

1 The Power of People and the Purpose of Public Education

ALL CHILDREN DREAM

I am standing in a hallway of a school in the South Bronx. It is a middle school, housed in a building well over a hundred years old: Its gray-green paint is peeling from the walls, flickering fluorescent lights cast a dim and cold light, and the faded linoleum floors are dull and dirty. I am waiting to observe a social studies class; it is a class break. Because school hallways are zones of relative freedom, students are talking, joking, pushing each other in fun, and, in general, being themselves. I pull my coat around me a little tighter; it is early February, and the building's ancient furnace cannot keep up with the cold. As I wait, my eyes drift to a bulletin board a few feet away.

Attached to the board are some student essays, written on little sheets of lined paper. Each is entitled "I Have a Dream," in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. Day. I move closer to read what these dreamers dream:

I dream my father will get out of jail.

I dream my mother will come home.

I dream my sister will stop using drugs.

I dream no one gets hurt.

I walk to a window at the end of the corridor and notice some construction in progress in the street below. It is baffling; the South Bronx

seldom attracts real estate developers. Could it be a hotel? Not likely. A parking facility? Possibly. On closer inspection, I realize it is a prison, complete with razor wire, high walls, exercise yards of concrete austerity, and cell blocks with windows that will never be opened.

It makes me think: What are we about as a country and a people that we feel comfortable building a prison near a school? What is our real reform agenda? Why are we willing to treat some children as disposable, destined for a life of continuous struggle, while elevating, celebrating, and rewarding the already fortunate?

Why are we seemingly content to be citizens of a country where a child's social worth is based on his or her race, ethnicity, residence, and wealth? Shana's story in Box 1.1 is by no means unique—there are millions of children like Shana in our cities, in our rural areas, and increasingly in our suburbs (Bey, 2005). Where will this preventable tragedy end?

Box 1.1—Shana's Story

Shana is a typical child of poverty. She lives with her mother and baby sister in a city project. She is alone most of the time because her mother cannot afford daycare and, therefore, must travel over an hour to leave her sister with her aunt before going to work. She must repeat the journey after an 8-hour workday. Shana's mother has only a few moments to rest, change her clothes, and share a bowl of soup with her children before she leaves for her night job, cleaning the restrooms at a local public school. She cannot survive unless she works 16 hours a day. Shana does not go out to play because it is too dangerous; her best friend was killed by a stray bullet on the playground when they were only 7 years old. Shana doesn't sleep well at night. She lies awake until she hears her mother's key in the door.

Shana and her mother work hard on weekends, trying in vain to keep their studio apartment clean; it is a losing battle. People come off the street and urinate in the hallways, and there are always vagrants leaning against the filthy walls, hallucinating from alcohol and drugs. The odors are so pungent that they burn Shana's eyes and throat. The stench slips under the door frame and through the thin walls. The plumbing doesn't work well, which adds to the ingrained fumes that Shana can smell in her clothes as she tries to concentrate on the lessons at school. They keep a bucket full of water next to the toilet and pour it in the tank, which only sometimes helps. The windows are old and there is rarely heat; even

though it is dangerous, they must keep the stove on for fear of freezing. Rats come in through exposed pipes and up through the toilet basin.

Shana's main diet is cereal and powdered milk and cans of chicken noodle soup. She gets very hungry waiting for her mother. She watches television and does her homework at a card table that her mother placed beneath the hanging lightbulb. Shana has no computer and her textbooks are used; pages are often missing. It is hard to keep up with her studies because of her empty stomach, the cold, the vermin, and fear of what might lie on the other side of the front door.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD; 2009) recently published a study ranking the well-being of children in 30 industrialized countries. The report makes evident that while the United States spends more money on education and child welfare than many other countries, it has a poor record of achievement. In educational well-being the United States ranked 25th (Finland was ranked 1st and Turkey last) in measures of quality of school life. Here is the overall report card:

The United States was fifth worst in the rate of children who lack more than 4 of the following 8 educational possessions: a desk to study, a quiet place to work, a computer for schoolwork, educational software, an Internet connection, a calculator, a dictionary and school textbooks.

. . . The United States ranked sixth worst in countries with gaps between good and poor school performers.

Recently, the American Human Development Project (2008–2009) compared the United States to other industrialized nations, using what is called the Global Development Index. Somewhat surprisingly, the United States has fallen from #2 in 1990 to #12 in 2009. Although the higher-ranking countries have lower per capita incomes, they all rank higher than the United States when it comes to human development (i.e., health, knowledge, infant mortality, longevity). Here are a few of the major findings about the United States compared to other OECD countries:

- The United States spends approximately \$5.2 billion every day on health care, but it is ranked 42nd in global life expectancy.

- The United States is ranked 34th in survival of infants to age 1.
- About 25% of 15-year-old U.S. students scored at or below the lowest proficiency level on an international mathematics literacy exam.
- In the United States only 53% of 3- and 4-year-olds are enrolled in preschool, as opposed to France, Italy, Canada, Germany, Japan, Russia, and the United Kingdom, where over 75% of children are enrolled.
- The United States is ranked first among the world's richest countries in the percentage of children living in poverty. Fifteen percent of American children—10.7 million girls and boys—live in families with monthly incomes of less than \$1,500 per month.

It seems as though our national priorities are out of order and confused; we spend more on cosmetics than basic education. We spend far more on weight-loss products and services each year than early childhood education. If there were a way to fully measure the content of our commitment to our children, surely our “score” would fall far short of what is expected from the greatest democracy in the world.

EDUCATIONALLY EXPERIMENTING ON THE POOR

Often our national response to the ongoing challenge of poverty has been to blame the poor for being poor and to blame public education for not performing miracles. Compounding this tendency is our willingness to substitute good intentions for actual justice. I would be the last person to criticize any individual or organization for making a good-faith attempt to alleviate the painful consequences of injustice; the problems we face, however, are not a matter of individual conscience or charity—they are a matter of collective responsibility. It is unfortunate that we have lapsed into a policy malaise that allows us to deceive ourselves into thinking that it is appropriate to turn the education of the poor over to young, idealistic novices who, with all the best intentions in the world, may not know much about how children learn, what they should be learning, and what constitutes a healthy school environment.

Money attracts all comers. The current national policy of pouring billions into short-term solutions to our educational challenges is resulting in what might be thought of as a gold rush mentality. A recent article in the *New York Times* describes how people who have never run a school are now being considered reasonable recipients of publicly funded aid (Dillon, 2010). John Q. Porter of Mosaica Turnaround Partners attended a vendor

fair in Ohio and told a *Times* reporter, “It was like a cattle call. No, actually it was more like speed dating” (Dillon, 2010). Speed dating may be fine on college campuses, but is this any way to build great schools for all children?

No amount of alchemy can turn brass into gold. The rush to start virtual schools, for instance, has caught the public imagination. Before we embrace yet another quick-fix mirage, however, we should look closely at the actual educational philosophies and instructional strategies of many virtual school operators. Researcher Gene Glass (2010), for instance, found that one rural Colorado school district of 77 students reported a total student enrollment of 1,000 students through the Colorado Virtual Academy. Most of the coursework the students studied was purchased from a company on the East Coast that is publicly traded on the New York Stock Exchange. Simply following the money can lead to some unexpected destinations and in the process reveal how the wisdom of practice developed by educators over many years is overlooked, ignored, or appropriated.

We know, for instance, that excellent schools are safe, led by competent principals, support well-qualified teachers, utilize proven and flexible curricula, assess students fairly, and often involve parents and reach out to the community for support (Edmonds, 1977). We also know that excellent schools have high academic standards, focus consistently on learning, and increasingly incorporate new communications technologies into the curriculum. *Great* schools have an extra ingredient—they are spirited learning communities where learning is joyful and where creating a sense of collective happiness is everybody’s business. *World-class* schools share these riches with the world.

MADISON WAS RIGHT: A NEW POLICY FRAMEWORK

In 1810 President James Madison delivered his State of the Union Address. After discussing foreign policy, he turned to a subject about which he was passionate—education:

Whilst it is universally admitted that a well-instructed people alone can be permanently a free people, and whilst it is evident that the means of diffusing and improving useful knowledge form so small a proportion of the expenditures for national purposes, I cannot presume it to be unseasonable to invite your attention to the advantages of superadding to the means of education provided by the several

States a seminary of learning instituted by the National Legislature within the limits of their exclusive jurisdiction, the expense of which might be defrayed or reimbursed out of the vacant grounds which have accrued to the nation within those limits.

Such an institution, though local in its legal character, would be universal in its beneficial effects. By enlightening the opinions, by expanding the patriotism, and by assimilating the principles, the sentiments, and the manners of those who might resort to this temple of science, to be redistributed in due time through every part of the community, sources of jealousy and prejudice would be diminished, the features of national character would be multiplied, and greater extent given to social harmony. But, above all, a well-constituted seminary in the center of the nation is recommended by the consideration that the additional instruction emanating from it would contribute not less to strengthen the foundations than to adorn the structure of our free and happy system of government.

Madison understood that Americans needed a national vision of public education because national unity was the young republic's best defense against external aggression and internal fragmentation. The linkage between education, enlightenment, and national cohesion seemed self-evident to the Founders (see Resource 2 for *The Virginia Declaration of Rights* as an example of Madison's convictions about the importance of freedom of thought and expression for the preservation of democracy).

In the great sweepstakes to capture the American imagination, however, it was not Madison who won; it was Jefferson. Jefferson was a strong and persistent voice for organizing public education at the local level. In 1810 he wrote to John Tyler,

I have in mind two great measures at heart, without which no republic can maintain itself in strength; 1. That of general education, to enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger is freedom. 2. To divide every county into hundreds, of such size that all the children of each will be within reach of a central school in it.

Local control of public education entered the American imagination and remains fixed there, no matter that it results in "savage inequalities" (Kozol, 1991).

Box 1.2—Inequality and Blocked Mobility

Let's look candidly at the relationship between education and social mobility:

- Despite the many apparent changes in our culture and economy, the wealth, race, and religion of our families is still the best predictor of our adult social status. The top 1% of Americans own 38% of the wealth; the top 96–99% own 21%; the top 90–95% own 12%; the bottom 40% own 0.2% of all wealth.
- Our society is deeply stratified. Perhaps economist Lawrence F. Katz said it best: *"Over the last 25 years, the penthouse has gotten really, really nice. All sorts of new gadgets have been put in. The units just below the penthouse have also improved a lot. The units in the middle have stayed about the same. The basement apartment used to be OK, but now it's gotten infested with cockroaches and it's been flooding"* (quoted in Gudrais, 2008).
- Our school system almost perfectly mirrors the class system. Social and economic mobility has come to a near standstill in the United States; education actually *suppresses and prevents* mobility.

There are roughly 15,000 school districts in the United States. Only 6% to 7% of their funding comes from the federal government; the rest comes from local property taxes, lotteries, and state revenues. Because states and locales vary enormously in wealth and willingness to tax, there are dramatic differences in funding for public schools. New York State, for instance, spends almost \$12,000 a year per student, while Mississippi spends just over \$5,000. Spending can vary within school districts considerably: A student in the wealthy Bronx suburb of Riverdale, New York, is very likely to have more educational opportunities than a student in the South Bronx only a few miles away—a lot more opportunities.

These disparities in funding and opportunities have real consequences in children's lives. Poverty affects learning. There is a predictable pattern of children's progressive alienation from school due to the cumulative disadvantages associated with poverty: Poor children, and many children for whom English is a second language, arrive at the schoolhouse door with two strikes against them. Early language acquisition and good

decoding skills are required to become a competent reader—many poor children are only beginning to develop those skills. If a student cannot read by the end of the third grade, his or her academic prospects are grim.

Decentralization breeds instability; local school boards are often forums for issues that have little to do with education but a great deal to do with local politics. When the average school superintendent is likely to stay in his or her position for only 3 years, have we tossed professional continuity out with the political bathwater? Decentralization also can result in anti-intellectualism. Witness, for example, the debate over evolution and the arguments of those who propose to explain biological complexity as the result of “intelligent design.” In an age of global competition and the exponential growth of knowledge, our best and most astute strategy is to develop 21st-century funds of knowledge based on freedom, rigor, science, and inquiry available to all.

We have opted for a localized, chaotic model of educational improvement in place of a democratic model dedicated to quality and citizenship. The march of history, however, is toward greater democracy, rigor, and freedom (Abdullah, 1999; Cookson, 2009b; Rifkin, 2009; Sachs, 2008; Sen, 1999).

There are those who would argue that we should adopt a business model for public education (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Freidman, 1962). This suggestion has an appealing message. There is no convincing evidence, however, that parental choice alone can or will be the engine of a genuine, democratic educational transformation or that treating schools as businesses will serve our collective democratic aspirations. We cannot build a world-class equitable system of public schools based on the principles of possessive individualism and deregulation (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Carens, 1993; Cookson, 1992, 1994, 2001a; Cookson & Berger, 2002; Engel, 2000; Macpherson, 1962). Try to imagine American history without public education—our open, inclusive, and “inefficient” system is the lifeblood of opportunity and the foundation of democracy.

Public schools can serve the American people by being:

A Great Unifier: Our national fabric is being torn apart; to heal our collective wounds, we need to reweave our civic culture. Despite our differences, we are one people—only a national vision of public education can reunite America.

A Great Equalizer: Chronic poverty and extreme inequality undermine the American dream—only a system of strong public schools can guarantee genuine equality of educational opportunity.

A Great Innovator: Unless we embrace the future, we will suffer decline and increasing irrelevance. We desperately need a public school system that is at the forefront of innovation.

A Great Ambassador: Whatever our limitations, the United States remains the world's best hope for peace and prosperity; it is time to embrace *smart* power as the best and most intelligent way to ensure American influence in the world. Peace is no longer an option—it is essential (see Resource 3 for the relationship between education, productivity, and peace).

TURNING DREAMS INTO REALITY

It is a spring day in the year 2020. The United States has embraced the concept of creating world-class public schools for all children. As part of this realignment of policies, the federal government assigns 5% of its resources to public education. The full funding of public education has resulted in the allotment of \$15,000 per child on an annual basis, no matter where she or he lives. Children are no longer educationally deprived because they are poor, or because of the color of their skin, or because their first language is other than English. Schools that educate the poor also receive additional funds through an Educational Trust Fund that has been established through the U.S. Department of Education. The country as a whole has embraced 21st-century education. A dream perhaps, but without imagination education loses its lifeblood (Egan, 2008; Foner, 1998; Freire, 1985; Fullan, 2010a, 2010b; Greene, 1988, 1995; Halpin, 2003; Houston, 2010).

As we walk through the South Bronx, we notice that the prison and the dilapidated middle school have been torn down, and in their place a new state-of-the-art community learning center has been constructed—the South Bronx Bolivar Center for Community Living and Learning. The fundamental design principle for the Bolivar Center is an urban village. Inside are well-lit, comfortable, and bright spaces for families to meet, obtain primary health care, study language and computer arts, and obtain counseling if needed. English and Spanish are spoken, and anyone in the community in need of help is welcome (see Schwartz, 2010, for a discussion of the close relationship between housing policy and education policy).

The Bolivar Center is the hub of a neighborhood learning community. The Bolivar's neighborhood includes 15 blocks in each direction from the Center—drawing together 60 square blocks of the South Bronx into one cohesive, cooperative village. Throughout the Bronx, New York, and the United States, there are other learning communities providing the same services as the Bolivar Center. Because the world is now “flat,” learning communities are linked to one another and to other education

systems throughout the world by a robust and secure Internet network. Building on the principles of community hospitality and mutual respect, the communication revolution is now harnessed to community building, connection, and learning (Rheingold, 2003; Russell, 1981/2009; Tapscott, 2009).

The governance of public education has been simplified: The U.S. Department of Education, the newly formed Educational Regions, and state agencies monitor the allocation of resources, provide grants and low-cost loans for building purposes, and conduct high-quality research. The heart of the local governance system is the Community Council. The Community Council is composed of community members, parents, grandparents, teachers, administrators, staff, and students and is mandated to ensure that every student in the community is given the opportunity to be an expert learner. Teachers still belong to their union, as do staff members, and statewide contracts are negotiated through the governor's office. The core work of the Bolivar Center is to develop an educational plan for the whole community.

Within the Bolivar Center community, there are 10 schools. The concept of dividing students into elementary, middle, and high schools has been eliminated. Because we no longer think of education in local terms, the United States, in cooperation with the United Nations and other international organizations, has created a global community where information and knowledge is shared, ideas are exchanged, and solutions are coconstructed. Freedom of expression is celebrated; each of the schools in the Bolivar community may experiment with curricula, develop new approaches to teaching, and engage in cocreating bold alternatives to traditional schooling. One school is the Good Earth School.

Architecturally, the Good Earth School is composed of open learning spaces, inviting social networking spaces, and very few enclosed offices. Teachers have workstations that are professional and include a telephone, a computer, and enough space to be comfortable. Students have access to quiet study spaces throughout the building. There are no security checkpoints. Instead of uniformed security guards, community organizations and families are asked to participate in the life of the school. By filling the hallways with community members and parents who know and love the students, discipline is maintained through personal connection, loving support, and hundreds of watchful eyes.

Throughout the hallways and classrooms, examples of student work are exhibited. In addition to an auditorium, there is a school commons where everyone can regularly meet. This can be done because the school can never have enrollments exceeding 500 students. Next to the commons

is the World Communications Center, a global communications hub where students from the Good Earth School can communicate and learn with students and adults throughout the Bronx, the state, the nation, and the world through the web.

Food is wholesome and plentiful; the living metaphor for the Good Earth School is the home and the family. The school is no longer a fortress or factory, but a living, organic part of the community—a place where parents and grandparents come after school to study, use the athletic facilities, and create a cultural environment that is safe, optimistic, and relevant.

At the center of the school's educational philosophy is a profound respect for the individual and an unwavering commitment to creativity and imagination (Sawyer et al., 2003). The Good Earth community believes that each of us, no matter what her or his accomplishments, is a tiny link in the story of human development. The curriculum is divided into four grand narratives: the struggle for human freedom, the power of reason, the beauty of human expression, and the clarity of numbers.

The Struggle for Human Freedom

Our species may have much in common with other species, but only humans can aspire to be free. To understand the unfolding struggle for freedom, we need a grasp of history, anthropology, economics, psychology, sociology, geography, and ethics. These ways of knowing provide the foundation for the open and informed mind.

The Power of Reason

The foundation for the enlightened mind is a scientific approach to problem solving. Students without a firm understanding of biology, physics, chemistry, and geology are entering the world intellectually challenged. We have learned more about the world in the past 10 years than in the previous 600. Imagine a global project in which students at the Good Earth School collaborate with students throughout the world to study the causes of malaria or the HIV virus, examine various medical treatments, and uncover the social contexts in which malaria and HIV are transmitted and can be treated.

The Beauty of Human Expression

Aesthetics is essential to the human experience. It expresses and stimulates our intuitive and artistic capacities, which include language

but go beyond language. Twenty-first-century education should include not only a deep understanding of English and other languages, but a complete commitment to the visual arts, the performing arts, and music.

The Clarity of Numbers

At the Good Earth School, students learn about the clarity of numbers from the inside out. By connecting mathematics with everyday life, especially the mathematics of digital communication, students are able to master the technology and mathematics driving the communication revolution and the languages of the current scientific revolution.

These four narratives provide the cognitive frameworks for a problem-solving, project-based, people-focused curriculum. Twenty-first-century education is more than a state of mind; it is a process of continuous development. The creation of a 21st-century mind is at the heart of the Good Earth School's mission.

THE OBTAINABLE UTOPIA

Some might argue that the vision described above is too idealistic, too expensive, and too *revolutionary*. Here is my counterargument: Societies either regress or progress; history is littered with societies that failed to meet the challenges facing them, leading to social, economic, and moral decline, disorganization, and disintegration (Diamond, 2005). A generous, informed, transformative ideal is the only sure path for creating a culture of cooperation, justice, and productivity.

BOOK STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What are the dreams of the children you know?
2. What other institutions besides education must play a role in reducing poverty?
3. Did the Founders leave anything out when considering the importance of education? What would you add to the Founders' vision?
4. What is the proper role of politics in educational decision making?
5. The author proposes a vision of 21st-century learning. What has been left out? Are there better proposals?
6. How would you define 21st-century education?

POSSIBLE ACTION STEPS

1. Brainstorm ways to reduce poverty.
2. Discuss the elements of a world-class school and see how many apply to your school.
3. Invite your local representative to a meeting to discuss his or her vision for education.
4. Organize a daylong event with the students about poverty in America.
5. Have some students study the effects of poverty on learning as a project and post it on the web.
6. Organize a “Founders Day” in your school to discuss the vision of democracy held by Jefferson and Madison.
7. Establish a website as a school and community forum.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

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