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TEACHING FOR DEMOCRACY

WILLIAM AYERS*

Education in a democracy—at least theoretically—is distinct from education under an authoritarian regime, a dictatorship, or a monarchy, in a particular way. In a democracy, life is geared toward and powered by a particularly precious and fragile ideal: every human being is of infinite and incalculable value, each a unique intellectual, emotional, physical, spiritual, moral, and creative force; each person is born free and equal in dignity and rights, each endowed with reason and conscience, each deserving, then, a community of solidarity, a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood, recognition, and respect. This core value is the heart of the matter, and it must express itself explicitly and implicitly in education as in every other aspect of associative living.

All schools, of course, serve the societies in which they're embedded—an ancient agrarian community apprentices the young for participation in that world, apartheid schools mirror an apartheid society, and so on. In fact, an outsider can learn a lot about any society simply by peeking into its classrooms—the old South Africa had beautiful palaces of learning and small state-of-the-art classes for the white kids and overcrowded, dilapidated, and ill-equipped classes for the black kids. It made perfect and perverse sense. Conversely, our outside observer could deduce what classrooms must look like if she could take an accurate measure of the larger community—knowing what apartheid means and does, she could have guessed the schools looked as they did.

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Schools serve society; society is reflected in its schools. And in the modern world, we see some differences as well as interesting similarities and noteworthy overlapping goals across systems. School leaders in fascist Germany or communist Albania or medieval Saudi Arabia or apartheid South Africa, for example, all agreed that students should behave well, stay away from drugs and crime, and master the subject matters, so those concerns don't differentiate a democratic education from any other. We all want the kids to do well. Practically all schools want their students to study hard and do their homework. Furthermore, schools in the old Soviet Union and fascist Germany produced some excellent scientists and athletes and musicians and so on. They also produced obedience and conformity, moral blindness and easy agreement, obtuse patriotism, and a willingness to follow orders right into the furnaces. In a democracy, one would expect something different—and this takes us back to the first principle: democracy is based on a common faith in the incalculable value of every human being, and that means that what the wisest and most privileged parents want for their kids is exactly what the community wants for all of its children.

This core value and first principle has huge implications for educational policy: racial segregation is wrong, class separation unjust, disparate funding immoral. There is simply no justification in a democracy for the existence of one school for wealthy white kids funded to the tune of \$20,000 per student per year and another school for poor immigrant kids or the descendants of formerly enslaved people with access to \$5,000 per student per year.¹ That reality—a reality in Illinois and across the country—offends the very idea that each person is equal in value and regard and reflects, instead, the reactionary idea that some of us are more deserving and more valuable than others. It also ex-

¹ Emerald Morrow, *A \$340 million deficit leaves Chicago Public Schools pleading with Springfield for help*, Feb. 14, 2008, available at <http://news.medill.northwestern.edu/chicago/news.aspx?id=78343>; see generally JONATHAN KOZOL, *SAVAGE INEQUALITIES* (Harper Perennial 1992) (1991).

presses the simple but crude and cruel message we send to children in the United States today concerning social policy toward them: Choose the Right Parents! If you choose parents with money, access, social connection, and privilege, your choices and your chances will expand; if not, sorry, you're on your own.

The democratic injunction has big implications for curriculum and teaching as well, for what is taught and how it is taught. We want our students to be able to think for themselves, to make judgments based on evidence and argument, to develop minds of their own. We want them to ask fundamental questions—who in the world am I? How did I get here, and where am I going? What in the world are my choices? How in the world shall I proceed?—and to pursue the answers wherever they might take them. In theory, (or at least for some students), we refuse obedience and conformity in favor of teaching initiative, courage, imagination, creativity, and more. These qualities cannot be delivered in top-down ways but must be modeled and nourished, encouraged, and defended.

Democratic teaching encourages students to develop the capacity to name the world for themselves, to identify the obstacles to their full humanity, and to have the courage to act upon whatever the known demands. This kind of education is characteristically eye-popping and mind-blowing—always about opening doors and opening minds as students forge their own pathways into a wider, shared world.

A wonderful historical example of democracy and education took place in 1963 when Charles Cobb, a young civil rights worker, proposed to create a network of Freedom Schools across the South as a way to energize and focus the Civil Rights Movement.² He noted that while black students had been denied many things—decent facilities, fully trained teachers, for-

² CHARLES COBB, PROSPECTUS FOR A SUMMER FREEDOM SCHOOL PROGRAM IN MISSISSIPPI, in STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE PAPERS, 1959-1972 75, available at http://www.educationanddemocracy.org/FSCfiles/B_05_ProspForFSchools.htm.

ward-looking curriculum—the fundamental injury was that people were denied the right to think for themselves about the conditions of their lives, how they came to be the way they were, and how they might be changed.³ He initiated a curriculum of questions: why are we, students and teachers, in the freedom movement? What do we want that we don't have? What do we have that we want to keep? Pursuing these questions to their furthest limits taught the 3Rs and so much more: how to take oneself seriously as a thinking person; how to locate one's life in the contexts of history, politics, economic conditions; how to imagine and then work toward a new—and freer and more equal—society.

Over the next several years, Freedom Schools were launched all over the country—and not just in schools, but also in community centers, churches, parks, coffee shops, and anywhere people came together freely to face one another in dialogue. People got a taste then of popular education, saw the dimensions of what a school for democracy and freedom might be. It was wild, unruly, diverse, and yet its common edges were there for all to see: teachers consciously became students of their students; students were active participants in their own learning—authors, artists, activists—rather than passive receptacles of someone else's ideas; teaching and learning was cast as having a larger purpose, and that purpose was the fullest participation possible in the world we share, including the development of capacities to change that world. Classrooms were characterized by their propulsive midwifery properties⁴ that fostered dialogue and encouraged students to challenge their circumstances.

³ *Id.*

⁴ Toni Morrison has described language “partly as a system . . . but mostly as agency – as an act with consequences”:

The systematic looting of language can be recognized by the tendency of its users to forgo its nuanced, complex, midwifery properties for menace and subjugation. Oppressive language does more than represent violence: it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge: it limits knowledge.

How do our schools here and now measure up to the democratic ideal?

Much of what we call “schooling” forecloses or shuts down or walls off meaningful choice-making for teachers, for parents, and disastrously, for students. Much of it is based on obedience and conformity—the endless lines and the little mechanisms of control (from the regularity of bells to the obsession with routines and schedules), the repetition of tasks and the strict reliance on external judgment and evaluation—the hallmarks of every authoritarian regime throughout history. Much of it banishes the unpopular, squirms in the presence of the unorthodox, hides the unpleasant. There’s little space for skepticism, irreverence, questioning, or doubt. While many of us in the education field long for teaching as something transcendent and powerful, we find ourselves too often locked in situations that reduce teaching to a kind of glorified clerking, passing along a curriculum of received wisdom and predigested and often false bits of information. This is a recipe for disaster in the long run.

In the contested space of schools and education reform, we might press to change the dominant discourse that has controlled the discussion for many years. That controlling discourse posits education as a commodity rather than a right and a journey, and it imagines schools as little factories cranking out products. The metaphor leads easily to imagining school closings and privatizing the public space as natural, relentless standardized testing as sensible—this is what the true-believers call “reform.” Michelle Rhee, C.E.O. (it’s a business, remember) of Washing-

Whether it is obscuring state language or the faux language of mindless media; whether it is the proud by calcified language of the academy or the commodity driven language of science; whether it is the malign language of law-without-ethics, or the language designed for the estrangement of minorities, hiding its racist plunder in its literary cheek it must be rejected, altered, and exposed.

Toni Morrison, American writer, Nobel Lecture (Dec. 7, 1993), http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1993/morrison-lecture.html.

ton D.C. schools, warranted a cover story in a November 2008 edition of *Time* called “How to Fix America’s Schools.”⁵ The pivotal paragraph praised her for making more changes in a year and a half on the job than other school leaders, “even reform-minded ones,” make in five: closing 21 schools (15% of the total), firing 100 central office personnel, 270 teachers, and 36 principals.⁶ These are all policy moves that are held on faith to stand for improvement. Not a word on kids’ learning or engagement with school, not even a nod at evidence that might connect these moves with student progress, not a mention of getting greater resources into this starving system, nor parent involvement, and so on.⁷ But of course evidence is always the enemy of dogma, and this is faith-based, fact-free school policy at its purest.

In this moment of rising expectations combined with deep and abiding crisis, this moment of “yes, we can” and will we survive, is a perfect time to re-think and re-imagine the mindset we have suffered with too long. Since President Barack Obama was elected, many people seem to be suffering a kind of post-partum depression: unable to find any polls to obsess over, we read the tea-leaves and try to penetrate the President’s mind. What do his moves portend? What magic or disaster awaits us? With due respect, this is a matter of looking entirely in the wrong direction.

Obama is not a monarch—Arne Duncan, the new Secretary of Education,⁸ is not education czar—and we are not his subjects. If we want a foreign policy based on justice, for example, we ought to get busy organizing a robust anti-imperialist peace movement; if we want to end the death penalty, we’d better get

⁵ Amanda Ripley, *Rhee Tackles Classroom Challenge*, *TIME*, Dec. 8, 2008, at 36-44, available at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1862444,00.html>.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ Arne Duncan, U.S. Sec’y of Educ., Biography, <http://www.ed.gov/news/staff/bios/duncan.html> (last visited Mar. 6, 2009).

smart about changing the dominant narrative concerning crime and punishment. We are not allowed to sit quietly in a democracy awaiting salvation from above. We are equal, and we all need to speak up and speak out right now.

We might articulate and re-ignite the basic proposition that the fullest development of all is the necessary condition for the full development of each, and conversely, that the fullest development of each is necessary for the full development of all—none of us can be all we need to be unless our brothers and sisters are all that they need to be. We focus our efforts, then, not on the production of things so much as on the production of fully developed human beings who are capable of controlling and transforming their own lives, citizens who can participate fully in our shared public life.

Education is where we decide whether we love the world enough to invite young people in as full participants and constructors and creators, and whether we love our children enough to give them the tools not only to participate but to change all that they find before them. Educators, students, and citizens might press now for an education worthy of a democracy, including an end to sorting people into winners and losers through expensive standardized tests which act as pseudo-scientific forms of surveillance; an end to starving schools of needed resources and then blaming teachers and their unions for dismal outcomes; and an end to “savage inequalities”⁹ and the rapidly accumulating “educational debt”¹⁰—the resources due to communities historically segregated, under-funded, and under-served. All children and youth in a democracy, regardless of economic circumstance, deserve full access to richly-resourced classrooms led by caring, thoughtful, fully-qualified, and generously compensated teachers.

⁹ See generally KOZOL, *supra* note 1.

¹⁰ Gloria Ladson-Billings, *Gloria Ladson-Billings Reframes the Racial Achievement Gap*, National Writing Project, Apr. 2007, <http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2513> (last visited Mar. 24, 2009).

This is our ongoing expression of and commitment to free inquiry and participation, access and equity, free thought and independent judgment, and full recognition of the humanity of each in the company of all. The struggle continues.