Educating for What? The Struggle for Democracy in Education[1]

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Making speeches, like teaching, is always an act I come to nervously, hoping perhaps that I'll "break a leg"—literally—and thus not have to get up there and perform. I had many chances on my way out here today; yet, here I am, alive and well. Public performances, even at their best, are also a reminder that even a standing ovation and loud applause are not proof that the message one had in mind has been heard.

I was reminded of this some years ago when a member of the audience came up to me after a well-received speech to tell me that I had changed her life. "I'll never again worry about what kind of shoes I have to wear on public occasions," she said. Indeed, I was wearing New Balance sneakers along with my fancy speech-making dress. It was a startling acknowledgment of an unexpected sphere of influence. In many ways it was an impact as great as any I have had on a single member of an audience, given how much many of us have suffered by wearing the wrong shoes. Never underestimate those ways in which one influences! As such, the "education of the shoes" is not a bad metaphor for teaching itself. Since we so rarely ask ourselves what purpose the relentlessly long years of education are intended to serve, almost any impact of consequence is welcome.

The Purpose of Education?

When I first began teaching kindergarten I grew curious about what the kids thought it was all about. I noticed that when parents came to collect their children at the end of the school day, the first words out of their mouths were: "Were you good today"? It was therefore not surprising that the kids readily answered my question about kindergarten with the following assorted answers: "To learn to raise your hand," "to take your turn," "to line up," "to be quiet when the teacher is talking." In short, being good. Hardly the most exciting reasons for coming to school, but a good match with what we, as teachers, signaled in our conversations with children and their families. Fortunately a few children finally chimed in with

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"reading." My heart leapt with enthusiasm. "And why is it important to learn to read," I asked? "So you won't get left back at the end of the year," virtually all answered. "And once you do get promoted, can you stop reading" I pushed on. "No, because if you get promoted to first grade, then comes second"— and on and on they went, through high school and, for some, beyond. The children, at that young age, were already aware that one needed to read in order to do well in school. "So," I continued, "When you finally get *out* of school can you stop reading at last?" They mostly responded "Yes," but one child persisted with uncanny foresight: "No, she said, "because if you get married and have a child you'd need to read to him so he wouldn't get held over!" These appear to be the dominant messages that many young children internalize about the purpose of their schooling. But do we, as adults, have better answers?

Rarely do we ask ourselves how much we have unintentionally silenced the playground intellectuals, who come to us as four- and five-year-olds. What could we say that is so important that it justifies our incarcerating kids for 12 to 16 years? Schooling is a legally enforced removal of one's personal liberty for five to six hours a day for 185 days each year! Why have we made lively, vital children sit still in our classrooms for 16 years no matter what their inclinations? What do we hope to "pass on," as one generation to the next that allows us to infringe so deeply on children's basic rights? And, how realistic is it to imagine that most children would enlist in the task of being schooled voluntarily, with enthusiasm and eagerness—and, most importantly, can "it" be taught well?

The question of education's purpose is a central question of our time. There are good reasons for universal, involuntary schooling, but we rarely address them. After all, even though children and youth are a captive audience, they do have the one power that human beings always have in the end — the power to resist. The power of resistance is a power that I honor; and one, I fear, schools distort rather than celebrate. In our current school culture most view resistance—by teachers and kids—as a wholly undesirable trait. As educators, we see our task as developing "a system" to devise foolproof methods to undermine resistance. We have enlisted the help of modern technology in this ignoble cause, creating surveillance technologies replete with hidden cameras, locker searches, strip searches, and police patrols roaming the corridors, and relentlessly excluding those who resist. Such forms of surveillance undermine the fundamental relationships between adults and children, and distort the complicated nature of trust as it pertains to schooling. Good schools are safe schools and if we are going to reimagine and reinvent schools, that task requires the reinvention of a democratic adult culture that mirrors the one we should reinvent for children so that their voices are listened to, respected, and taken seriously.

Public Trust in Education

Proponents of "standards-based" school reform argue that the way to restore public trust in education is through test-based accountability; and that such high-stakes testing is the route to effective school reform. Better test scores have come to be equated with what it means to be well educated, to work in more rewarding jobs, and ultimately, to contribute to a stronger economy. Of course, large gaps exist between the performance of U.S. students and those of other countries, with the United States ranking 25th out of 30 Organization for Economic Development (OECD) countries on the mathematics scale, and 21st on the combined science scale, while Finland is ranked at the top (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). Although a startling gap exists between U.S. test scores and those in Finland—as well as the majority of other industrialized OECD nations—there is also a vast inequality gap in the U.S. in comparison to Finland, where universal access to health care, child care, and other fundamental rights exist. The United States also ranks highest in relative child poverty rates among 24 OECD nations, whereas Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden respectively have the lowest child poverty rates (Innocenti Research Centre, 2007). Hence the so-called Black/White, poor/ non-poor achievement gap that exists in the US has far more to do with poverty, low-wage jobs, juvenile incarceration, and the overall highest incarceration rate in the world than with simple test score results (Fass & Cauthen, 2007; Human Rights Watch, 2005; Pew Center on the States, 2008).

However, those seemingly intractable problems are far more complicated to "fix." Fixing them appears too expensive, or a violation of "personal responsibility" principles, and requires too much of a long-term investment in children's well-being to tolerate. So, instead, we have become fixated on the test score gap.

Richard Rothstein (2004, 2008) has made an interesting argument about poor children's well-being that, among other health issues, focuses on dental health. He points out that that the provision of dental care for *all* children would result in improved test scores for low-achieving students—more so than if better reading programs were introduced. Pain, Rothstein argues, plays a crucial role in children's ability to succeed in school; including their attentiveness while test taking. Therefore, getting rid of pain would raise scores by a few points or more for a certain subgroup of children who lack dental care. An ingenious idea with alarming implications for what it says about our disregard for children's fundamental health and well-being. Clearly, we need better reasons for both improved dental care and improved readers.

Democratic Schooling

It is in schools that we learn the art of living together and where we are compelled to defend the idea of a public, not private, interest for the common good of our children. One of the most important reasons that we aimed to cultivate "habits of heart and mind" at Central Park East (CPE) was to sustain democracy. There are no worthwhile, well-paying jobs that do not require these kinds of habits; they also fit well into the scholarly world of academia. Applied to any subject matter, habits of heart and mind enhance the value of that knowledge, the insights derived, and the usefulness and transferability to many uncovered subjects—including those that are impossible to imagine in the here and now. What is good for the historian and the mathematician turns out to be very healthy for fostering democracy; yet, oddly enough, we have created a system for growing up in which no one takes responsibility for democracy. No institution is accountable for producing a citizenry worthy of a democracy— individuals who are capable of weighing complex matters, of learning as they go from a wide range of sources, and of engaging in critical dialogue and challenges to the status quo.

Small-town life was supposed to be the way democracy was passed on from one generation to the next. It rested on publicly and transparently different opinions and self-interests that clearly had to be accommodated and negotiated. That way of life has mostly disappeared, and even where it still exists—as in my hometown of Hillsdale, New York—precious few decisions have been left to the local citizenry to decide.

It is a vicious circle; for if there is truth to our fears about the failure of democracy the cure is not *less*, but *more* attention to democracy in our schools. What is more important than to educate our children well? But can we educate children and adults for democracy if they have never experienced it? If we cannot trust our citizens —students, parents, teachers and neighbors — to decide what kind of schools they want and how best to accommodate disagreements, how dare we leave it to citizens to decide what kind of world they want, in matters as important as war and peace? While we expect our children to grow up and take on the obligations of citizen jurors, we think they are too unwise and too easily conned to weigh the serious matters that affect their lives in school.

It is certainly easier to discount my warning about the absence of democratic structures and practices in our current schools, but what if I am right? Where is the time and space to make room for democracy? And even within the schoolhouse we do not have the time to gather and discuss our profession and our school's collective decisions together. Time to talk and think is a critical factor. If you want to know if a school is a democracy, look at who has the time to think about the school as a whole, and who has the time for discussing it? Is there time to talk with the students, the teacher across the hall, all the teachers, the parents of

students and, even those citizens, upon whose money and vote the school relies? My litmus test always considers the effect the school and its organization has on its various constituents; and their sense of power and respect. Do all constituents think they have an impact? The whole life of a school sends vital messages about power and status and its connection to decision-making.

Habits of Heart and Mind

The habits of heart and mind that are built into a school day and that are embedded in the fabric of students' lives are crucial, particularly in stressful times. Habits are those activities and commitments that survive stress. The habits of democracy are often the very ones we abandon voluntarily under stress. "This is too important a decision to leave to them," we say about those who have less power than we do. What does such a view of democracy say about its value? What do kids think of the idea that we leave it to them to make only those decisions—if any—that are trivial, and which we, ourselves, care little about? The same is true when, for example, the state government steps in and tells a school community — principals, teachers, parents — that they cannot be trusted to make any but the most trivial decisions about their schools.

These habits of heart and mind were the basics of the Central Park East and Mission Hill schools. They took time to develop and to implement and for the schools to function as democratic spaces for all in the community. Years later, when CPE graduates were interviewed for a study about their experiences (Bensman, 2000) and asked about what had made a difference in their lives, and why they had stayed in school longer than other peers and succeeded—graduates sometimes made note of our curriculum and pedagogy. But, far more frequently, they referred to their relationships with peers and adults, their strong sense that they were "members" of something, not just consumers or passers-by. They referred to seeing themselves as future experts and decision makers, and of assuming that their viewpoint mattered to others. Still others stated they were in the habit of expecting to be treated respectfully, to be listened to, and taken seriously. I liked that! I certainly never want children to become comfortable with humiliation. Unfortunately, in my observations at many schools that achieved impressive test data, I have often witnessed the public humiliation of the weaker and "lesser" students by those who were stronger and, hence, more important. Schools should never become sites for humiliation in the name of education!

David Hawkins (2002), a distinguished physicist at the University of Colorado, once described the triangle that is at the heart of all learning, which he called the "I- Thou-It" relationship. It is through our joining together—teacher and student—in mutual interest that we learn, each in our own way.

Reflections on My Own Habits of Heart and Mind

Many years ago, when 5-year-old Darrell insisted that his rock was "alive" I was dumbfounded. I had dutifully applied the lesson plan in the Board of Education curriculum guide. We spent Day 1 discussing living and non-living things and on Day 2 each child was asked to bring an object to school. Darrell was the first student I called upon. I asked him to place his rock in either the box labeled "Living" or the box labeled "Non-living." He chose the "Living" box. I tried subtly to correct his mistake (after all he was not yet a reader), but he was adamant. Within 20 minutes he had converted the class. As I looked at the next child, who had a recently plucked leaf in her hand, I decided the time had come to move on to other things. Was that leaf living or non-living? (Short audience discussion). I needed time to think about where to go next with this simple and obvious idea. I discovered we were on the cutting edge of science, so we kept at it on and off for the entire year and never entirely settled the argument about what is alive.

A year later I pursued another grand plan for a curriculum on the importance of sunlight for living things. We planted seeds in a dozen little containers and once they began to grow we placed half on the windowsill and half in the closet for the weekend. Of course, I could have wasted less time and just told them that sun was needed for the plants to grow. However, on Monday I came in early and discovered that the plants on the windowsill were dead, and the ones in the closet were thriving, so I threw them all away! Like many educators I unconsciously still viewed "experiments" in class as just a way to help the memory — vivid means for highlighting a scientific concept. The notion of experiments as a means, not an end, had gotten lost. My nerve failed me just exactly at the moment that real science might have entered the children's school life. The possibility of arousing their passion, their curiosity was part of my educational belief system, but it was not yet a habit.

Some years later, 13-year-old Frances and I happened to be studying a big old-fashioned world map on the wall, the kind that divides Asia from Europe. She turned to me and asked in a genuinely puzzled voice: "How come the East Indies are in the West and the West Indies are in the East?" I brought this amazing fact to the attention of my other students and it immediately became part of the curriculum; the history of maps, decisions made about how to represent a round earth on a flat surface, and so forth. For Frances this experience was life altering — she had introduced a weighty and important subject by her own observant curiosity. Who made history? Together we joined forces to explore this important topic? Who and how?

We need this marketplace of ideas because, as educators, we are often wrong. We need our collective observations and suppositions to increase the odds in our favor. But democracy only works if we believe in it, and if we get into the habit of actively pursuing it —rather than saving it just for the first Tuesday of November. It is true that if children were only widgets it would be much easier. But that is not our vision of utopia. Better our messy dreams than some neat nightmare! But such a vision requires that we, ourselves, are convinced—and that we are convincing to others—if we are to turn our schools into centers of learning suitable for democracy. It means rethinking the silly idea that "practical smarts" are less valuable, and fundamentally different, than are "academic smarts." For example, there is not a day in the year that I do not run into statistical claims, and perhaps only one in 365 when algebra seems relevant; yet we shortchange statistics and probability, upon which understanding so much important information depends. In real life after all, the claim that "it's academic" is hardly a statement calling for the best use of our minds. After years spent learning to write "academically," we spend years *unlearning* how to write effectively to lay audiences so that democratic ideas become public and accessible.

If we have tasted democracy as a living experience we can hold on to the fact that it is not always triumphant. I have tasted the difference, and so have we all. Some schools, hundreds of them, have tried it, despite obstacles, and despite fears. They have decided that respect means to be interested in the other, a belief that there is something valuable at stake.

It was in the happenstance experiences of my unplanned summers as a child that I probably learned about life best. It was a summer in the 1930s when my family took us to North Carolina to experience an inter-racial community that changed much of how I understood the world. It was with my brother during our many attempts to divert streams and dam up waterways, build fortresses and tree houses, and explore water spray in sunlight, that I developed the life-long, and sometimes irritating, habit of wonder.

It is in schools, alongside with parents and children that we can reinsert such life-changing experiences; for too many children miss them altogether. Life is an experiment. In fact no day is ever "solved." Adults who know their children well can use their expertise and authority on behalf of children, or they can turn away, and just take the easiest path. I am afraid, however, that the easiest path will not enable us to live up to the preamble to the U.S. Constitution:

> We the people of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

Where and when is it that these fifty-two thrilling words impact children's lives? What plan have we in mind for them to take on life and meaning? What kind of schools dare we build for our children that will enable them to tackle the complexity of that paragraph, and all that follows? What kind of schools dare we build so that they look to their own and their country's future in ways that are both joyous and empowering?

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