

POWERPLAY

A JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL JUSTICE

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Editors' Introduction

We welcome our readers to join us in celebrating the launch of *PowerPlay: A Journal of Educational Justice*. Our goal is to produce an intellectually challenging and educationally grounded interdisciplinary journal, with a commitment to social justice and urban education in both national and international contexts. We welcome contributions from scholars and practitioners in all fields, including educators, students, community activists, and advocates. A key focus of *Powerplay* is to explore the relationships between power, poverty, inequality, race, gender, and rights as embedded in social and educational policy and educational practice.

With this, our first issue of *PowerPlay*, we feature the work of three renowned scholars and public intellectuals: Pedro Noguera, Deborah Meier, and Jean Anyon. All three were invited as Porter Chair Scholars for the College of Education Porter Lecture Series of 2007-2008. In the *Views and Reviews* section that follows, community activists, teachers, and graduate students from Southeast Michigan share their reflections about the work of Pedro Noguera, Deborah Meier, and Jean Anyon. Future issues of *PowerPlay* will focus on critical and significant educational issues and social justice themes (See *Call*, for Vol.1(2), on *Disproportionality*) in both national and international arenas, with the *Views and Reviews* section serving as a forum for essay reviews, rejoinders, and commentaries. We invite manuscript submissions and contributions to *Views and Reviews* from a broad and diverse audience of scholars, practitioners, activists, and policy analysts.

Dean's Introduction

Eastern Michigan University's College of Education has played a pivotal role in the preparation of teachers and other school personnel for more than 160 years. We have led the nation for more than 15 years as the largest producer of school personnel. We consider it a distinct honor to introduce *PowerPlay: A Journal of Educational Justice* as a new vehicle for promoting excellence and equity in education. *PowerPlay* is tailored for students, educators, and policy-makers who grapple with the challenges often associated with schooling in urban, hard-to-teach, and other marginalized communities around the globe.

PowerPlay emerges as a natural, next step in the on-going commitment of the College of Education to impact the field of education through its highly successful John W. Porter Distinguished Chair in Urban Education. The Chair in Urban and Community Education is named in honor of the former Eastern Michigan University President and State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Dr. John W. Porter. It is the first endowed chair in the College of Education along with a corresponding distinguished lecture series.

The John W. Porter Chair is funded by generous financial gifts from the C. S. Mott Foundation, the McGregor Foundation, and the Herrick Foundation. These foundations' contributions are used for the expressed purpose of identifying prominent scholars in urban education, who will provide educational leadership to the College of Education at Eastern Michigan University and surrounding educational communities. The Porter Chair is designated to actively expand the College of Education's role in urban school districts, with an emphasis on school community partnerships.

Since 1999, the College of Education has successfully attracted an impressive cohort of nationally acclaimed critical thinkers and urban community education reformers to offer the Porter Lecture Series including the following: James Comer, James Earl Davis, Lisa Delpit, Jocelyn Elders, Joyce Epstein, Donna Ford, Nel Noddings, and Gary Orfield. As we move forward with the second decade of the John W. Porter Distinguished Chair, the College of Education has adopted an innovative approach to enhancing the impact of our Porter scholars through our new electronic journal, *PowerPlay*. *PowerPlay* will afford urban educators and activists immediate access to the nation's most celebrated urban scholars.

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Three international scholars were selected for the John W. Porter Lecture Series during the 2007-2008 academic year, Jean Anyon, Deborah Meier, and Pedro Noguera. Each has provided an original scholarly manuscript for inclusion in the inaugural issue of *PowerPlay*. Jean Anyon's work examines the impact of public policy on urban communities and schools. Deborah Meier is the founder and teacher-director of a network of highly successful public schools in New York City that are considered exemplary models of urban school reform. Pedro Noguera is an urban sociologist whose research focuses on student achievement, youth violence, race, and ethnic relations.

PowerPlay comes at particularly trying economic times brought on by the decline of the banking and automobile industries. The heightened pressures on school systems to close the achievement gaps are even more pronounced now than during the years immediately following the *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) decision. As indications of the challenges that we face in Michigan, there are 10 million people living in Michigan, with 2.5 million school-age children. At more than 12.8%, Michigan has the highest level of unemployment largely due to the decline of the automobile industries. Of the 2.5 million school-age children in Michigan, 54% are living in impoverished communities. In Detroit, 289,000 people are living in low-income communities or in poverty. Recently, Detroit Public Schools were ordered to close 29 schools effective immediately. Almost half of the schools in Michigan are Title I schools, indicating that the majority of their students are eligible for free or reduced price lunches. The academic achievement indicators for poor and minority students in Michigan are among the lowest in the nation—the alarm is echoed throughout the urban enclaves of the state.

We are especially proud of *PowerPlay*'s main focus on issues of equity and social justice. It is, of course, the principles of social justice that ensure that all students, educator candidates, and faculty are protected against discrimination, physical abuse, emotional distress, and social stigmatization regardless of their class, gender, race, or sexual orientation. We welcome your input and participation in this exciting new journal, *PowerPlay*.

Vernon C. Polite, Ph.D.
Professor and Dean
Eastern Michigan University

The Change We Need: The Achievement Gap and the Future of Education Policy in the Obama Administration¹

Pedro A. Noguera
New York University

No Child Left Behind, the Achievement Gap, and the New Discourse on Race and Achievement

No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the far-reaching education reform law enacted in 2002 under President George W. Bush, with the notable bipartisan support of Democrats Senator Ted Kennedy and Congressman George Miller, significantly expanded the role of the federal government in public education. Prior to NCLB, the federal role in education was limited largely to civil rights enforcement and ensuring compliance with various federal policies, most important among these being the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Title I), which significantly increased federal funding for children in poverty. However, unlike past initiatives that required states, and by extension school districts, to demonstrate compliance with federal mandates, NCLB required states to establish academic standards and to use standardized test scores as a means of holding schools accountable. As a result of these measures, and NCLB's requirement that schools disaggregate test scores by subgroups (e.g., race, language, income, etc.), the law drew attention to the achievement gap and exposed the glaring and profound inequities in American society that are reflected in and, more often than not, exacerbated by the American educational system.

Of course, drawing attention to a problem is not the same as solving it, and NCLB has done very little to provide schools with the guidance, support, or resources needed to actually address the achievement gap (Hanushek, 2003). Seven years after the enactment of this law, it is clear that it will take more than standards, pressure, or public humiliation to close the achievement gap or get schools to improve. Nonetheless, these have been the primary tactics employed by NCLB. For that reason alone, it could be argued that although NCLB may have taken the nation a step forward by holding schools accountable for student achievement, it also took schools backwards because it distorted our understandings of achievement, limited measures of learning to how well students performed on standardized tests, and provided schools with little guidance or

¹ Pedro A. Noguera is a Professor of Sociology and Executive Director of the Metropolitan Center for Urban Education, New York University. This article is adapted from a keynote address for the Porter Chair Lecture Series, March 13, 2008, College of Education, Eastern Michigan University

resources to address the problem it identified. More importantly, the sanctions and penalties included within NCLB have done little to ameliorate the chronic problems and shortcomings present within a significant number of schools serving high-need student populations. Although some districts have shown progress in raising achievement, the clearest sign that NCLB has not worked is disturbingly evident: in most large urban school districts across the country, dropout rates exceed 50% (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2006; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2007). Moreover, it continues to be the case that in most areas where poor children are concentrated, the funding allocated to support education continues to be considerably less than the amounts provided in affluent communities, and more often than not, the quality of education provided is often quite poor (Cowley & Mehan, 2003).

A growing number of scholars have argued that the pervasive achievement gap in American schools is largely a manifestation of broader patterns of inequality in American society, or what Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) has referred to as America's "educational debt." Throughout American history, poor children have been short-changed with respect to the educational opportunities available to them, both because of a history of racial segregation and exclusion and because, in many American schools, disadvantaged children are frequently denied the opportunity to learn. Despite all the changes that advocates of NCLB claimed it would achieve, seven years after its enactment it is clear that many children are still being left behind.

For civil rights activists and promoters of educational equity, the dismal panorama of American education is a major disappointment. Following the Supreme Court's landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, many were hopeful that the pursuit of integration might do more than merely mix children from different racial backgrounds in the nation's public schools. The goal for Thurgood Marshall and the advocates from the NAACP was to use integration as a means to extend and to begin equalizing educational opportunities. However, furthering civil rights through educational equity has remained an elusive goal. The release of the Coleman Report in 1966, with its suggestion that children's backgrounds had greater bearing on their academic outcomes than the quality of schools they attended, had the effect of undermining the push toward greater equity in education. In subsequent years efforts to advance equal opportunity through education have in many cases been undermined by those who continue to rationalize lower rates of achievement on the basis of genetic and cultural characteristics (McWhorter, 2000; Ogbu 1987).

In identifying the achievement gap as a problem that could be solved, and framing it as one that schools have a moral imperative to address, NCLB forced American schools to confront an issue that has long been ignored throughout much of American history. The achievement gap is not new; disparities in student

achievement that correspond to the racial, socioeconomic, and linguistic backgrounds of children have been common to American public schools for years (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Miller, 1995). What is new is the idea—and the policy adopted by the federal government—that the achievement gap can be closed and that schools should be held responsible for making it happen. NCLB made it clear that schools would be held accountable for producing evidence that all students, regardless of their race, language, income, or other status, were learning. In his presidential nomination acceptance speech George Bush (2000) himself challenged schools by calling upon them to “end the soft bigotry of low expectations.” Even if it is not clear that Bush actually understood the significance of this slogan, such rhetoric and, more importantly, the mandates that accompanied it had enormous impact on thinking about schools and their role in promoting racial equality.

Acknowledging the impact that the Bush administration had upon educational policies and practices should not be interpreted as an endorsement of its overall approach to reforming public education. Under the Bush administration, privatization efforts aimed largely at dismantling public education gained enormous credibility and momentum. Worse still, in its efforts to control how poor children were being educated, the administration deliberately supported the profiteering of several private corporations in the testing and text book industries under the guise that those entities were offering “research-based” approaches to educating children that were superior to others. Nonetheless, NCLB has succeeded in holding schools accountable for student achievement and in generating interest in finding ways to insure that all students are learning. Even the fiercest critics of the Bush administration must acknowledge this as a significant step forward.

Undoing an Ugly Legacy: Race and Achievement in American History

In response to NCLB, a sense of urgency has developed around the need to improve the educational outcomes of underperforming students. In many communities, this has resulted in greater focus and attention being placed on the need for strategies to improve academic achievement among children who have traditionally not done well in school—namely, poor and disadvantaged children; students with learning disabilities; recent immigrants and English-as-a-second-language learners; and, in many communities, African Americans, Latinos, and other students of color (Miller, 1995). Those familiar with American history, and the history of American education in particular, will undoubtedly be struck by the irony and significance of the current national preoccupation with closing the

racial achievement gap. Racial gaps in achievement, attainment, and measures of intellectual ability are by no means new. Throughout most of American history, racial disparities in educational achievement and performance were attributed to innate genetic differences between population groups. Prior to the civil rights era, much of American law and public policy that addressed matters related to race was premised on the notion that racial differences were immutable. The inherent superiority of Whites over non-Whites was regarded widely as a “natural” phenomenon (Fredrickson, 1981), and intelligence was regarded as an innate human property rooted in the particular genetic endowments of individuals and groups (Duster, 2003). In such an ideological context, altering patterns of academic achievement was not regarded as feasible or even desirable.

Given this history, the fact that federal educational policy has made closing the achievement gap a national priority, is a step forward. Though policymakers have not characterized efforts to eliminate racial disparities in student achievement as a repudiation of views on race that prevailed in the recent past, in many ways it is. Educators at the center of these efforts are often forced to confront views and assumptions about the relationship between race and intellectual ability that remain rooted in the biases of the not-so-distant past. Unfortunately, the notion that children of color are not as intelligent or capable as White children continues to find adherents among a broad cross section of the American public (Hacker, 1992), including among some of the educators charged with solving this problem.

Throughout most of the 19th and 20th centuries beliefs about the relationship between race and intelligence held that non-Whites, specifically Blacks, Native Americans, Hispanics, and even some Eastern Europeans, possessed lower levels of intellectual capacity than Caucasians, particularly those that originated in the countries of Northwestern Europe (Gould, 1981). Such views about the relationship between race and intelligence had considerable influence on social science research, psychology, and education (Lehman, 1996). Although less overtly pernicious, these views were consistent with beliefs about race held by previous generations that rationalized slavery, genocide, imperial aggression, Manifest Destiny, and Jim Crow segregation (Fredrickson, 1981; Zinn, 1980).

Early in the 20th century, advocates of eugenics—the so-called science of genetic engineering—propagated the notion that groups and individuals with superior intellect and physical ability should be encouraged to procreate to strengthen the national gene pool, while inferior groups should be actively discouraged and even prevented from reproducing their progeny (Duster, 2003). Given the dominance of these views, it is not surprising that some eugenicists became leaders in the effort to devise tests for measuring intelligence (Lehman, 1996). The leaders of the early testing movement sought to ensure that

intelligence tests and examinations such as the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) would be seen as providing an objective measure of talent and ability. They also pushed for the results from standardized tests to be used to determine who should be recruited for top occupations and for enrollment at elite universities (Fischer et al., 1996).

The history of beliefs about the relationship between race and intelligence in the United States is relevant to current efforts aimed at closing the achievement gap. Although it is increasingly regarded as politically incorrect to attribute differences in achievement to genetic differences between racial groups, it is important to remember that Herrnstein and Murray's (1994) tome, *The Bell Curve*, made precisely that point—and that it received a mix of condemnation and acclaim at the time of its release (Fischer et al., 1996). Such views have been prevalent in American society for many years, even though they have never been supported by research on genetics or advanced by scientists engaged in research linking human biology to intelligence.

For example, even though neither of the authors of *The Bell Curve* studied genetics (Herrnstein was a psychologist and Murray is a political scientist), their lack of knowledge about genetics did not stop them or others from making arguments about the genetic basis of intellectual ability or the inferiority of racial minorities. Not long ago, former Harvard University President Lawrence Summers (currently serving as President Obama's national economic advisor) suggested that one of the reasons why women were not well represented in mathematics and science-related fields was due to innate differences in intellectual ability (Bombardi, 2005). Though his remarks generated so much controversy that he was eventually forced to resign, we can be sure that if the president of Harvard University, an economist by training, felt comfortable making remarks about the genetic basis of intelligence, it would not be a stretch of logic to conclude that similar views about the relationship between race, gender, and innate ability continue to be widely held throughout American society.

While it is increasingly less common for arguments about the genetic inferiority of minority groups to be made in public, it would be a mistake to suggest that these assumptions have disappeared entirely. In their place, arguments that attribute differences in achievement to differences in broad and undefined notions of culture (McWhorter, 2000; Ogbu, 1987), parental influences (Epstein, 1994) and even rap music (Ferguson, 2002) have been used to serve a similar purpose: rationalizing the lower rates of achievement among Black and Latino students as the result of problems that some claim are inherent to these groups. Unlike biology, culture has been embraced as a less politically distasteful explanation, in part because it is assumed that cultures are not immutable but can be changed over time.

Among those advocating this perspective are scholars such as anthropologist John Ogbu who has argued that non-voluntary minorities—that is, members of groups that were incorporated into the United States through conquest, slavery, or force (i.e., Native Americans, African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Mexican Americans)—consistently do less well in school because they adopt an “oppositional culture” in relation to schooling (Ogbu, 1987; Ogbu & Davis, 2003). According to Ogbu, non-voluntary minorities often regard schooling as a form of forced assimilation and, as a result, they are less likely to embrace the behaviors that contribute to school success (e.g., obeying school rules, studying for examinations, speaking Standard English, etc.). Ogbu’s views have been embraced by many scholars as an effective way to explain why many “voluntary” immigrant minorities (especially Asian Americans) do well in school while many non-voluntary minorities do not.

Similarly, linguist John McWhorter (2000) has attributed the lower achievement of many African American students to a “cult of anti-intellectualism” (p. 127), while former English professor Shelby Steele (1996) has attributed it to what he calls *victimology*: the tendency on the part of Blacks to blame the White man for their problems. McWhorter contends that this victimology “stems from a lethal combination of this inherited inferiority complex with the privilege of dressing down the former oppressor” and adds that it “condones weakness and failure” (p. 28). Others such as sociologist Orlando Patterson (2006) and journalist Juan Williams (2007) have cited the culture of *gangsta rap*, with its emphasis on *bling* (flashy jewelry), violence, and disdain for hard work, as producing a culture of failure among African American students. Finally, others such as Ruby Payne (2005), whose work has been embraced by a number of school districts nationwide, have cited a “culture of poverty” as one of the reasons why poor children of all races often fail to perform well in school (p. 58). Such theories draw on the work of anthropologist Oscar Lewis (1966), who coined the term “culture of poverty” and who argued that intergenerational poverty among Puerto Ricans was the result of the poor embracing norms that perpetuate poverty (e.g. teen pregnancy, substance abuse, etc.).

Cultural explanations of the achievement gap such as those articulated by Ogbu, Payne, and McWhorter have been widely embraced by researchers, policymakers, and educators (Noguera, 2003). Though such explanations of academic performance fail to account for those who deviate from established patterns—for example, poor Black students who excel, and middle-class White and Asian American students who struggle academically—these theories continue to be embraced by a broad spectrum of researchers and practitioners. A recent article in the *New York Times Magazine* (Tough, 2006) framed the cultural argument in this way: “Kids from poor families might be nicer, they might be happier, they might be more polite—but in countless ways, the manner in which

they are raised puts them at a disadvantage in the measures that count in contemporary American society” (p. 28). Recognizing how difficult it will be to achieve the goals of NCLB if cultural differences are at the root of the achievement gap, the article goes on to pose an intriguing question: “Can the culture of child-rearing be changed in poor neighborhoods, and if so, is that a project that government or community organizations have the ability, or the right, to take on?” (p. 29).

In debates with proponents of these cultural arguments, I have often pointed out that culture cannot explain the high percentage of Asian American students at schools such as Galileo High School in San Francisco or Richmond High School in Richmond, California, who drop out of school; nor, conversely, can they explain the high percentage of low-income African American students at schools such as Fredrick Douglass Academy or Medgar Evers Middle College High School in New York City who excel. Close examination of achievement patterns at these schools reveals that it is conditions within these schools—and the ability of the educators to create an environment where students do not believe that their racial identities determine their academic ability—that play a major role in shaping academic outcomes.

This does not mean that cultural influences are irrelevant to student achievement. At an aggregate level, Asian American students do outperform other groups in mathematics, White students do achieve at higher levels than Black and Latino students, and middle-class children generally outperform poor children (Farkas, 2004; Jencks & Phillips, 1998). Individual exceptions exist, but the patterns cited are fairly consistent (Ferguson, 2007). To some degree, these patterns may be attributed, in part, to characteristics loosely associated with culture. However, in order to be helpful in finding ways to ameliorate or, at least, to reduce disparities in achievement, the specific aspects of culture that seem to be most influential must be identified.

For example, certain child-rearing practices such as parents reading to children during infancy or posing questions, rather than issuing demands, when speaking to children are associated with the development of intellectual traits that contribute to school success (Rothstein, 2004). Similarly, parental expectations about grades, homework, and the use of recreational time have been shown to influence adolescent behavior and academic performance (Ferguson, 2007). In his research at the University of California, Uri Treisman (1992) found that many Asian American students studied in groups and helped one another to excel while reinforcing norms that contribute to the importance of academic success. In contrast, the African American students Treisman studied were more likely to socialize together but study alone. Whether or not such behaviors can be attributed to culture can be debated, but clearly identifying specific behaviors that

seem to influence academic achievement positively is more helpful than making broad generalizations about “oppositional” and “anti-intellectual” cultures.

Even when behaviors that appear rooted in culture are identified, educators must be careful about relying on cultural explanations to guide their thinking about academic achievement. Such thinking often has the effect of reinforcing inaccurate stereotypes because it fails to account for the high degree of diversity within racial groups. Differences related to socioeconomic status and income, the educational background of parents, the kind of neighborhood a student lives in, and, most importantly, the quality of the school a student attends, significantly affect student achievement (Miller, 1995; Noguera, 2003). Such factors influence the academic performance of all students, but because of the tendency to overemphasize the influence of culture on the performance of racial groups, they often are ignored. A number of White students do poorly in school (Jencks & Phillips, 1998), but substantially less attention is paid to this problem than to the issues facing minority students. Academic failure among White students, like the existence of poverty among White people in the United States, is a phenomenon that often is rendered invisible due to the high degree of emphasis placed on race in many aspects of American social policy. It is rare indeed to hear “the experts” cite culture as an explanation for why some White students do poorly in school.

It is hard to imagine how schools in the United States might go about changing the culture of individuals who seem to embrace attitudes and norms that undermine possibilities for academic success. It is far more sensible to focus on factors that can actually be controlled such as poverty and racial segregation, equalizing funding between middle-class and poor schools, lowering class size, and ensuring that qualified and competent teachers are hired. These are all factors that research has shown can have a positive effect on student achievement (Noguera, 2003), and none of them involves trying to figure out how to change a person’s culture.

The fact that the effort to close the gap in academic achievement is now at the top of the nation’s educational agenda is a significant and historic departure from the past. It suggests that prevailing beliefs about race in the United States may have shifted dramatically away from the assumption that differences in intellectual ability are rooted in one’s genes toward an assumption that regards these differences as the product of social experiences. NCLB has placed the onus upon schools to devise ways to boost the achievement of all students regardless of their backgrounds. This is not an endorsement of the educational policies pursued by the Bush administration, but rather an acknowledgment that despite its failure to address the more substantive inequities that plague American education—school funding, the lack of health care for many poor children, and so forth—the Bush administration did use its bully pulpit to change the discourse about what

schools can do. When, at the highest levels of government, public officials espouse the notion that the primary obstacle to higher achievement for children of color is rooted in educational practices and beliefs that limit student performance rather than innate ability, the door may be opened to major changes in the way children are educated.

Yet, seven years after the adoption of NCLB, it is clear that eliminating racial disparities in academic outcomes will require more than an official renunciation of traditional views about the nature of race. Race continues to be implicated in patterns of student achievement in predictable and disturbing ways, and the persistence and pervasiveness of these patterns compels Americans to ask why? It also forces us to reconsider what it might take to alter the longstanding relationship between race and achievement given that so many efforts to alter racial patterns have been unsuccessful.

A New Direction under Obama?

Despite its many promises, it is clear that the Obama administration will not be able to deliver the “change we need” quickly. The problems facing the United States—war, recession, budget deficits, and more—are so vast and complex that it may well take some time before educational issues receive the attention they deserve. It is also clear that we will need more than just money to fix the nation’s schools and address the achievement gap. Although more money is needed in many communities, there is no guarantee that more money alone would generate better results in public education. Over the last 20 years, billions of dollars have been spent in the name of reforming public schools, with little evidence of success in schools that disproportionately serve poor children (Payne, 2008). Even in resource-scarce districts where facilities are crumbling and basic learning supplies are lacking, it is highly unlikely that increased funding alone would produce a change in results. Failure has been endemic in too many schools for too long for the problems to be fixed quickly or easily.

If genuine progress is to be achieved, then what is needed is a complete change in direction. The United States needs a new policy agenda for education that will make it possible for schools to play a central role in ongoing efforts to rebuild the U.S. economy. The Obama administration has been clear about its determination to expand access to high-quality early childhood programs and after-school programs. Throughout his campaign, President Obama also promised to end the federal obsession with using standardized testing as the exclusive tool for evaluating the performance of schools. As the current administration contemplates what else it will do to address the challenges confronting our nation’s schools it must understand that these problems cannot be solved by a few

sweeping reforms or major investments in a few discrete initiatives. New approaches to educating children and managing schools and districts are necessary to bring about the kinds of changes in educational outcomes that the nation so desperately needs.

Even in many affluent suburban districts where resources are less of an issue, racialized patterns of achievement are often deeply entrenched and reinforced by tracking systems that deny children of color access to honors and college track courses (Noguera & Wing, 2008). Despite the federal government's fixation with using test scores as a barometer of progress, several indicators suggest that large numbers of children, including many White and affluent children, are not performing at levels commensurate with children in most other economically advanced nations. In international comparisons of math and science achievement among the world's wealthiest nations, children from the United States consistently rank far lower than children in other nations (Schmidt, 2008). Similarly, in a recent comparative study of the 25 wealthiest nations (Innocenti Research Centre, 2007), UNICEF ranked the U.S. 24th out of 25 on a broad set of indicators related to the well-being of children.

Creating an Equity Agenda

Despite the complexity of the challenges confronting public education, it is clear that the Obama administration cannot afford to put off the task of addressing them indefinitely. Education is implicated in the causes and potential solutions to several major social and economic problems confronting American society. From finding ways to break the cycle of poverty to devising new means to generate employment in cities where the manufacturing sector has collapsed, the Obama administration will need a bold new strategy for reforming public education if the nation is to move forward.

There can be no new future for Detroit if that city's public schools, which presently are in shambles, are not capable of educating a new generation of workers to staff the new industries that will replace the declining auto industry. Likewise, it is highly unlikely that cities like Cleveland, Buffalo, Flint, Gary, and dozens more across America's rust belt can be revived if the shortage of competent high school graduates produced by schools in these communities today is not addressed. The sooner we realize that the distribution of economic rewards in American society is tied to the state of our schools, as Jencks (1972) contends, the sooner we will see that urgent action is needed in the way we go about preparing our disadvantaged children for education and for the workforce.

However, before the Obama administration can proceed with "fixing" the schools, we must be clear about the nature of the problem that must be addressed.

Firstly, we must recognize that our troubles in education are inextricably related to the deep and profound inequality that characterizes most aspects of life in American society. After all, the achievement gap is in many respects nothing more than an educational manifestation of social inequality (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Any serious attempt to reform public education must be based upon a clear understanding of how the policies enacted should interact with other efforts to further equity (e.g., housing, wages, and health care reforms), to create a social safety net for children, and to expand access to opportunity and mobility. This will mean addressing the following three crucial dimensions of inequality in education:

- **Funding**—Our nation’s public schools are characterized by profound disparities in quality and resources because we fund schools largely through local property taxes and we consistently spend more money to educate affluent children than poor children. In states like New York, New Jersey, and Texas, efforts to equalize funding between school districts have been hurt by the recession, budget shortfalls, and political opposition in affluent suburban communities. Additionally, even larger funding disparities exist between and among the states, with Southern states like Mississippi and Louisiana consistently spending far less than wealthy states like New York and Massachusetts to educate children (Rothstein, 2008). If the Obama administration is to have a major impact on public education it must do more to ensure that the effort to set standards for schools and students also includes a commitment that all schools meet basic opportunity-to-learn standards and ensure that all students have access to high-quality learning conditions regardless of where their schools are located. This will mean taking a more active role in ensuring access to qualified teachers, adequate learning facilities and supplies, and a curriculum that prepares students for good-paying, 21st-century jobs.
- **Segregation**—More than 50 years after the *Brown* decision, the United States continues to send its children to schools that are segregated on the basis of race and class (Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2000). Although commitment to old remedies like school busing to further the goal of racial integration appears to have waned, the Obama administration must do more to make sure that more recent initiatives like charter and magnet schools are not allowed to exacerbate existing patterns of segregation. Many of these new schools have adopted admissions policies that allow them to exclude the neediest children, particularly those with limited proficiency in English and special needs (Wells, 2002). The administration can also further efforts to reduce residential segregation by supporting the development of low-income housing in middle-class communities as a

way to bring about increased integration in schools. Finally, it must engage intermediaries with track records of success in turning around failing schools to improve the quality of schools in high-need areas. The inclusion of high-quality preschool and after-school programs are just some of the enticements that could be used to lure middle-class children to integrated schools.

- **Unmet Needs**—Although one out of five children in the United States are poor and another fifth come from households that are struggling financially (Auerbach & Krimgold 2000), school reform initiatives thus far have largely ignored the nonacademic needs of poor children (e.g., health, nutrition, housing, etc.). A variety of studies have shown that these unmet needs invariably have an impact upon the ability of children to learn in school (Rothstein, 2004). In the name of equity, however, NCLB has been used to hold poor children to the same academic standards as privileged children in affluent school districts, even though the two groups of children are not educated under similar circumstances. Nearly a quarter of poor children do not have access to adequate health care and miss far too many days of school because they are sick (Children’s Defense Fund, 2007). Given that family income and parental education continue to exert powerful influence over student academic outcomes (Jencks & Phillips, 1998), it is not surprising that our nation’s schools rarely serve as a vehicle for poor children to escape poverty. By expanding access to critical social services for students in need, including helping schools to provide such services in communities where no other agencies have stepped up to the plate, the Obama administration can provide support to schools so that they can do a better job of helping children overcome social and economic handicaps.

Additionally, public school systems in many cities across the United States are dysfunctional and not organized to respond effectively to the needs of the children they serve. They are also often the largest employers in many cities, a reality that contributes to the tendency for powerful constituencies that should be concerned about the quality of education to be more focused on controlling contracts for services and jobs within the system. State and federal intervention is needed, for example, in school districts such as St. Louis, Detroit, and Cleveland, where the local school boards have become so mired in political battles that their leaders can no longer function adequately. National leadership by the Obama administration and the teachers' unions is critical to move the conversation about teacher quality beyond a narrow debate over merit pay and job protection to one focused more broadly on how to ensure that teachers receive adequate support and training to meet the academic needs of their students and to ascertain their

effectiveness in the classroom (Cowley & Mehan, 2003). As Elmore (1996) argues, internal accountability must include everyone—administrators, teachers, parents, students, and, most importantly, the politicians who allocate the funds and set the policies under which schools must operate.

Creating Schools for the 21st Century

Under NCLB, schools have become preoccupied with teaching basic skills that can be assessed on standardized tests, and student performance on these tests has served as the basis for how schools are judged. As President Obama observed during his presidential campaign, teaching to the test has become a pervasive and harmful phenomenon. This is especially true in schools that serve poor children, but the distortion of the curriculum has occurred in many schools serving middle-class children as well. In their desire to raise test scores, too many schools have limited students' access to subjects not covered on the tests, including science, social studies, art and music, social skills, leadership training, and character development. It is hardly surprising that students commonly complain that school is boring when the mode of instruction relied upon in most schools consists largely of lecture and test preparation. Thought-provoking literature is in short supply. Students do very little research or writing in school, and the average middle school student is generally more comfortable with technology than the average teacher.

As the Obama administration contemplates what it will do to reform NCLB, it must find a way to restore the proper balance between assessment and instruction to ensure that schools are cultivating students' higher order skills, including creativity, fluency in a second language, and problem solving. These intellectual traits are not easily tested, but they are the kinds of abilities that our society will need most if education is to play a role in expanding opportunity and reviving the sagging economy. The good-paying jobs of the future in health, telecommunications, renewable energy, organic food production, biotechnology, and environmental protection will be more accessible to individuals who have the ability to learn new skills quickly and to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances.

Immigration is unlikely to fade as an issue (Clark, 1998), so the Obama administration must also find ways to ensure that schools can meet the learning needs of documented and undocumented children, especially since the nation's courts consistently have ruled that undocumented children have the right to an education. Additionally, it must attempt to minimize the extent to which those who cross our borders become a permanent underclass trapped in low-wage jobs. As our society is transformed through changing demographics, our public schools will continue to be called upon to help prepare immigrant children to participate

fully in American society. Schools will need resources and support to meet this challenge.

Finally, it will be essential for the new administration to recognize that the fate of the U.S. economy is fundamentally tied to the state of its schools and universities. Recognition of this linkage must compel us to think in new ways about how to address the problems facing public education. A growing number of U.S. industries have come to rely increasingly upon foreign labor, both because it is cheaper and often more skilled for their labor needs (Reich, 2007). Unless this pattern is reversed, large segments of our population will become permanently marginalized.

New thinking about how to reform schools is desperately needed. Our nation cannot afford to repeat past mistakes that not only have been costly, but also have reinforced the notion that improving schools is a hopeless endeavor. Since the 1983 release of the National Commission on Excellence in Education report, *A Nation at Risk*, numerous efforts have aimed at reforming the nation's public schools, but most of these have produced relatively little evidence of improvement. Undoubtedly there are some who believe that the fate of the U.S. economy is not at all tied to the state of our nation's schools; however, whether or not we find ways to improve our schools will determine whether America's disadvantaged youth will be able to reap the fruits of a recovered economy or simply harvest more inequity.

Even if the Obama administration does not take action in the short term, it must recognize that improving education is the best long-term strategy for expanding opportunity and addressing rising unemployment rates. This is especially so in our nation's cities, where the unemployment rates for minority males were high even before the current recession (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). For the federal government to begin using education as part of the strategy for reviving the national economy and addressing the marginalization of communities that have long been denied the ability to participate and share in the benefits of American society, its school reform efforts must include, at minimum, the following:

- A revision of NCLB so that greater emphasis is placed on providing students with access to high-quality instruction and learning environments that support their intellectual development (Rothstein & Noguera, 2009);
- Expansion of access to early childhood, preschool, health care, and after-school programs for poor children to address some of the nonacademic needs that affect their learning and to expand their opportunities to learn (see www.boldapproach.org);
- A concerted effort to recruit highly trained teachers and principals to high-need schools and provide them with extended, site-based mentorship

during the first two or three years of service to increase the likelihood of their success and retention;

- Greater alignment between economic development goals and educational plans related to how schools can prepare students for jobs in the “new economy.”

Examples of the last three initiatives are already evident in a small number of sites across the country. For example, through public-private partnerships the city of Chicago has created over 100 full-service schools that make a variety of social services available to students. Similarly, the Harlem Children’s Zone in New York City, headed by Geoffrey Canada, has provided comprehensive social services to 6,000 poor children. The state of Oklahoma has made sure that the vast majority of its children are enrolled in quality preschools. In the Bay Area of northern California, plans are being developed for a number of “green schools,” whose focus will be on preparing students for jobs in environmental protection. Additionally, a number of innovative career academies at schools across the country currently teach students how to produce animated films, grow organic fruits and vegetables, build robots, and how to start and run small businesses.

More must be done! The challenge for the Obama administration will be to expand efforts like these on a much larger scale and overcome the political obstacles that most assuredly will make implementation of these reforms more difficult.

Clear signs have emerged that the political obstacles to more substantial reform will be significant ones. Most challenging perhaps is the reality that, in many parts of the country and especially in the nation’s urban areas, the middle class has abandoned the public schools and no longer feels it has a role to play in ensuring their viability. Joe Nocera (1990), a regularly featured columnist in the *Wall Street Journal*, made this point bluntly in an article titled “How the Middle Class has Ruined Public Schools.” He argued that without the support of the middle class—the constituency most capable of demanding adherence to academic standards and responsiveness to parents and communities—U.S. school systems frequently experience difficulty raising public funds for education.

Other important political debates that are likely to distract the Obama administration and prevent it from taking on the larger issues confronting the nation’s schools, unless it finds ways to address these issues quickly and effectively, include those surrounding teacher tenure and merit pay. Regarding the first of these, Washington, D.C., public schools chancellor Michelle Rhee has made the elimination of teacher tenure a centerpiece in her reform efforts. Other educational leaders, such as Chancellor Joel Klein in New York, have cited tenure as an obstacle to change and claim that it impedes efforts to remove inept teachers from classrooms. On this point, the teachers’ unions are vulnerable. During

periods of fiscal austerity, tenure policies often result in newer teachers being laid off first under “last hired-first fired” agreements. Moreover, in too many cases, unions feel obligated to defend the due process rights of their colleagues, including paying costly legal fees even when they know that not all of those individuals belong in the classroom. Rhee’s plan to raise teacher salaries substantially if they voluntarily give up tenure may be draconian, but until unions take a leadership role in monitoring the performance of their members and even supporting their removal when necessary, such calls for change are unlikely to go away.

Recently, a number of school districts have flirted with the idea of pegging teacher salaries to changes in student test scores. Advocates of merit pay frequently make an important point that cannot be easily dismissed: teaching is a profession where compensation is not connected to performance, and teacher salaries are not affected either by how hard or how effectively they work. Few other jobs work this way, and although opponents of merit pay may argue that teachers work hard out of a genuine desire to serve their students, the reality is that not every teacher works hard. The idea of providing teachers with incentives for improving their students’ academic performance may seem attractive, but merit pay plans are fraught with problems. Even in districts where merit incentives are based upon value-added measures of student growth, such plans often have the unintended consequence of narrowing curricula to test-preparation tasks only and creating a disincentive for teachers to work with the lowest-achieving students for whom generating an increase on standardized test scores may be most difficult.

Conclusion: The Change We Need

It is important to keep in mind President Obama's prophetic campaign statement that “change doesn’t come *from* Washington—it must come *to* Washington.” The future of public education in the United States has been the subject of fierce ideological debate in recent years. The forces behind NCLB who continue to view testing as the salvation for the nation’s schools, who view merit pay for teachers as the critical issue for improving the quality of instruction students receive, and who see various privatization schemes as the best way to improve the performance of schools, have powerful voices. They remain active in both the Democratic and Republican parties, and they persistently attempt to undermine the Obama administration's commitment to genuine reform. Undoubtedly, their narrow views about what schools and students need will continue to exert considerable influence over policy at the state and local levels.

A broader view of education is needed to achieve success in bringing sustainable reform to public education. This broader view is rooted in recognition that children must be well-fed, healthy, and intellectually challenged and stimulated if they are to thrive and achieve. If the Obama administration's policies are to succeed in reflecting this broader view, they will require the mobilization of grassroots support. Advocates of this broader view must be prepared to organize and advocate for it at the local, state, and national levels to create the schools our children need and deserve.

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Educating for What? The Struggle for Democracy in Education¹

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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 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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Food from the Mouths of Children: Corporate and Individual Wealth and Underfunded Schools in Urban America¹

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Money does matter to school districts. While lots of money may not guarantee that a school district will provide a good education, a district cannot provide a good education without sufficient funds. Books cost money; small class size is expensive; experienced highly qualified teachers command higher salaries; college counselors, reading and math specialists, and special education support personnel are costly; new buildings demand millions of dollars; technology is not cheap. And in low-income urban districts, the students need additional monies to compensate for the health care issues and other ravages of lives lived in poverty.

The United States is the richest country on earth. U.S. based corporations earn billions of dollars in profits every year, and American individuals with high incomes are among the world's wealthiest. Indeed, there are more affluent households in the U.S. than ever before. One out of every 325 households had a net worth of \$10 million or more in 2004, the latest year for which data are available. This figure is more than four times the number of wealthy households counted in 1989 (Wolff, forthcoming).

The funds to pay for education come, of course, from tax dollars. In most places, local school districts still rely on property taxes to finance school budgets, although property taxes are diminishing as the major source of education funding nationwide. States now pay on average more than half (about 56%) of education funding in the U.S. (Hoo, 2006). A critical question addressed in this paper is as follows: Do wealthy corporations and individuals pay their fair share of taxes? "Fairness" here, as is common in discussions of progressive taxation, indicates tax payments commensurate with capacity to pay.

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Corporate Profits and U.S. Taxes

The February 2, 2005, issue of *The Economist* noted that between 2003 and 2005, U.S. corporate profits rose by 60% while wage income rose by only 10%. U.S. corporate profits increased 21.3% in 2006 and, as reported by the U.S. Department of Commerce that year, accounted for the largest share of national income in 40 years (Market Watch, 2006). Yet, despite record-breaking profits and a nominal 35% tax rate, many U.S. corporations paid little or no U.S. tax. Sixty percent of the largest and most profitable corporations paid no federal income tax at all in one or more years between 1996 and 2000 (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2004). According to the well-regarded Citizens for Tax Justice (2002), low audit rates since Ronald Reagan's administration, tax breaks, and "Congressional indifference to abusive offshore corporate tax shelters," cost the U.S. taxpayers over \$170 billion annually. The Citizens for Tax Justice reports several examples of this type of corporate welfare:

- "General Electric, one of the America's most profitable corporations, reported \$50.8 billion in U.S. profits between 1996 and 2000 but paid only 11.5 percent of that in federal income taxes" (p. 1). That low tax rate reflected almost \$12 billion in lost taxes for the U.S. economy. The impact such an amount could have had on public education is huge.
- "IBM reported \$5.7 billion in U.S. profits in 2000 but paid only 3.4 percent of that in federal income taxes. In 1997, IBM reported \$3.1 billion in U.S. profits, and instead of paying taxes, got a tax rebate" (p. 2).
- "Colgate-Palmolive paid no taxes at all between 1999 and 2000, despite \$1.6 billion in reported U.S. profits. Colgate's total tax rate between 1996 and 2000 was *negative* 1.3 percent, due to \$595 million in corporate tax welfare" (p. 2). In a strategized movement to increase corporate revenue, bonuses for executives, and higher dividend checks for shareholders, the company washed its hands of the resources it could have helped provide for public education and other public goods such as healthcare, breakfast programs, and so forth—all of which lost funding in the successive budgets of the George W. Bush presidency.
- "Microsoft enjoyed more than \$12 billion in total tax breaks [between 1996 and 2000]. In fact, Microsoft actually paid no tax at all in 1999, despite \$12.3 billion in reported U.S. profits. Microsoft's tax rate for the past two years was only 1.8 percent on \$21.9 billion in pretax U.S. profits" (p. 1).

Corporate taxes have been falling worldwide. As a share of total taxation, corporate taxes have fallen by 15% and 22% in the United Kingdom and Italy, respectively, since the 1980s. They have fallen by 41% and 43% in Germany and Japan, respectively, since the 1970s; and by 53% in the U.S. since the late 1960s. As a recent report of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions revealed, the amount of money lost to tax havens in developing countries every year is equivalent to “six times the annual cost of achieving universal [worldwide] primary education” (2006, p. 25).

In the U.S., the share of the federal tax burden paid by corporations declined, from 40% in the 1940s, to 26.5% in 1950, to 10.2% in 2000. In 2001, the corporate share of total federal taxes paid by corporations was down to 9.2% (Mishel, Bernstein, & Boushey, 2003). State and local taxes paid by corporations have also declined in the U.S. In 1957, corporations provided 45% of local property tax revenues in the states, but by 1987, their share had plummeted to about 16% (Mishel et al., 2003). By 2002, the corporate share of total state and local taxes paid was only 2.9%.

Research has shown, however, that the decline in the effective state-local corporate income tax rate is due to changes in state tax law, not to shifts in economic activity toward those states with lower tax rates (Fisher, 2002). Indeed, in 15 of the 50 states, corporations pay even less than this 2.9% rate. For example, in New York in 2005, more than 60% of corporations paid only the minimum-mandated tax of \$1,500. In New Jersey, 30 of the state’s 50 largest corporations paid only the minimum tax of \$200 (Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, 2005).

An analysis of the state taxes paid between 2001 and 2003 by 252 of the largest corporations in the U.S. found that they paid on average only 2.3% of their U.S. profits in state tax payments (Citizens for Tax Justice, 2005; see also Anyon, 2005). Since the average statutory state corporate tax rate is about 6.8%, two-thirds of these companies’ profits escaped state taxes entirely. Some companies like Toys R Us, AT&T, and Merrill Lynch paid no net state income tax over the three-year period studied. The analysis points out that if these 252 corporations had paid the 6.8% average state corporate tax rate on the almost \$1 trillion in U.S. profits that they reported to their shareholders, they would have paid \$67.1 billion in state corporate income taxes over those three years. Instead, they paid only \$25.4 billion. Thus, these 252 companies avoided a total of \$41.7 billion in state corporate income taxes over those three years (Citizens for Tax Justice, 2005; see also Anyon, 2005). A 2.3% tax rate does not rank as a fair share.

Urban school districts across the U.S. are struggling to meet the needs of students, teachers, and decaying school buildings. Yet, states and city governments cry poverty as the reason these districts fall behind. One reason is

that profitable corporations are not paying their fair share of taxes. Another reason is the vastly diminished tax rates of wealthy individuals.

Individual Wealth, Poverty, and U.S. Income Taxes

Do wealthy individuals in the U.S. pay their fair share of taxes? In 1913, the income tax became a permanent feature of U.S. life via the 16th Amendment to the Constitution. By 1918, 55 income brackets had been established with a maximum individual tax rate of 77% and a corporate rate of 12%. Still, only the wealthiest 5% of the population paid income tax.

After World War I, a series of four tax cuts during the 1920s lowered the top (marginal) individual income tax rate from 77% to 25% (Phillips, 2002). During the Great Depression, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Congress raised the top individual tax brackets, implemented inheritance taxes, and eliminated personal holding companies through which some of the rich had deducted the expenses of their estates, stables, and other items. A number of other taxes were implemented as well, including taxes on capital stock and dividend receipts. The Social Security Act of 1935 imposed a wage tax, half of which was to be paid by employees and half by employers; it also increased the top individual tax rate to 79%.

During World War II, Congress dramatically expanded the reach of the income tax. The number of taxpayers grew from 4 to 43 million between 1939 and 1945. From 1940 to 1944, marginal tax rates increased from 4% to 19% for those Americans in the bottom tax bracket, while the rate for those at the top increased to 88%. During the post-World War II years of broadly shared prosperity in the U.S., income tax on the rich was high. In 1948, the marginal tax rate on the richest 1% of U.S. families was 76.9%. During the 1950s, it was 85.5%.

With regard to taxes, it seems to matter little which political party is in place: the movement toward a centrist position to protect the interests of rich party backers has been in play for decades. In 1963, Democratic President John F. Kennedy reduced tax rates for the rich back to 77%. If that were not enough, the rates for the top 1% of the nation's wealthy families were reduced even further in 1965. During the "Reagan Revolution" years of the 1980s, the top income tax bracket was cut from 70% to 28%. By 1989, the portion of the nation's wealth held by the top 1% of its richest citizens had jumped to 39% — nearly twice the share held during the New Deal and comparable to 1929 levels. Since then, U.S. tax rates for the rich have plummeted further while concentrated wealth and income have climbed.

Beginning with Reagan's administration, the effective tax rate of the median-income U.S. family increased steadily, from 5.3% in 1948 to 24.63% in 1990. Payroll taxes paid by middle-class individuals such as those mandated by FICA (the Federal Insurance Contribution Act for Social Security) and Medicare, for example, have also risen dramatically, from 6.9% in 1950 to 31.1% in 2000 (Phillips, 2002).

Nationwide, middle-income families pay almost 10% of their earnings in state and local taxes, and poor families pay more than 11%. But the richest people effectively pay only 5.2% of their income in state and local taxes. Since 1989, state and local taxes have risen for low- and middle-income taxpayers, but have fallen for the very wealthiest (Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, 2003). Thus, the burden of paying for public education is placed most heavily upon the shoulders of those who must forfeit the most to pay for it. This becomes especially problematic for school districts as they try to raise operating funds through levies since these are the only kinds of taxes that citizens can effectively vote down in the polls. Though legislators determine income tax levels and decide when to provide stimulus packages or rebates, ordinary voters can say "no" to districts that are forced to come begging for funds on election day.

The working poor also pay taxes. Despite years of tax cutting, poor families in many states still face a substantial burden when they file personal income taxes. In 2001, in almost half of the states that levy income taxes (19 out of 42 states), two-parent families (with two children) with incomes below the federal poverty line, owed income tax. In 17 of those states, single-parent families (with two children) in poverty also paid income taxes. Moreover, about half of the 23 states that do not tax the poor still tax families with incomes just above the poverty line, even though those families typically have great difficulty making ends meet. In some states, families with poverty-level incomes paid income taxes of several hundred dollars (Johnson et al., 2002).

For instance, a two-parent, two-child family in Kentucky with income at the 2001 poverty line (\$18,104 for a family of four) owed \$596 in income tax which represents the highest tax on such a family in the U.S. A single-parent family with two children in Kentucky with income at the poverty level (\$14,129) owed \$361, which is second only to the tax levied on a similar family in Alabama (\$388). These amounts can make a significant difference to a family that is struggling financially. Other states levying income taxes of \$200 or more on families with poverty-level incomes include Arkansas, Hawaii, Indiana, Michigan, Montana, Oklahoma, Oregon, Virginia, and West Virginia (Johnson et al., 2002). Federal and some state governments recognize the challenges faced by families with incomes slightly above the poverty line and have set eligibility for some assistance programs such as energy assistance, school lunch subsidies, and health care subsidies at 125% of the poverty line or above. Thirty states, however,

continue to levy income tax on families with incomes at 125% of the poverty line (Johnson et al., 2002).

The Federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), enacted by Congress in 1975, is a tax credit available to working families with incomes well below the federal poverty line to double that threshold. At its inception, the credit was relatively small, but several expansions in the late 1980s and early 1990s have changed it into the “largest federal aid program targeted to the working poor” (Berube, 2003, p.2). In 1999, the EITC lifted 4.7 million people, including 2.5 million children, above the official poverty line, making this program the most beneficial of any federal program linked to taxes. Nationally, in 2000, about 15% of all individual income tax filers claimed the EITC. In Baltimore, 26% of income tax filers were EITC; in New Orleans, 36% and many others who were eligible but did not file for the credit (Berube, 2003).

The tax break provided by the EITC is dwarfed, however, by the federal tax breaks provided to middle-class and affluent homeowners. Homeowners are allowed 5 different tax breaks that cost the government billions of dollars each year. The best known of these allows interest paid on mortgages for principal residences and/or vacation homes to be deducted on federal income tax returns. Two-thirds of the benefits go to families with high incomes (i.e., those earning over \$100,000 in 1995). The National Housing Institute calculated that the mortgage interest deduction cost the U.S. Treasury slightly more than \$58 billion in 1995. By comparison, the entire 1995 budget for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development was only \$26 billion (Zepezauer and Naiman, 1996). In 1999, mortgage and interest payment deductions for homeowners totaled \$63 billion or roughly three times HUD’s budget (Dreier, 2000). Other tax advantages of owning a home include tax-free sale provisions, deduction of state and local property taxes on federal income tax forms, and deduction of the interest paid on home equity loans. These advantages alone cost the federal government about \$38.2 billion per year (Zepezauer and Naiman, 1996). In total, the government “gives” mostly wealthy homeowners a little over \$96 billion each year.

In addition to state and local taxes (i.e., sales taxes), the wages of the working poor are taxed through payroll taxes, none of which are refunded or credited. These latter taxes include FICA, Social Security, Medicare, and employer and employee contributions. For example, a single woman with one child who worked at a job paying \$16,000 per year paid \$2,448 in payroll taxes in 2001 (Sawicky & Cherry, 2001). The Social Security payroll tax is also extremely regressive in that poor workers pay proportionally more than do rich workers. Social Security tax is paid on money earned up to a threshold of 6.2% of income or a limit of \$94,200 in 2006. After that amount, income is not taxed for Social

Security. Wealthy earners pay only the 1.45% Medicare portion of the payroll tax on their earnings over that limit.

As federal income tax has been cut, a larger and larger portion of federal revenues has come from payroll taxes. At the end of World War II, payroll taxes provided 2% of federal revenues; in 2002, they provided 37%. Consequently, major tax cuts of the past 25 years have been heavily tilted toward the rich, and federal payroll taxes have been increased to compensate for those lost revenues. The payroll taxes rose substantially in the 1980s. During those same years, however, President Reagan was cutting income taxes for the rich (Reich, 2002). Since the taxes on middle-class families' incomes have risen substantially and the rich have seen a lessening of the monies they must pay in income taxes, the U.S. tax burden has shifted so that it is now heavier for low- and middle-class families.

The wealthy in the U.S. simply do not pay taxes commensurate with what they could, and should, pay; and the wealthy do not pay their fair share because the people who hold positions in government have acquiesced to their demands, in order to guarantee their election to office or their continuation in office. The inadequacy of the rich's contributions to U.S. tax coffers, and of U.S. corporations' share of the national tax burden, leaves state and city coffers miserably low and lacking in the funds needed for urban school districts to function effectively.

The Effects of Corporations Not Paying Fair Taxes

The foregoing discussion of U.S. taxation and tax rates reveals that the effects of past tax legislation have huge consequences for schools and the people who work and learn in them. Poor facilities alone in underfunded urban districts could have benefited significantly from additional resources purchased if their tax revenues had been adequate. If the founders of Microsoft find it beneficial to their corporate interests to bypass paying taxes and, instead, set up a tax-protected foundation; they, in fact, take control of what is taught, who teaches, and who can benefit from the dollars that their company and supporting foundation take in yearly. This is problematic on many levels. It is interesting that a prime component of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's focus, according to co-founder Bill Gates, Sr. (2009), is "to create better high schools." Noting that the foundation has made over \$2 billion in grants since its inception, the elder Gates maintains that its goal is "to give schools extra money over a period of time to make changes in the way [high schools are] organized (including reducing their size), in how the teachers worked, and in the curriculum." This thinking suggests that the Gates Foundation evidently has a better sense of how to fund successful educational programs than do the educators who work within the schools, given

that those programs are supported not with tax dollars but with foundation monies, which are granted to those who know best how to write the type of grant proposal the elite will favor.

Moreover, philanthropic donations do not make up for the dearth of taxes paid by wealthy individuals and businesses. As reported in a *Fortune* magazine study, although Bill Gates and billionaire investor Warren Buffet donate a lot of the money, the wealthy give away only 1.1% of their income on average. One percent, however, is a much, much smaller amount than their statutory tax rate. It is also less than you and I pay in taxes, and less than that paid by the wealthy of Europe.

It would be comforting to be able to say that inequities in funding are the product of one or another political party. However, this is not the case. John F. Kennedy, a sitting Democratic president, as has been said, reduced the taxes paid by the rich. One might ask at this juncture why such actions were taken by a Democratic sitting president; at the same time, one might conjecture that a political party does not matter as much as maintaining and complementing the privileges enjoyed as part of the ruling class.

Funding for Urban Education

The Education Trust, an independent, Washington, D.C.-based group, monitors funding available to city school districts and, in a 2001 study, demonstrated cities' lack of financial resources. That study, titled "The Funding Gap: Low-Income and Minority Students Receive Fewer Dollars," reports that in most states, school districts that educate the largest number of poor and minority students—namely, urban districts—have fewer state and local dollars to spend per student than do the districts with the least number of poor and minority students. The study also points out that the districts that educate the largest number of poor students receive an average of \$966 less per pupil than do low-poverty districts.

These district funding gaps add up to significant gaps per school. For example, in New York, the state with the largest discrepancy, a difference of \$2,152 per student was found between the state and local revenues available to low-poverty districts. For a typical New York elementary school of 400 students, this amounts to a difference of \$860,800 in funding annually. The per-student funding gaps translate into the following schoolwide gaps per year in other states: in Illinois, \$824,000; in Montana, \$614,000; in Pennsylvania, \$499,200; and in Michigan, \$441,200. These schoolwide income gaps confound the effects of family poverty because the students who do not have resources at home are more likely to receive the fewest resources at school. Such disparities are even more disturbing when one realizes that these monies could ensure that students in poor

urban areas receive the resources they need. More equitable funding would pay for the highly qualified teachers who flee poor areas, and for the instructional time and additional resources that research and data conclude are needed for leveling the playing field.

The Education Trust repeated the same study in 2005 with similar results. It found that in 27 of 49 states studied, the highest-poverty school districts still received fewer resources than did the lowest-poverty districts, with a disparity of \$907 per student. In 30 states, high-minority districts received less money per child than did low-minority districts. The 2005 analysis also made a 40% adjustment upward in funds necessary for support services for children growing up in poverty, as do the federal government and many other educational finance analyses. This adjustment means that if a state provides districts with \$5,000 for each non low-income student, equity demands that at least \$7,000 be provided for each low-income student. With this adjustment, the number of states that underfund school districts serving large numbers of poor children grows to 38, and the average gap goes from \$907 to \$1,436 (The Education Trust, 2005).

This underfunding means that little if any money remains to meet the extra needs of children living in poor families. This leads to less-qualified teachers, larger class sizes, fewer materials, fewer curriculum options like advanced courses, fewer computers and college counselors, older and less technologically capable buildings, and several other severe consequences, many of which have been widely documented (Anyon, 1997; Kozol, 1990).

It is tempting to despair that urban children and families will never be provided what they need to get ahead. However, the history of our country demonstrates that people have, on many occasions, risen to the task of changing unfair laws and practices. It is to this issue of community engagement and activism that I now turn.

Reclaiming Public Education through Social Movements

Too often, we believe that a simple change in political parties occupying government seats will make the difference needed to achieve educational and other forms of social equity. This is not the case. The heads of government may change, but the interests of the political and economic elites constantly converge, especially when it comes to the taxes those elites should pay. At the same time, we, the people, have organized and achieved significant changes that have increased equality substantially over time. Such changes have been wrought by social movement organizing. My reading of American history has shown that

although the progressive social movements have not always been successful (as the aborted immigrants' rights movement of the early 21st century attests), throughout U.S. history, social movements from the political left have often had profound results. I include among these the populist movement of the late 1800s, the socialist movement of the early 1900s, the 1930s labor movement, the civil rights movement, both women's rights movements of the 20th century, and the aborted immigrants' rights movement of the early 21st century. Such movements have led to passage of a number of social policies that have increased the rights of working people, women, and minorities and to important policy accommodations on the part of governments and social institutions.

Social movements can sometimes change education. Although in many ways the U.S. education system remains much the same as it was in 1900, progressive changes have been wrought by the concerted protest of Americans involved in social movements. For example, immigrants' struggles for education in the early 1900s yielded adult worker education and Catholic schools for children. The civil rights movement led to national Head Start programs as well as increased recognition and educational opportunities for African Americans and other minorities nationwide. Latino struggles resulted in bilingual education programs. The 1970s women's movement yielded curricular change as well as increased entitlements for girls and women in schools and districts. Organizing around issues facing persons with disabilities prompted federal protections and entitlements for that group of Americans. Low-income parents in urban neighborhoods are organizing today for better schools in their communities and, if their efforts continue and coalesce, they potentially could build a new social movement for educational civil rights.

Throughout U.S. history, social movements have served as catalysts for the implementation of legislation and policies leading to greater social justice and equity as well as progressive court decisions (Anyon, 2005). Yet, how do social movements form, and what catapults them to national attention at certain historical moments? For people to take action against political or social oppression, they must see clearly the systematic causes of their subordination. Community and other grassroots organizers work to transform subordinated or excluded people's fear into anger, moral indignation, and action directed at the system. To develop systemic analyses of subordination, they discuss local issues by connecting personal and neighborhood problems to regional, national, and sometimes global processes aligned with powerful groups (Della Porta & Diani, 2006). Community organizers also provide information that demonstrates the ways an existing system, program, or policy contributes to the difficulties individuals or groups may be experiencing.

Moreover, in order for people to take action, they must believe that they have the power to bring about change (Piven & Cloward, 1977). To build this

confidence, movement organizers work to provide fledging groups with small “wins.” To attract members, organizers must demonstrate to community members that participation in social movement organizations will yield some of the deepest pleasures of life—namely, a sense of community, connectedness, and meaning (Jasper, 1997).

An individual’s ability to participate in a movement, however, is facilitated by a variety of personal and social resources including sufficient income and time to attend meetings and protests, available organizations and alliances to join, ties to these networks, and effective leadership (Diani & McAdam, 2003; McAdam, 1982). The prevailing cultural context may also influence participation in movements. If critical public discourses or artistic works such as novels on the topic of concern are available in the media or, if critical scholarship on a topic reaches people in communities, then ideas in support of change may circulate in discussion and facilitate dissent and participation. Additionally, the political environment sometimes affects whether people join movements and may contribute to the form and intensity of collective action taken. For example, electoral instability in a country may encourage dissent and protest. Political opportunities such as the availability of influential allies, the tolerance for protest among elites, and the openness of the political system may also facilitate social movement building (McAdam, 1982; McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001). In sum, sympathetic scholarly observers often see the “zeitgeist” as an important factor in determining whether and when movements build and grow.

However, as I argued in a recent book (Anyon, 2005), a typically unacknowledged factor influencing the ascendance of social movements is the decades-long prior preparation by individuals or groups—what civil rights movement activist Ella Baker called “spadework.” For example, Blacks in the American South had been resisting, demonstrating, and confronting the courts for five decades before the movement to end legalized segregation gained national notice in the 1950s. Similarly, the development over the years of activist networks and organizations, and the cumulative impact of sympathetic legal decisions laid the foundation for the success of the nationally catalyzing Montgomery bus boycott in 1955.

Moreover, an open political system or acceptance of protest by political elites is not always necessary for movements to build or erupt. Movements sometimes grow rapidly and come to flower during decades of political conservatism and extreme repression. The decade in which the American civil rights movement burst onto the national scene was one of virulent McCarthyism and conservative dominance in politics. The decades leading up to the Montgomery bus boycott, when community and labor organizers in the South were building that movement, were marked by an exceedingly repressive environment regarding racial rights (see Kelley, 1990).

Of importance to public engagement efforts today may be the realization that the political conservatism and federal attitudes toward dissent in the 1950s were not terribly different from the zeitgeist of the current era. The PATRIOT (Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism) and Homeland Security acts and the resulting abrogation of civil liberties to fight a so-called “war on terror” attest to that. There may be reason for optimism, however. The last quarter century of community organizing for school reform may have prepared the ground for substantial change. The year 2000 brought with it 25 years of legal battles at the state level to remove urban educational inequities. Over 70% of these court cases were successful, and many new state mandates subsequently were written by the courts. More than a few await the public political pressure that might force full funding. These cases, and the years of education organizing that preceded them and that continue today, may provide the legitimation and leverage needed for national movement building. With collaboration, a joint vision, and a fortuitous catalyst, public engagement efforts like education, organizing, and alliance-building could develop into a national social movement.

What would facilitate such growth? Education reformers must engage in the public conversations and actions that have emerged in low-income communities around issues that are intimately related to educational achievement, but that have not been part of most education reform efforts to date. These issues include the struggles for living wages, decent jobs, health care and housing, and immigrant rights. If education activists could collaborate with groups already working in these arenas, social movement building and, perhaps, the production of lasting equity might result.

Conclusion

As I have argued, taxes paid by wealthy individuals and corporations are—and have been—unfairly low. The inadequacy of their payments robs the public storehouse of money for public education and other needed services in low-income areas. Still, in 2006, the U.S. government spent \$8 billion a month on the war in Iraq, almost all of which was paid by borrowing from other countries which can now hold this country economically hostage while vastly increasing the federal debt. Even more staggering is the interest that U.S. taxpayers pay to the wealthy individuals and corporations that hold the bonds and other forms of debt incurred in our names as urban children go begging.

Urban children are hungry for a decent education, and their schools cannot nourish them. Fairness and decency demand that we collect taxes from those who can afford to pay, commensurate with their ability to pay, and that we use these monies to “feed” our neediest students and schools. Accomplishing this will

require concerted and sustained social organization and protest; for history has shown us that the rich and powerful give away little without pressure.

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Views and Reviews

Silenced Students: Education's Absent Voices

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Our children are our futures, or, more aptly and far more darkly, our children are our canaries. As of now, they are languishing in the toxic mine shaft of zero tolerance policy in the United States. In 2004, there were 3,279,745 students suspended and 106,222 expelled from elementary and secondary schools in the United States – a 9% increase in suspensions and a 7% increase in expulsions since 2000 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). School suspensions and expulsions have become widely accepted school-discipline practices— with complicit and pernicious links to overall dropout rates, to the juvenile justice system, and to future incarceration as an adult.

There is gross racial disproportionality in terms of suspensions and expulsions, with the vast majority of excluded children comprising children of color; so that an analysis of African American youth in the juvenile justice system reveals that 56% of youth report prior school suspensions (U.S. Department of Justice, 2006). The majority of expelled children are early adolescents in grades 7 through 9; once expelled their own futures are placed in jeopardy as they confront poverty, life on the streets, and the school-to-prison pipeline (Advancement and Civil Rights Project, 2000).

Forty-one percent of incarcerated people in the United States have not completed high school or its equivalent (Harlow, 2003), compared to 18% of adults in the general public. Yet, by way of comparison, it costs approximately \$10,000 per year to educate a child and almost \$24,000 per year to incarcerate a person (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006; Pew Center on the States, 2008). The links between poverty and lack of education are also striking. The National Center for Children in Poverty reports that 83% of children whose parents do not have a high school degree and 58% of children whose parents have a high school degree, but no college education, live in low-income families (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2007).

Political leaders and policymakers vow to leave no child behind. Yet, millions of poor children have no access to health care, housing, education, after-school care or child care. Attention must be paid to Jean Anyon's persuasive

argument that current social and political realities spell doom for the professed ideals of our nation. Her warnings about administrative decisions that drain urban communities of resources and create an untenable chasm between rich and poor are prescient. In her book, *Radical Possibilities* (2005), she argues:

Contrary to the assumptions of education policy analysts who argue that ‘money doesn’t matter’ and contradicting federal legislation (e.g., the No Child Left Behind Act) that assumes that it does not, low urban property tax receipts and insufficient additional school financing have devastating effects on public education.” (p.63)

The decades-long policies that honored market fundamentalism as a natural and irrevocable force of nature, while ignoring human consequences, crumbled dramatically in 2008. The third quarter of the twentieth century had promised a real change in the supremacy of excessive individualism that historically permeated American attitudes. In education, during the 1950s, *Brown v. Board of Education* dismissed the shibboleth that separate was equal and established the right of all children regardless of race or ethnicity to equal educational opportunities. *Brown* was followed by special education mandates in the mid-1970s that detailed procedures that would provide free, appropriate education for even our most disabled children.

With access to education seemingly assured for all children, it appeared that we would be free to focus on delivery of quality programs and services and on challenging barriers to intellectual and social growth. But, in the 1980s, the Reagan era reverted to America’s obsession with rugged individualism. Personal responsibility is the lens through which we, once again, evaluate both individuals and social conditions. Recognition of the equally essential requirement of concomitant social responsibility has been eliminated. The environment that permitted the financially comfortable to assert, without embarrassment, that their taxes were excessive was part of a trend that has been rampant since the 1980’s. If there is a political will to change the disastrous conditions that result in homelessness, incarceration, and lack of access to health care, it will take much time and energy. Meanwhile, many of our children struggle as invisible “others” in healthy, wealthy, White America. They cannot wait, and we cannot delay in addressing their needs.

And, here in Michigan, policymakers and the media continue to warn us that we must educate all our children if we are to have the human resources essential for an economically vibrant state. Yet, uncounted numbers of children are pushed out or thrown out of school. They disappear from plans that focus on constructive change and are moved to “problem” categories to be incarcerated, controlled or criminally neglected. For example, both the laws and the intent of the laws governing special education have been eroded so that children in obvious

need of supportive services are often left to fend for themselves— until they make a misstep at which point they are harshly punished. As we treat our children, so will our country prosper or further decline.

Children in Michigan can be expelled permanently with no obligation for alternative education or support. The consequences of racialized educational inequality and zero-tolerance policies are evident when we consider graduation rates: Sixty-six percent of Michigan's high school students graduated on time in 2003. Of these, only 23% of Native American students, 32% of African American students, and 35% of Latino/a students graduated on time, in contrast to 75% of White students (Education Trust, 2006). In that same year, 8% of Michigan teens ages 16-19 were neither employed nor in school, and 6% were identified as high school dropouts, a percentage just below the national average of 7% for 'drop-outs' (Kids Count, 2008).

Following passage of the federal Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994, zero tolerance school policies and informal exclusion practices have swept the nation. While the Act is limited to firearms, states have enacted a plethora of broad regulations governing student behavior. Michigan's mandatory expulsion laws are particularly onerous but representative of conditions nationwide. In Michigan children have no constitutional right to an education. Children of any age can be suspended or expelled for a variety of behaviors deemed inappropriate and released to the streets with no obligation of any system to supervise or support them. Zero tolerance policies in Michigan are far more severe than those required by federal law and include the following: The permanent removal of expelled students from all public schools in the state with no obligation to reinstate a child even after a full year of expulsion; no standards for ascertaining either the validity of charges or the determination of the penalty; no recourse beyond the school district for students to appeal a decision (legal recourse is expensive and, unavailable to all but a very few); and a requirement that school officials to report 'criminal behavior' to law enforcement agencies. It is the responsibility of the family to petition for reinstatement in school with no obligation of any agency to assist in such preparation, as well as the responsibility of the family to provide alternative education, although there is no concomitant obligation for any state agency to provide such services. There is little oversight by the State Department of Education of local districts as well as an absence of accurate and comprehensive data about who is affected by these policies, and the long-range consequences for children (Zweifler & deBeers, 2000).

In my capacity as founder and director of the Michigan Student Advocacy Center from 1975-2004, I most often addressed the damaging consequences of expulsion practices, as well as the critical erosion of public education in favor of privatization and home schooling. Jean Anyon has argued powerfully about the possibilities for youth empowerment; so, too, at the Student Advocacy Center, we

have long believed that it is critical to listen to the voices of students, as opposed to the administrative language that shapes our perceptions of “troublemaker” students. The term “dropout” blames and places the onus on the student, thereby masking the consequences of educational policies that push-out, ignore-out and throw-out— all practices employed by educational administrators to rid themselves of unwanted students. Over the years, as I have spoken to children and youth, either individually or in groups, the constant message and request has been “talk with us... acknowledge us!” From my first interviews many years ago with students, the issues of respect and failure to communicate are threaded through their experiences and perceptions. In meetings and conferences with teachers and administrators I often heard, “This child lacks self-esteem.” My own sense is not that the children lack self-esteem, but that they are absorbing and reflecting the perceived lack of recognition of themselves, their dreams, and their abilities by significant adults in the educational environment. Even the youngest children are aware of the unspoken messages and expectations:

In the following section, children who have been disrespected and punished and marginalized in school speak for themselves:¹

Students’ Voices

Vernon, a 10th grader at a suburban high school explained, “When they say I did something, I don’t say nothin’ because, if I say ‘I didn’t,’ they say I’m lyin’ and then I get in more trouble.”

Mario, a Detroit 10th grader had recently been transferred to a mainstream school from a special disciplinary program. When asked what turned him around he said, simply, “I had a counselor. She talked to me.” When someone suggested that it would be interesting to compare resources at the different Detroit high schools, this was his astounding reply, “Oh, no! That wouldn’t work because they would say, ‘Those kids at Cass Tech and Renaissance High, they deserve!’”

Eight-year-old Cal was asked whether she was ever told that she couldn’t participate in a school activity. “Oh no! They don’t say that. It’s like, when you say, ‘Can I be in a different reading group?’ They say, ‘You be happier where you are.’”

Chris, a talented artist, was not thriving academically. When he was evaluated, his mom and advocate were able to observe through a one-way mirror. When the time came to hear the results of the tests, the diagnostician emphasized Chris’ inability to move beyond concrete thinking. One of the questions was, “How are

¹ Student Advocacy Case Files. All names are changed to protect confidentiality

a poem and a statue alike?” The advocate recalled that his response, “They both make you wonder.” struck her as both poetic and abstract: The diagnostician leafed through her manual, and replied that the answer was not acceptable.

Carmen was twelve when she was brought to her counselor’s office because of a verbal altercation with a friend just before school started. While in the office she told her counselor that she didn’t want to get in any more trouble. She had a knife in her backpack that she then gave him. He took the knife and left the room, returning with the vice principal who told her she was expelled. At the hearing a School Board trustee asked Carmen why she had the knife. This child, an indifferent student, replied, “You know, in winter, you wear a coat. It keeps you warm. The knife made me feel safe.” No one asked why she felt unsafe. No adult asked what could be done to help her feel safe. She was permanently expelled.

The proliferation of laws, policies, and practices, ostensibly to assure school safety, has poisoned the school environment. Surely all this effort must reflect the reality of the dangers lurking everywhere. Teachers are on the lookout for trouble. Students eye each other anxiously. A student in trouble is unlikely to turn to an adult for counsel or help knowing that the response is more likely to be harsh punishment. Trust has been eroded for successful students as well as for their struggling peers. Zero Tolerance policies and practices have even dismantled the myth and rhetoric of schools as nurturing places. As we hear policymakers proclaim the urgency of assuring a well-educated citizenry we continue to remove children from school through expulsions, push-outs and throw-outs. With the acceptance of zero tolerance as a philosophy, children whose behavior falls far short of expulsion consequences are, nevertheless, treated with similar consequences and barriers to access to education.

Children from scorned groups are overwhelmed by the messages, both explicit and subtle, about their abilities, aspirations and worth. These messages are at variance with the child’s inchoate sense of self. Opportunities to develop and articulate the child’s own self perception must be a heady and liberating experience. I wonder what might happen with more such opportunities. Interestingly, at a recent roundtable discussions convened by the ACLU in Northern California, the participants – a diverse group who work on these issues from many perspectives—all advocated much more serious efforts to allow students their own voices in stating both the problems and possible solutions in their schools (2007). To do so will take practice and sustained support.

It is possible to assure, safe, well disciplined schools while guaranteeing that even our most troubled or troubling children will be provided with the intellectual and social skills to become active, productive members of our society. But in order to do so, ALL children must be guaranteed an appropriate public

education; accurate data about school expulsions must be critically analyzed and disseminated; due process protections in state codes must be codified; clear standards for alternative education must be implemented and the disproportionate racial impact on children of color must be addressed; and the proactive identification of students with special needs (including substance abuse) in order to provide supportive services, *not* punishment, is essential.

Ideally, schools would provide new tools and open fresh pathways for young students. Pressure to pass stultifying progress tests smother such possibilities and diminish the likelihood that new ideas will be nourished. But, as we consider the pervasive and destructive consequences of poverty for some—and affluence for the rest of us—I argue that we can build a youth movement by changing the way we regard children and that we can empower our children to make their own future. Jean Anyon’s recommendations for a new, participatory model that honors the insights of all members of a community offers a blueprint for hope and change. Harsh disciplinary practices and failure to provide any due process to children, who should be learning how to live according to our professed democratic ideals, are learning, instead, that power and autocratic authority (or tyranny?) are the preferred modes. There is another way of relating to children. It does not even cost money. But it does require a drastic change in attitude and practice. The question is: can we, and most importantly, *will* we do it?

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Democracy and Schools at Stake: Lessons from Meier and Noguera

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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. (Dewey, 1915/1965, p. 7)

These words from philosopher John Dewey are repeated time and again in the literature on the quality of education in the United States. In their Porter lecture presentations and in their earlier research and writing, Deborah Meier (1995) and Pedro Noguera (2003) respond to Dewey's appraisal in the context of urban schools—a limb of American society that they contend is viewed too commonly as failing by a nation that prides itself on wealth, freedom, and political power. By contrast, what wealth, freedom, or political power do urban schools enjoy? The dizzying answer, from the supervisors at these schools to their teaching staffs and their students, seems to be little to none.

In her 1995 work, *The Power of their Ideas*, Meier describes with stunning humility and striking self-reflection her journey toward establishing dynamic education reforms in New York City's Central Park East elementary and secondary schools. In *City Schools and the American Dream*, Noguera (2003) takes a hard look at the environmental factors that affect urban schools in the United States, switching between the wide and narrow lenses of schooling and society. As both scholars contend, the challenges facing urban schools are shared in common by many U.S. schools. They offer, however, that the possibilities of reform in urban schools can serve as a guide for combating the strains found not only in schools throughout this society, but also in the maintenance of democracy itself.

Public schools in the U.S. are diverse because they aim to serve the populations that reside in particular neighborhoods. This diversity can pertain to religion, language, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, culture, history, neighborhood condition and safety, community resources, or countless other identity characterizations; but when diverse families send their diverse groups of children to public schools, these characterizations either compete or unite. It rests upon the schools to either address the differing needs of students and families—to level the playing field, so to speak—or to subordinate the needs of the minority to those of the dominant social and economic groups, thus reproducing the status quo.

Educators know that hunger, domestic violence, homelessness, illness, and insufficient resources can deter students from high academic achievement, yet rarely are these issues discussed inside the doors of urban schools. It is as if district administrators believe that a certain brand of fashionable school reform—one focusing mostly on learning materials and benchmarks rather than on the learners themselves—can provide the silver-bullet solution. While adults turn a blind eye to students' physical, mental, and emotional suffering, students continue to bear the burden of society's inequalities. In such models of schooling, students are neither accommodated nor supported by education; rather, they are forced to accommodate their schools' shortsightedness and achieve despite their surroundings.

Noguera maintains that school administrators adopt a narrow focus on raising student achievement “not because they do not understand that a broad array of social and economic factors influence academic outcomes, but because they lack the resources to address the external conditions that have an impact on student learning” (p. 88). Noting that public school resources are supplied by local, state, and federal funds as well as the private and public sector, he claims that shortages exist even in affluent districts because “the ties between schools and public and private institutions are not well developed” (p. 143). Regardless, the dust need not settle aimlessly on the cracked walls and dirty windows that too often stereotype urban education. Genuine acknowledgment that hunger, domestic violence, homelessness, illness, and insufficient resources affect learning suggests that schools must adopt an additional set of responsibilities.

Noguera cites a number of schools that have accepted these responsibilities by committing themselves to being a source of social support for students. These schools provide students and students' families with vital resources such as first aid, dental care, pregnancy counseling, immunizations, meals, clothing, shoes, and after school tutorial programs. He further describes teachers who go beyond their traditional obligations to help students find jobs, get out of jail, or to gain access to scholarships, advanced placement classes, and college information. He points out that these educators take a more expansive attitude in addressing violence in urban schools, and they recognize the underlying challenge of teaching students who often have no strong visions of their future. They amend these shortfalls by providing tutoring, mentoring, job training and placement, counseling, college tours and advising, field trips, and more.

Urban schools that really do what it takes to educate their students pledge themselves to their students and communities—even if it means staffing a clinic on the school site and providing health care, dental care, glasses, and clothing. When such support systems are put into place and are found to be successful in raising student achievement, the questions then become: Why have they not

spread rapidly across the country? How can politicians and a concerned public constantly cycle through educational reforms and rhetoric focused on ‘proper’ assessments and achievement gains, while ignoring the humanity of those for whom education is intended?

Noguera maintains that society cannot place blame only on schools for not accepting the responsibility of raising future generations; that responsibility belongs to us all. He offers that long-term solutions remain a challenge because local governments cannot independently control the variety of factors that affect education. To enact actual, long-term change, he contends, society must accept responsibility for the endeavors of education.

Meier’s (1995) argument is that this communally responsible and rewarded perspective of education evokes democracy’s core values. She purports that everyone must have an active hand and voice in the shaping of a system that plays such an important role in defining our society’s present and future. She calls upon the nation’s citizenry to share power in educational reform with the consciousness that power must always be shared. This means that policy must not only follow the whims of a majority group; it also must make certain that the majority listens to the systemically marginalized and silenced. The flagrant lines drawn between the dominant “us” and the othered “them” cannot last in a system that is dependent on buy-in from all its members.

This view also counters initiatives supporting school vouchers and the privatization of schools, approaches that often snub neighbors of diverse race, religion, linguistic, or economic needs. As Meier explains:

What all forms of privatization hold in common is pulling back from concern for our shared public fate. They reward us for arriving at solutions that ignore, compete with, or even injure our neighbor’s child without having to think about the possible consequences. (p. 79)

To survive as a strong, united democracy, our nation cannot afford this separatism of regard of one citizen for another. According to Noguera, “allies with resources and a willingness to help [are] instrumental in making change possible” (p. 152). This communal support, dialogue, and action must exist within schools as well. A school’s effectiveness depends not only on the strength of its connections between the community outside of the school but also on the community within the school, including the relationships and distribution of power among teaching staff, students, and supervisors.

Both Noguera and Meier, in their respective writings and lectures, illustrate how these collaborative and respectful partnerships solve problems more meaningfully and how they nurture student achievement. Noguera (2003) describes the *Youth Together* and the *Diversity Project*, both of which are led by student and parent assemblies that are often left behind in fashionable educational

reforms. These projects affirmed these stakeholders' voices as they sought to define their experiences, concerns, or opinions in forums that honored their position in the school. Establishing these open lines of communication yielded more authentic results for the school to consider and helped to "[shift] the focus of conversation about student achievement away from a search for blame and toward a search for solutions" (p. 73).

For Meier, collaboration means building into staff schedules time to pool resources, critique one another, and act as a team. At the Central Park East schools that are the focus of her 1995 book, meetings to make decisions about the school are open to students, families, and all who wish to participate. Challenges are presented in a straightforward way to students, with the solution left open to be determined by everyone, not simply the school supervisors. Meier notes that she found ways to be a strong leader in her schools, without assuming the customarily hierarchical posture of school system authorities. She trusted and respected her teachers, students, and families enough to dialogue with them through meetings and newsletters. In essence, she remained faithful to their needs and avoided being dictated to by a separate administrative unit or by popular schooling fads. In excerpts from her newsletters to school community members, she comes across as an approachable, imperfect human being who is passionate and keen to learn how to improve her schools and find allies. She actively sought the thoughts and feelings of parents and students, designating meeting spaces and salary for participants, distributing surveys, inviting their participation on hiring committees and portfolio judging, and daring them to respond to three critical questions: "What kind of school *are* we?" (p. 158); "What more ought I do? (p. 88); and "How might I make a difference?" (p. 88). Meier's Central Park East examples demonstrate the possibilities inherent in Dewey's concept of schools as laboratories.

Schools, like democracies, are reborn and redefined with each generation. Progress in schools and democracies consist of endless, deliberate, and collaboratively chosen, forward-moving patterns that simultaneously question, challenge, adjust, and expand the actions their constituents set in motion. The five habits of mind that Meier cites as critical for establishing these patterns are guided by the following additional questions: "How do you know what you know? What's your evidence? How and where does what you've learned 'fit in'? Could things have been otherwise? and Who cares, what difference does it make?" (p. 156). Not only are these questions that steer students toward a sense of shared values and success at school; they also are fundamental questions at the heart of democracy. Practicing these habits of mind presents students, families, and educators with the right and responsibility of democratic citizens—namely, to question and think critically about their conditions at school and opportunities. Traditionally, schools have preserved a rigid authoritarian model that seems

neither realistic, respectful, nor conducive to a democratic society. Though her ideas may seem simply reasonable, Meier makes a bold case for preparing students for democracy by ensuring that they practice democratic values in school.

Noguera and Meier concur that small schools can consistently make decisions that are inclusive of student perspective and school culture. Such settings, they contend, more easily affirm the democratic pillar of providing public space to talk and listen so that students can participate, in authentic ways, in school decision-making processes. They further afford increased opportunities to put into place Meier's "school at work" model, which simply and practically mirrors the adult democratic values that are students' right and responsibility to learn and to practice. Small school size also means that school procedures can be implemented more rapidly and effectively, absent the need for complex methods to discipline, threaten, or punish students for noncompliance. Solutions integrate everyone's voices, building in cooperation and peace. Students and staff do not feel lost in oceans of people; instead, they are more likely to be recognized, affirmed, and transparently cared for as individuals with ideas that are respected. The result, these two educators maintain, is improved performance and students, parents, and teachers who show concern for their environment.

As Noguera explains, when a school building's atmosphere is prison-like and expectant of crime—replete with metal detectors and ever-present surveillance cameras—the learning space becomes more, rather than less, threatening. Danger and instability are normalized in such settings; trust and suspicion about who belongs in school and who does not—factors often related to race and gender—become misplaced. He proffers that small schools and classes, especially those that are ordered strategically around a sense of connection and relationships, counter the coldness and isolating anonymity that is often inherent in large schools. Students, teachers, and families can forge more substantial relationships that do not disappear at the end of a class hour or semester or even at the end of a school year.

By example, Meier notes that the teachers at the small Central Park East schools see their students for extended lengths of time. They have sufficient departmental meeting time to coordinate instructional plans, to exchange information about students with other teachers, and to better meet the needs of students who might be experiencing absences, difficulties, or problematic interests or social behaviors. If students are cutting class, engaging in sexual harassment or vandalism, or experiencing a challenge—or if they have something to celebrate (e.g., weddings, graduations, or birthdays)—these issues can be addressed promptly and personally. This individualized attention sends a strong message that upholds the values of the school community.

In their teaching, research, writing, and lecturing, Deborah Meier and Pedro Noguera have conceptualized and brought to fruition the important ties of democracy that, when sewn into the fabric of our public schools, can help secure this nation's democracy. Their work makes clear that the path to social justice ultimately must take a social course that is inclusive of all the many voices in the "choir" of stakeholders. The survival of our national democracy rests in the power of schools, families, students, and communities. As Noguera (2003) succinctly concludes: "What is at stake are children's lives and the kind of society we will become" (p. 157).

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Poverty, Schools, and Educational Possibilities

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Urban schools cannot make significant and lasting systemic changes alone! That is one of the central arguments made by John W. Porter lecturers Pedro Noguera and Deborah Meier both in their earlier writings and recent presentations. Noguera's and Meier's work encompasses the internal and external factors that significantly affect urban schools and the quality of urban education. The challenges facing urban schools are numerous, and the solutions are not readily apparent. As our nation strives for positive change in its systems of schooling, we educators must do everything we can to address these factors.

Focusing solely on internal factors such as high staff turnover, morale, organizational climate and culture, facilities and instructional materials, and emotional and physical safety concerns will yield only limited improvements in student achievement. As Noguera (2003) contends, schools must also find ways to address key external factors, which include demographic and socioeconomic conditions, neighborhood instability, poverty, social isolation, crime, housing affordability and stability, economics, health care access, and local and state politics. "Until there is a genuine commitment to address the social context of schooling, to confront the 'urban condition,'" he writes, "it will be impossible to bring about significant and sustainable improvements in urban schools" (p. 6).

Noguera applies Paulo Freire's (1969) concepts to many of these internal and external factors, referring to them as "limit situations" or problems that call for thoughtful reflection, critical thinking, and engagement (p. 154). A central argument shared by both Meier and Noguera focuses on the search for continual opportunities for change and the capacity to seize opportunities and take action. According to Noguera, "possibilities for change must constantly be assessed and reflected upon so that strategies for countering these conditions can be devised" (p. 16). Meier's (2002) examples of the changes that took place within Central Park East (CPE) Elementary School in New York City's East Harlem District 4 provide evidence of the impact and effectiveness of a community of learners comprised of students, staff, and parents. The CPE school setting was one in which the members of that community were continually reflecting upon possibilities for change, devising strategies for problems others viewed as constraints, and taking action—even if only to develop partial solutions.

Noguera contends that even partial solutions must be developed based on a thorough understanding of the limits and possibilities. Too often in urban public

schools, internal and external factors have been viewed as insurmountable constraints and thus ignored completely. Awareness of these problems and challenges, coupled with a belief in and commitment to the possibilities of positive change, helps empower learning communities in urban public schools to envision the partial solutions that are within their circle of control. For example, although urban public schools cannot address the overall health care dilemma faced by many of their students and families, they can forge partnerships with health care service providers to offer direct health care within school buildings.

It is difficult not to notice that the majority of concerns that have been identified as evidence or indicators that urban schools are failing tend to place the blame on schools and districts, suggesting that poor local control is at the root of this problem. Noguera contends that the bigger picture should focus on external factors: “Failure to undertake a more ambitious effort to improve conditions in impoverished urban areas means that schools serving poor children will continue to suffer, and schools cannot alleviate the suffering by themselves” (p. 148). He declares that the term *failure* is often used to describe urban public schools in the United States because there are so many problems to address. Low grades, high dropout rates, poor attendance, and generally unmotivated students are among the concerns he raises. He also indicates concerns with burned out teachers, unsafe buildings, inefficient bureaucracies, and an endless series of reforms without genuine improvement. However, the blame game must stop. It is not moving our nation collectively toward finding solutions to the problems urban public schools face.

Both Noguera and Meier express concern about school vouchers and privatization, asserting that our nation must reclaim its systems of public education. Public schools, they contend, are the only social institutions that cannot turn any child away. All children in this country have a right to attend public school; it is a form of social entitlement that operates under democratic principles. More specifically, however, they argue that all children should be guaranteed access to high-quality schools and education. According to Noguera,

[r]ather than being regarded as hopelessly unfixable, urban public schools, particularly that serve poor children, must be seen for what they are: the last and most enduring remnant of the social safety net for poor children in the United States. (p. 7)

Meier offers similar views: “In schools that are public, citizens are joined by right, not by privilege” (p. 7). She adds:

Schools dependent upon private clienteles, schools that can get rid of unwanted kids or troublemaker families, exclude on the basis of this or that set of beliefs, and toss aside the “losers,” not only can avoid the democratic arts of compromise

and tolerance but also implicitly foster lessons about the power of money and privilege. (p. 7)

Noguera and Meier also agree on the issue of school choice. Shared empowerment of individuals and families within public schools is critical, as well as the sense of community. Meier absolutely values choice and empowerment within public schools, in providing families with options regarding the school their children attend, as well as the critical role families play within the school structure. In Central Park East Elementary, many schools of choice were offered to families within the public schools. Noguera (2003) addresses the *captured market*, which impacts poor families with less time, limited resources and options from taking advantage of official school of choice structures which result in families being "compelled to accept the quality of educational services provided to them whether they like it or not" (p.94).

The concept of choice and empowerment link directly with *social capital* which social scientists have used to describe benefits people acquire from participating in social networks and organizations. Both Meier and Noguera address the need for poor families to have strategic assistance, as well as allies with resources and a willingness to help. Even when resources are available, safety and distance is a critical priority. Noguera points out that "developing the social capital of parents may be the only way to address the captured market problem" (p. 97).

Offering families schools of choice, either within a school district or in collaboration with a neighboring school district, would provide families with more options and opportunities within public schools. This structure, as well as engaging families in more decision-making, would provide an increase in their sense of empowerment and commitment to their school. Noguera mentions the development of local site councils that are comprised of parents and community members who are responsible for hiring and monitoring the school principal, overseeing the school budget, and receiving reports on academic plans. There are certainly advantages and disadvantages of this type of structure. Parents and the community would have to be educated and informed about numerous aspects and details of educational research, philosophy, child development, business and operations, as well as a variety of other areas. This would certainly require development of trust and quality relationships, but essentially would work best when school personnel and families are open-minded, willing to listen to understand others' perspectives, and are focused on what is best for all children and the entire school community.

Certainly related to social capital is one main component: resources. Although resources come in a variety of forms, the most significant concerns are the disparity and use of financial resources. School districts' tendency to pursue

costly reform measures, strategies, and programs without making a commitment to evaluate the effectiveness of their reforms leads to cynicism and distrust. It also impedes the application and implementation of new practices. The public's perceptions of urban schools as failures increase when school districts cannot demonstrate the effectiveness of reform programs and practices. Therefore, it is critical for school districts to continually identify key programs and practices; it is also imperative to collect and analyze data on the effectiveness and impact of those programs on student achievement and to use the results to determine which programs and practices to continue and which to eliminate. This would also help to narrow the focus, within any particular school district, to the most effective programs and practices, which would increase the quality, consistency and depth of the application of those practices.

In addition, urban schools are significantly impacted by differences in per pupil spending—a direct result of the ability to generate revenues as Jean Anyon has pointed out. When resources are lacking, school officials often focus on narrow ways to address student achievement. Yet, equitable allocation of resources is crucial. Noguera asserts that the development of civic capacity-building would compel leaders of public and private organizations to think creatively about how to bring resources they control to support the learning and education of children in schools. He identifies four different ways that this is possible. First, the use of community volunteers as tutors and mentors supports student learning. Second, school-community partnerships would support career development. Third, school-community partnerships such as local universities could support professional development for school staff. Finally, health and welfare services could be provided for students and their families. The possibilities through civic capacity building would be a positive support within schools. This would certainly require personnel within the school district to communicate, coordinate, plan and implement various structures, services, and programs to maximize the benefits and results for students and their families. At the outset, it would require financial resources to begin the majority of these supports. In addition, even when the structures are implemented within the school setting, it would require personnel to facilitate and maintain the partnerships and services over time.

In *The Power of Their Ideas* (Meier, 2002) some aspects of social capital and civic capacity-building seemed to be applied within the Central Park East structures. The staff had a high level of responsiveness to the parents and the community with a sense of accountability to those students and families they served. Communication with students and their families, as well as accessing community resources to support their mission, was a priority. Connections and networks within the school and community were built with families as the focus; families and students had a significant impact on decision making within a

democratic structure. Greater demands and expectations of families, following their choice to attend Central Park East Elementary, as well as significant systemic changes within the school in teaching and learning, plus some external support and assistance resulted in increased responsiveness by the school to the needs of students and parents.

One significant central argument that can also serve as a limit and possibility is the idea that the beliefs of individuals and collective groups of people must be challenged and addressed. Noguera (2003) asserts "stereotypes and assumptions about the values and culture of students and their families influence the way schools respond to their needs" (p. 48). Meier gave examples, in which, the Central Park East Elementary staff openly addressed race, class and gender through discussion and role-plays. She also indicated that students "desperately need opportunities to sort out racism- to deal with it in a 'safe' way" (Meier, 2002, pp. 44-45). The central argument is that beliefs and attitudes must be brought to the surface and discussed in a safe, trusting and open environment. Assumptions and stereotypes will manifest themselves in behavior. The way we view race, class and culture significantly impacts the way we treat our peers, students and their families. It also affects how we address problems or concerns that arise. Safe and meaningful dialogue that results in a challenge to our thinking, and ideally changes our views, would be a significant step in impacting the quality of public education. Since beliefs are the foundation of our actions and behaviors, it is essential that we challenge those beliefs. The difficulty for most schools and school districts is embedded in this simple question: How do we have safe and meaningful dialogue around our beliefs, attitudes and stereotypes, which will lead to a greater sense of empowerment and community, with a specific action plan, to accomplish our goals? There are many challenges embedded in this one simple question. Establishing a clear and collective vision is certainly one of those challenges.

In summary, some of the central arguments shared by both Deborah Meier and Pedro Noguera regarding urban schools include first, the fact that schools cannot reform public education alone. Noguera summarizes it best by stating, "American society as a whole has a responsibility to provide the resources and support needed to revitalize urban schools and communities. To accept anything short of this is shortsighted" (2003, p. 155). Both internal and external factors need to be identified and addressed within urban schools and society as a whole. Second, we need to search for and seize opportunities for change, even if we can only identify and implement partial solutions. Third, public institutions provide access to education for all children, although it may not always provide equal opportunities. Fourth, equitable resources, particularly financial, are a significant challenge for urban schools. Fifth, it is critical that the attitudes and beliefs of students, staff and the community be challenged in safe environments, with

varying perspectives and understandings about race, gender, class, and culture leading to more collaborative and empowered communities, which in turn, positively impacts student achievement and the development of the whole child (i.e. emotional, social, physical and cognitive). Many of the central arguments shared by both Meier and Noguera include both limits and possibilities. Both social capital and civic capacity are seen by Noguera as critical components that need to be considered in the development of solutions.

Although there are many challenges in reforming urban public schools, continued commitment and collective effort, with a willingness to seek and implement solutions within a larger political and social context, will propel us forward in impacting lasting change for our children.

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Toward Meaningful Change: Reflections on the 2007-2008 John W. Porter Lectures

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Every year at Eastern Michigan University, a particular department within the College of Education is given the opportunity to invite guest speakers for the John W. Porter Distinguished Lecture Series in Urban Education. During the 2007-2008 academic year, Jean Anyon, Deborah Meier, and Pedro Noguera visited Eastern Michigan where they delivered public lectures, interacted with local school personnel and community activists, and collaborated with students and faculty. Each of the three distinguished educators lectured in front of full auditoriums as they attempted to distill lessons learned and concepts developed during their productive careers into an hour's worth of knowledge. As an educator just beginning his graduate studies, I found all of the lectures to be inspiring. Collectively, these presentations have led to a serious paradigm shift in my views on teaching, learning, and schools. In my subsequent studies, I have explored some of their themes in more detail.

Jean Anyon's recent book, *Radical Possibilities: Public Policy, Urban Education, and a new Social Movement* (2005), analyzes the political and economic policies of the 20th century and how they have shaped our education systems, particularly urban education. After exposing the systemic inequalities in areas such as housing and employment opportunities, as well as the lack of political influence, Anyon contends that even with well-intentioned and skilled teachers, there can be no meaningful change unless many governmental, economic, and political factors are critically examined. Anyon points out where these organizational structures have gone wrong and gives powerful suggestions for the next steps forward.

One of Anyon's key themes found in *Radical Possibilities* and the Porter lecture is the potential to be found in the power of community organizing. She explains that this rarely detailed facet of the civil rights movement was, in fact, essential to producing the systemic changes that led to the eventual dismantling of the Jim Crow laws in the American South. In her later chapters, she gives examples of recent community organizing programs that have had a positive effect on informing and mobilizing parents, so that they may demand more from those in charge of the schools their children attend. True to Anyon's previous works going back several decades, she helps us to understand the damage and lost opportunities found in unexamined or unacknowledged systemic policies, from the classroom dynamics to political decision-making.

Deborah Meier and Pedro Noguera both see an urgent and ill-attended

problem in our country today, namely the failure of our nation's public schools to serve all children equally and well. Students failed by our public education system are overwhelmingly poor, and are often students of color or other marginalized children not of the dominant culture. In their respective writings and lectures, Meier and Noguera not only cite the failures of the schools, but they also document those aspects of school culture, infrastructure, policy, and teacher behavior that are detrimental to the learning to which all students are entitled. Both have worked for decades to understand how and why schools are failing, and they have devoted their careers to devising ways for public schools to help the learners who have been left behind.

Meier and Noguera shared their stories not simply to highlight their legacies; rather, they hope their experiences will serve as catalysts to inspire other schools to follow what they have determined to be highly successful models. In her 1995 book, *The Power of their Ideas*, Meier contends that Central Park East School (CPE), which she helped to found, is in no way unique to New York City's Harlem and that its core principles can be replicated anywhere. She later warned, however, that CPE is not "a template to be slavishly copied" but "a model in the sense of showing what is possible" (Meier, 2002, p. x).

Educators can reclaim public education in several ways but my interpretation of Meier's and Noguera's ideas suggests that many of the subtle details can be distilled to a few important points:

- Schools should be a part of the community, which involves not only active participation from parents but also from other members of the community;
- Schools must orient themselves around learners, which requires a significant paradigm shift from how we normally view schools; and
- Public education should foster choice, and those making decisions about schools should feel accountable to the community as well as to the learners.

How does one make a school part of a community? Just because a building sits in the middle of a residential area does not necessarily mean that it is connected to the residents who surround it. Deborah Meier feels parent involvement is a central aspect to the success of CPE. Parental involvement goes beyond PTO meetings at CPE; they are involved with hiring staff, and CPE staff take input and criticism from parents very seriously. This was especially important in the beginning of their school when there was a significant difference between the ethnicities of the parents and of the teachers, who were mostly white.

CPE staff also acknowledged that they alone cannot make a child successful; it also requires parental engagement to support and encourage learners at home, regardless of whether a parent has the ability to help with homework or

not. For such situations, the school can supplement with tutoring, but no school program can replace a parent's positive cultivation of a student's talents and interests. President Obama mentioned this frequently while on the campaign trail when referring to education. On June 16, 2008, he gave a speech at Kettering University in Flint, Michigan, where he explained that education was not only the responsibility of the state. He specifically challenged parents to “instill a thirst for educational excellence” in their children (Obama, 2008).

Parental involvement is a major challenge in impoverished school districts. Parents often have odd-hour work schedules compared to parents of middle- or upper-income students, and this limits their ability to attend performances or parent-teacher conferences. Many working-class parents may have not had positive experiences as students and may thus be anxious about interacting with their children's schools. Noguera insists, however, that a primary job of the school is to build trust with disenfranchised parents and to find a way to involve every parent/guardian in the best way possible. Part of equal opportunities for all students is understanding the expectations of all parents, not just those with the most social capital (Noguera, 2003, p.94).

Throughout my brief career as a teacher, I have often heard the phrase "student-centered learning" advocated as the proper way to teach. Often this term meant making homework that was at least somewhat relevant to students' interests. However, when student-centered learning begins and ends with lesson and homework planning and the rest of the school remains authoritarian, one begins to question just how meaningfully student-centered these schools might be. For Meier, the entire structure of a school should be based around cultivating the interests and gifts that each student possesses. This requires a dramatic shift from the school setting one sees in the vast majority of schools in the United States. Flexible schedules, small schools, and valued, constant student input are the centerpieces to beginning to build a true student-centered learning environment. Of course, building a working model of this also requires valuing input from teachers and allowing enough time for educators to collaborate and debate the best ways forward.

As Meier (2002) recalls in affirming a suggestion from one of her colleagues, keeping schedules simple allows teachers to focus more on the "complexity of the kids and the complexity of the ideas they are dealing with" (p. 54). However, such simplicity cannot be achieved if a school is attempting to deal with the logistics of managing 2,000 students. Claiming that “smallness makes democracy feasible in schools” (p. 110), Meier lists compelling reasons why small schools (e.g., high schools no larger than 400 students) are better. If we wish to have active members of a democracy in our country, they must learn how to act democratically, and that requires practice. True democracy, she asserts, is hard to model in an industrial-scale school. Smaller size fosters closer interaction

between all students and makes it less likely that students will "fall through the cracks" due to anonymity. Moreover, small schools can be created, even in existing large buildings; all it requires is initiative on the part of forward-thinking administrators and an active and engaged teacher corps. A single large campus can be divided into smaller schools, and each one of those schools can concentrate on different learner interests such as arts or healthcare, thereby allowing greater student and parent choice.

The ability of parents to choose schools for their children is the final important aspect of Meier's (2002) vision for improving urban education for all students. She is quick to warn, however, that choice is only a catalyst and not a solution in itself. The benefit of school choice lies in its potential to form "a consciously equitable instrument for restructuring public education so that over time all parents can have the kinds of choices the favored few now have, but in ways that serve rather than undercut public goals" (p.99).

Noguera (2003) echoes many of Meier's sentiments on this topic, arguing that far too many public schools have what he refers to as a "captured market" (p. 97). Unlike students from middle- or upper-income families, many working-class and poor students cannot choose to attend private schools, nor can they afford the transportation costs of attending a more distant but superior public school. He proposes that decentralizing schools and offering better public school choice options empowers working-class parents to select schools that best suit their children, and to leave those schools that do not meet their children's needs. This brings to poorer families an opportunity that already exists for families of higher incomes, so that those with the least resources are not destined to attend the worst performing schools.

Noguera makes a case for one other important responsibility of public schools, advocating that they should be the center point for the provision of health and welfare services to low-income students and their families. He does not advise schools to do this alone or to use their limited resources alone for this purpose. Rather, he proposes that the school must become the center point for developing civic capacity within the community. Furthermore, the schools should find local resources that can help alleviate the very real challenges that learners of limited resources encounter.

Aside from a lack of economic resources, Noguera points out that poor and working-class families lack social capital, or the "bonds of reciprocity derived from participation in social networks" (p. 34); and they also face deficits of educational capital. Like social capital, educational capital is not only a network of influential friends but also, also, an understanding of how systems within cultures work and interact. Only with such knowledge can individuals or groups make appropriate use of social networks. For many people living in poverty who are also members of cultural minorities, such networks can be extremely difficult

to understand or negotiate without guidance, because so much of the structure of this nation's bureaucracies has been shaped by the dominant culture. Thus, Noguera distinguishes the building of social and educational capital among the poor and working class as one of the most important responsibilities for a successful school focusing on democratic traditions: “[F]or communities struggling to meet basic needs, improvements in education can be an effective means to obtain tangible benefits even without other more far-reaching social reforms” (p. 102).

I agree with Noguera that educational capital could be considered an aspect of social capital, given the working definition used above, but important aspects of this idea are worth further elaboration. Ultimately, educational capital should be viewed as the means through which poor and oppressed people the world over gain awareness of their rights, and the means with which to articulate that awareness.

In that sense, it involves much more than reading, writing, and mathematics. It involves, as Meier (2002) contends, interdisciplinary study that integrates social science with physical science, and trusting learners with concepts and fields of study that are considered by some to be too complex for certain age groups, such as psychology for adolescents, or teaching racism to homogenous cultural groups.

Central Park East is not a working example of a school that fosters social and educational capital, even though Meier does not use that terminology, nor does she maintain that building social capital is something that can occur with a single lesson. Instead, she suggests, it must be something built into the fabric of a schools; so that if our nation wishes to produce active members of a democracy, students must learn how to act democratically—and that requires practice.

Anyon, Meier, and Noguera expose the very real challenges that parents, teachers, students, and administrators face in providing quality education for all. They warn realistically that many more will get left behind if our nation continues along its present course, but they also present us with a way forward in the quest for equality of educational opportunity. They are each teachers who have revealed their experiences so that other teachers might model them in their own communities, from densely populated urban centers to rural Indian reservations and all the other forgotten parts of our nation. Children across this land are being shortchanged out of their educational opportunities. Anyon, Meier, and Noguera provide those of us who are new to this profession the framework to begin to change the present dismal realities into new and exciting opportunities for the future.

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Democratic Classrooms and the Pursuit of Happiness

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Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of inward forces which make it a living thing. (Mill, 1869, p.107)

Human beings are by nature generators of ideas, what I didn't understand was how it was that some children recognized the power of their ideas while others became alienated from their own genius. How did schools, in small and unconscious ways, silence these persistent playground intellectuals? Could schools, if organized differently keep this nascent power alive, extend it, and thus make a difference in what we grow up to be. (Meier, 2002, p.3)

The pattern of educational policies, public school systems, and political agendas, as well as corporate and other special interests, are so interwoven that a single thread pulled one way, restrains, even chokes, another area within this tightly interlaced system. We educators are, in fact, having our public support purposefully eroded. Even academic research meant to support our positions can become, all too easily, self-serving or manipulated by those providing grants. In the beginning we, as educators, are prompted by intuition; yet, it appears there is a denial of the connection between intuition, research, and action; for intuition is seen as less than scientific, evoking the quaintness of former teachers in outdated dresses or short-sleeve dress shirts and string-bean ties, not the self-assuredness of scientists in white lab coats. We craft our arguments, in the end, for the market for which they are supposedly intended.

The monetary threads are being pulled and in chasing the federal money it is our well-intentioned interests as educators that are being choked. Even more so, there is the danger that it is our nation's children who, in the long run, may be done the greatest harm if we as educators fail to recognize, carefully reflect, and *act* on what we believe is in the best interests of our children.

In a recent conversation with a seasoned educator, I suggested that we need to make the point that we are overly focused on teaching our children to be good test-takers, instead of self-confident and happy individuals. He responded by noting that we cannot refuse federal funding. But, I countered, perhaps we *could* stand up and point out, in democratic fashion and as respectfully and as loudly as we need to, that we do not agree with current funding, testing and legislative dictates. Since it would be in the best interests of children, we might find that

some parents would sense the truth of our motivations and be guided by the sincerity of our arguments and actions.

However, the truer purpose of schools lies in an unasked question. It is a question that should be brought to light for a very public debate. The purpose of public schools has been to provide equal access to an educational system that is a microcosm of our wider democratic society. However, the purpose now appears to be to produce test-takers and compliant future workers for corporations.

During a recent speech at Eastern Michigan University, Larry Sanger, co-founder of Wikipedia, spoke to our need as citizens to be aware of who is making the opinions about which we are made aware (Sanger, 2008). More importantly, he went on to state that we all have the democratically equal ability to express an opinion, even if we do not have equal access to the media sources that legitimize opinions. The most powerful point brought to light by this line of thought is that democracy, as a concept, legitimizes the views of the smallest of us. Those of us with the least access have opinions that carry weight, just as our single vote has weight and is important to the daily advancement of democracy.

As I sat in the audience, Sanger's point resonated back to a statement made by Deborah Meier at Eastern Michigan University the evening before: "The question is not, 'Is it possible to educate all children well?' But rather, 'Do we want to do it badly enough?'" (Meier, 2008). Do we want it badly enough to turn away from those opinions with greater governmental and media access and, with every passing day, from those swinging a more heavily funded stick, when those opinions do not seem to work in the best interests of children? The challenge may be for each of us to create the space within our day to reflect on and to state as openly and publicly as Meier or Sanger, that those of us *on the ground*—some, such as Deborah Meier, having literally been on the carpeted ground of a kindergarten classroom—choose to view, speak to, and teach what is best in the lived worlds of our children.

Democratic Classrooms: Why They Are Important Today and Tomorrow

The most effectual means of preventing the perversion of power into tyranny are to illuminate, as far as practicable, the mind of the people at large. (Thomas Jefferson, cited in Foley, 1900, p. 278)

Although the Declaration of Independence may not have clearly delineated the meaning of the phrase "pursuit of happiness," it clearly did *not* say that the pursuit of happiness would be strictly limited to our working lives—as given over to our employers or to the attainment of material or purchased goods. Our happiness has

a much wider range to be traveled, and it includes our individual need to be functioning citizens capable of respecting the rights of others, exercising self-determination and standing up for our own rights. It also includes, by a small extension of this line of thought, the necessary right to arrive at an understanding that democracy is a very “messy” proposition. (Meier, 2008)

Currently, our civil liberties are being infringed upon. There is surveillance without warrants (some of which violate the current wiretap laws), as well as the gathering of financial information, and records of phone, Internet, and library usage. This seems to be a clear trend by the former Bush administration toward cleaning up the ‘messiness’ of democracy. Dissent has been frowned upon, and to question authority and its opinions—wherever they may be have been formed and in service of whatever entities or interests, even if special or corporate interests—is not sanctioned. Consequently, I find it curious that within the following various hot button educational initiatives and trends — collaborative teams, learning communities, small schools, character education, constructivism, inquiry, peer teaching, student-led conferences, differentiation in instruction and assessment, service learning, diversity, social justice, gender equity—there would seem to be a potential fortress built against the alignment of these practices with democratic classroom practice and philosophy.

It seems evident that democratic structure within the classroom could be, if acknowledged, the unifying element and the method by which solidarity of unified purpose could be approached across classrooms and across the nation; and, democracy would, thereby, be better served. A clear and open discussion of where democracy *does* and *does not* reside, both inside and outside of the classroom, might, in turn, further invigorate educational practice.

In an open roundtable discussion at Eastern Michigan University, November 9, 2007, with Dr. Jean Anyon, there was a discussion as how best to enliven political activity in future teachers during their formation process while in teacher training programs. A class, or requirement, centering on civic action or service was one idea discussed. After listening to Deborah Meier, I wondered if this empowerment of future teachers might not be best derived through an open exploration of democratic principles and a discussion of democracy within the classroom, and how these preservice teachers might utilize democratic principles to help develop active and reflective child-citizens in their own future classrooms (Pryor & Pryor, 2005). The goal should be to design a democratic environment with more open agendas that could be formally and organically crafted to what is meaningful for preservice teachers; and they should be active participants in the process (Mattern, 1997). Democracy should be the “how,” but the agenda, if truly democratic, cannot be rigidly predetermined.

Finally, democratic classroom practice would provide a unifying principle by which we, as educators, could not only guide and best serve our students and

our society; but it would also provide the way in which we, ourselves, could be given a framework to examine how we will teach, how we will serve, and how we will continue our own growth as educators, as individuals, and as loyal citizen participants in this cantankerous business of democracy.

The Impact of the Democratic Classroom

When teachers or students work within a framework of a democratic classroom, the perception and the outcome for student learners is empowering to all participants, young and old (Murray, Wood, & Arnold, 1999). Because of the wider panorama and scope of competing values from inside and outside of the educational organism, a focus on trying to bring democratic classroom philosophy back into the foreground, actively spoken to and addressed, is even more essential.

As educators, we are being asked to restrict our students to predetermined choices, and then enforce our students' compliance. We are called to present instruction deemed relevant without eliciting voices from the children in our classrooms in making that decision. This curiously brings to mind the rallying cry of the American Revolution, "Taxation without representation," attributed most often to James Otis, but earlier stated in a sermon by the Reverend James Mayhew (Bradford, 1838). In order for children to buy into the business of education and democracy, educational experience needs to be constructed as democratic. What is a definable and missing component of today's educational learning environment is not a sanitized grouping of standards that can be tested at the cost of three to four weeks of active instruction time each year; instead, it is a well-spoken vocalization of the truth—that it is the democratic process that will invigorate and provide a better citizenry.

We, as teachers, may not be able to feed, clothe and give shelter to our students and their families—those basic necessities which should come of a wider citizenry's commitment—but we could immediately provide for the ability of our young child-citizens to develop within a democratic classroom experience. We could provide a forum in our classrooms to decide what they should talk about today, so that tomorrow, after they have left school, they might decide, actively and with discernment, what it is that they will most need to discuss in the wider society outside of the classroom. Having had early and first-hand constructive experience with democracy, our children will know they possess the ability to have meaningful dialogue about the issues they will face. Future political action may well begin with one small idea that a child intrinsically knows and which has value to him/her, and is worth taking the chance to speak aloud, while classmates and the teacher listen.

Happiness as Ambiguity

The phrase “pursuit of happiness” is one of the areas in the Bill of Rights that has not been used much to help guide politicians, or those in judicial branches, in their legal decisions to discern the intent of the Constitution. Something of this constructed wisdom of the Constitution’s framework, its purposeful ambiguity, as well as its inherent trust of a future citizenry, points to the inherent fallacy of our current political/educational system.

Current funding, testing, and legislative mandates disenfranchise a democratic citizenry of its right to self-determination and of the best methods to serve the educational needs of our nation’s children. Current policies, when viewed in this way, are also the subject of an unstated distrust of the majority of the citizenry, parents and educators, who guide the path of our nation’s children.

Self-determination, echoing the Constitution’s preamble, seems to have a positive effect on developing active learners (Rathunde & Csikszentmihalyi, 2005), who discern issues in schools and in their communities that are of value to them. It is this value of self-discernment that the Constitution circumnavigates. It is also choice and self-determination within the classroom that *involve* active learners who determine their own course to happiness within their learning environments. This is the intersection of democratic elements that effectively engage young student-citizens, producing learners who are invested in their own learning. Our children are very apt at learning from everything they see or experience. Not to acknowledge the full tree from which individual initiatives branch out, nor how children form their own views as they apply to the lives of their own families, is to cut the branch from the body from which it derives its strength.

Conclusion

“Teaching is mostly listening, and learning is mostly telling.” (Meier, 2002, p. xiii)

The need for student awareness of democratic principles is mandated by legislatures—observation of Constitution Day, the posting of Core Democratic Values in our classrooms—but it is outside of legislation that democratic classroom action occurs, not as awareness, but as experience. It is not in mandates but, rather, in the choices of teachers to listen and guide, while staying in the background, that democracy is most in evidence. The choice is not to control, but to understand the dynamic of self-determinism, and to facilitate rather than dictate.

The core need for democratic classrooms is not for the resulting increase in scientifically measurable outcomes. It is housed in the belief that public schools allow us a view of a diverse populous with a common and shared heritage, the awareness that, “Public Schools can train us for...political conversation across divisions of race, class, religion, and ideology. It is often in the class of irreconcilable ideas that we can learn how to test or revise ideas, or invent new ones” (Meier, 1995, p.7).

Democratic classrooms are a choice; a choice which individual teachers and future teachers should consider with an attentive focus. America’s future identity as a democracy would, thereby, evolve as more the result of a populous movement, rather than a mandated non-reflective reaction to legislators and the promises (or threats) attached to the educational funding of our children.

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