schools still fulfill these missions as evidenced by rhetoric in our current society.

While a work of fiction, Jostien Gaarder's *Sophie's World: A Novel About the History of Philosophy*[10] is one of the best introductions to philosophical thought available. The plot involves a mystery surrounding a series of letters written to the teenage protagonist of the story, Sophie. The letters, coming from a mystery mentor, introduce Sophie to many of the Western schools of philosophy, from the ancient Greeks to Marx, Darwin, and Freud, and soon evolve into a series of conversations regarding these schools. The book, intended for an adolescent audience, is eminently readable—it is often used in introduction to philosophy courses because of its balance between accuracy and readability.

Part biography, part history, Joshua Kendall's *The Forgotten Founding Father: Noah Webster's Obsession and the Creation of an American Culture*[11] is a thorough, balanced examination of the complicated figure that was Noah Webster. It details his relationship with George Washington, the difficulties with early drafts of his dictionary, and its less-than-favorable initial reviews. Kendall does a good job of pointing out Webster's role in getting citizens of the new nation to see themselves as Americans rather than English, particularly through the books written for use in American schools and Webster's decades-long work on the *American Dictionary of the English Language*.

In the immediate aftermath of the Revolution, the debate about slavery took on an added import—as did how to incorporate free Blacks into society. John Rury's article "Philanthropy, Self Help, and Social Control: The

New York Manumission Society and Free Blacks 1785–1810"[12] looks at the Manumission Society's efforts both as anti-slavery crusaders as well as providing education to the free Blacks of New York. The article details the paternalistic nature of the Society's efforts as a tool for social control and the mixed response of the Black community—both acceptance and resistance to the Society's efforts.

Notes

1. Noah Webster, *An American Selection of Lessons in Reading and Speaking, Being the Third Part of the Grammatical Institute of the English Language* (Newport: Peter Edes, 1789), n.p.
2. Thomas Jefferson, "Extract from President Jefferson's Sixth Annual Message," in James Conant, *Thomas Jefferson and the Development of American Public Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 106.
3. Ibid.
4. H.W. Brands, "Founders Chic: Our Reverence for the Fathers has Gotten Out of Hand," *The Atlantic Monthly* 292, no. 2 (2003): 101–110.
5. Howard Brinton, *Friends for 350 Years: The History and Beliefs of the Society of Friends Since George Fox Started the Quaker Movement* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 2002).
6. Freeman Butts, "The Promise of the American Revolution: 1776–1826," *Public Education in the United States: From Revolution to Reform* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978)
7. Thomas Cathcart and Daniel Klien, *Plato and a Platypus Walk Into a Bar … Understanding Philosophy Through Jokes* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008).
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12. John Rury, "Philanthropy, Self Help, and Social Control: The New York Manumission Society and Free Blacks 1785–1810," *Phylon* 46, no. 3 (1985): 231–241.