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IN SEARCH OF DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION. CREATING MYTH, FALSE PROMISE OR BRIGHT FUTURE?

This paper extends a conversation begun at a conference in Cracow in 2007 – *Re/forming Education: Linking Schools, Universities and Communities for Democratic School Reform*, during which we were discussing different approaches to educational reform and examples of initiatives. In summarizing the conference sessions we decided that there were three critical concepts extracted from our presentations and arguments and essential to the whole discussion about schools. The first concept was democracy and the conditions for operating a democratic society, thereby enabling a democratic education. The second concept was cooperation/communication, including the conditions that create a framework for all our activities. Finally, the third was systemic change and the dilemma of whether or not schools alone can create fundamental changes in society (Mazurkiewicz, Fischer, Armaline 2008). Those three concepts create a space and offer a structure for deliberation about numerous, diverse factors shaping education. It is important to help people involved in the decision making process (in both countries and the world) to understand how their mental models (Senge 2002), programs (Hofstede 2000), beliefs and values shape education and schools in their countries. We continue that conversation in this paper by exploring educational reform through the three generative concepts, with particular focus on where we all might go from here. What have we learned in our respective countries and through our respective efforts? What have we accomplished and how have our efforts fallen short? Finally, we reflect on the prospects, from our experiences, for the reform of schooling to lay a foundation for social reconstruction.

Introduction

People perceive the rapidly changing world in different ways, depending on their individual experiences and cultural contexts (Berger and Luckmann 1983). For some the world is cruel, for others chaotic, and for still others it is a place where they are able to lead successful lives. The positions from which people reflect on and analyze situations go a long way to determining the results of that reflection. Two countries with different histories, geographies, and demographic configurations surprisingly face similar challenges. They may even share general strategies and approaches for change, although specific solutions may be quite different. The USA, a so called well established democracy, and Poland, recently defined as an emerging democracy or transition country may be able to create a common space for educational discourse.

Education is often seen as a promise and solution for the world's and people's problems and challenges (Delors 1998, Mayor 2001). Building social cohesion through supporting equal opportunity and fighting poverty, especially during the current transition to a "knowledge society," is often seen as a main priority for schools in democratic societies (Hargreaves 2003). Unfortunately this notion often remains mainly a declaration, a relatively empty slogan. In an interesting way the official, political statements regarding schooling's role in society are far removed from what actually occurs in and through school. The majority of the state initiatives focusing on school improvement reflect essentially traditional functional and structural conceptions of school. Consequently, those reform efforts touch administrative issues, the structures of schooling, procedures of financing and the like. They do not penetrate to the core of education reform – ideology, value systems and basic beliefs regarding the purposes of schools. Because the discussion about the core purposes and root causes of educational practices is so rare, it is extremely interesting and useful to participate in an ongoing dialogue focused on those issues.

We – the authors of this paper – are among a group of friends, educators, scholars, and social activists from Poland and the USA who were fortunate to be a part of a fascinating cooperation and exchange of ideas since 1995. Kathy Farber and Bill Armaline have worked directly in school reform for more than twenty years in the USA. Grzegorz Mazurkiewicz, as a teacher experienced in the reality of school, worked as an educator in various teachers' professional development initiatives and led numerous educational projects in Poland and throughout Europe. In our conversations and exchanges over the past several years, we have tried to understand different initiatives and strategies popular in our countries. We have met in a point on our journeys coming from somewhat opposite directions. In Poland, after the political transition of 1989, we were working to decentralize the highly centralized educational system inherited from our totalitarian past in order to secure authentic, quality democratic education. In the United States we were working in some ways to overcome an explicitly decentralized school system. Yet, at the same time reformers in the USA were also fighting against efforts to exert indirect control over the curriculum and instruction in public schools through various forms of funding legislation, state curriculum standards, and high stakes standardized testing. We continue to struggle to secure authentic, quality democratic education, especially for children living in poverty.

One of the important events in the long lasting cooperation was a collaboratively organized conference in Kraków in 2007 – *Re/forming Education: Linking Schools, Universities and Communities for Democratic School Reform*,[1] during which we were discussing different approaches to educational reform and examples of initiatives. In summarizing the conference sessions we decided that there were three critical concepts extracted from our presentations and arguments and essential to the whole discussion about schools. The first concept was democracy and the conditions for operating a democratic society, thereby enabling a democratic education. The second concept was cooperation/communication, including the conditions that create a framework for all our activities. Finally, the

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third was systemic change and the dilemma of whether or not schools alone can create fundamental changes in society (Mazurkiewicz, Fischer, Armaline 2008).

Those three concepts create a space and offer a structure for deliberation about numerous and diverse factors shaping education. It is important to help people involved in the decision making process (in both countries and the world) to understand how their mental models (Senge 2002), programs (Hofstede 2000), beliefs and values shape education and schools in their countries. It might happen through reflection, planning, designing, dreaming, arguing, talking and (perhaps) agreeing on the critical issues that serve to re/form education. We would like to continue that conversation in the following paragraphs of this paper. What follows is an exploration of schooling reform through the three generative concepts, with particular focus on where we all might go from here. What have we learned in our respective countries and through our respective efforts? What have we accomplished and how have our efforts fallen short? Finally, we reflect on the prospects, from our experiences, for the reform of schooling to lay a foundation for social reconstruction.

Discussing idea of democratic school reform one should take under consideration the strong influence of the long lasting phenomenon of "deskilling" teachers which views school improvement through the lens of packaged programs that work to script the teachers, prescribes what they should do in their context, and pulls more and more control to central authorities (Spring 2002). Recently, however, teachers have been recognized as necessary leaders in school reform. Working within what Kahne and Westheimer (2000) named the "pedagogy of collective action," many of us have sought to create "professional development communities" (Darling-Hammond and Sykes 1999, Wiburg and Brown 2007, Pomson 2007), with PDCs understood as groups of engaged educators who work over time to improve their pedagogy and context (Fischer and Mazurkiewicz 2008).

At the same time, for at least the last fifty years, public offices over almost all the world are subjects of criticism related to education. This criticism comes with a special focus on schools. In Poland, for example, it has been claimed that school has demoralized children and teenagers, killed passion and creativity in young people, and is responsible for recreating the social injustice of the surroundings (Kaczara 1997, 35–48). This point of view is not detached from the trends in discussions about school in United States and other places, although within the U.S. context most criticism of schools tends to focus on literacy and notions of knowledge competence. The criticism represents the visible condition, in which school is not able to fulfill the multiple and often conflicting expectations of contemporary societies (Fischer and Mazurkiewicz 2008).

Rather than reform efforts and programs which are known to have little impact compared to long-term, collegial work (Hixson and Tinzmann 1990, Sparks and Hirsch 1997, Stronge 2002, Wood and Thompson 1993), our work with schools is based on building professional relationships designed to support the creation of what Goddard, Hoy and Hoy (2004) have called "collective efficacy,"

> In schools possessed by a high degree of perceived collective efficacy, new teachers learn that extra effort and educational success are the norm. In turn, these high expectations for action create a normative press that encourages all teachers to do what it takes to excel and discourages them from giving up when faced with difficult challenges (p. 6).

We seek to work in grassroots efforts (Fine 2005) as they identify issues worthy of attention. We understand teaching to be a cultural act (Stigler and Hiebert 1999) and understand that the unique context of buildings and communities needs to be represented in what is determined to be the direction of the work (Ayers 2004). By working to link in schools, universities and communities in engaged, reciprocal networks of support we can strengthen the outcomes and success of school reform in ways that lift up students, teachers, communities and democratic societies themselves.

Cooperation/communication

In an article entitled "Democracy, Improvisation, and Schooling Reform," two of us (Kathy and Bill) examined the concept of collaboration in urban schooling reform in the United States as it relates to democratic theory and practice, situated within a social, political, cultural climate marked by diversity, rapid change, and shifting conceptions of knowledge production and use (Armaline and Farber 2008). Put briefly, the article discussed how a reconceived concept of democratic collaboration might work in educational reform efforts in the USA. The piece contended that collaboration as currently conceived and practiced in urban schooling reform in the USA is rooted in a consensus model of social interaction, where consensus is sought through rational inquiry, public discourse, and the free exchange of ideas. The unquestioned use of these processes tends to ignore the tensions and points of contestation that arise as diverse groups with often conflicting cultures, interests, values, and positions of power work to construct public education in their own images.

Given such a reality, consensus models of collaboration are not only simplistic, but also potentially misleading. Further, democratic collaboration in education tends to focus on the political/procedural aspects of democracy and treats the democratic process primarily as a means to some greater end (the "reconstructed" school). A great deal more may be gained by exploring the pedagogical possibilities of democracy and treating it more as an end in itself, or, put more accurately, as a site where means and ends collapse into one another (Dewey 1916). Such a means/ends collapse may be found in other, more non-traditional sources of democratic, collaborative activities grouped in that earlier article as forms of collective improvisation in the arts. The article briefly explored three such sources of artistic collective improvisation – in jazz, dance, and writing – in an effort at reconfiguring educational collaborations (Megill and Demory 1984, Novack 1990, Epstein 1995).

How does reflecting on the practice of collective improvisation in the arts help us to theorize collaboration as democratic practice in ways that take into consideration the complexities of an increasingly global context? First, the process of collaborating democratically is not separate from the product of that collaboration. The art produced (music, dance, or literary composition) is part and parcel of the process. We are compelled by these metaphors and see the need for this same collapse of means and ends in the functioning of democratic schools. The reforming of schools around democratic principles requires the on going living of those principles. And in living democratically,

we learn to live and work together, not without difference and conflict, but across difference and conflict. Second, while consensus may indeed be an episodic result of the process, it is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for the process to go forward. What we feel is a more compelling condition than consensus is gaining an awareness of mutuality and interdependence. The jazz musicians need one another to make music, the dancers need one another for the dance, and the writers need respondents to produce the collective composition. Universities, schools, community groups, parents, and non-governmental organizations all have multiple interests in and images of schooling. We believe that a developing and deepening of our conscious awareness of interdependence can be a guiding force in helping us live democratically in and out of school.

Recognizing our interdependence and using it to develop more just and sustainable ways of living are vital if we are to move from our contemporary divided society to one global community (Jackins 1990). Increasing awareness of the responsibility for the future and the incredible technological possibilities give us a chance for decreasing the multitude of threats we are facing. Huge differences in wealth, the use and misuse of nuclear power, the lack of democracy and equality, and the negative impacts of globalization are known very well; but we struggle with transferring that knowledge into political will (Klein 2004, 463). Further, although we have access to and the ability to use technology, we often suffer because we lack the insight, vision and ability to communicate common interests that exist despite our many differences.

Given that societies are changing rapidly, that globalism is becoming a reality, no institution can stay frozen in the current time (Marx 2006). The real questions for us are: "What forms will globalism take?" and "What role will education/schooling play in that global society?" This is a critical moment for education. The biggest educational task is the transformation of thinking about the world, creating a collective effort that unifies all human kind. In this vision of globalism there should not be a space for vertical relations, for unequal distributions of power and wealth. Is it unreasonable to think that we educate ourselves to a level of self-awareness and awareness of the world such that we can work through our cultural and regional differences and forge a common future? Is it possible that through deep reflection we might recognize the opportunities afforded us by our differences and use the richness of those differences to strengthen our connections, our interdependence? Cooperation/communication, mentioned as one of defining issues for education, becomes today both a factor that influences the quality of the process and an aim of reform efforts – a means-ends collapse – exactly in the same way as democracy itself.

Democracy

We have been working for over two decades in democratic school reform, and our thinking and acting through shifting conceptualizations and metaphors of democracy are continually being revised. The work and experience coming out of the 2007 conference at Jagiellonian University is exciting because we may now use the ideas developed to collaborate democratically across our differences in history, culture, and context.

In this effort at mutually supportive schooling reform, we think a few things from the USA experience may be instructive, both for schools themselves and for developing democratic principles and institutions.

We in the USA have made great progress over the past 20–30 years in reconstructing schools in ways that can improve student academic performance. Tests of literacy, computational skills, writing, science, and civic knowledge indicate an upward trend in those schools that have adopted our reform strategies and processes. Those processes focus on (1) shared decision making including multiple stakeholders (teachers, students, parents, community members) regarding the structure and operation of the school; (2) on-going staff professional development employing best practices for instructional leadership, teaching and learning; and (3) direct services for students and their families to help prepare them for the demands of schooling and for post secondary education and the world of work (Marzano, Waters, and McNulty 2005, Marzano 2007). We have also seen the schools transformed into more caring and nurturing places for staff and students alike – not an unimportant outcome by any means.

What we have not seen, however, is an appreciable change in the ability or willingness of teachers and students to engage in an ongoing critique of the broader society, challenging systemic injustices and deeply held beliefs that often work to the disadvantage of large numbers of people. It is here, in the arena of schools functioning as agents of fundamental social change, that our efforts at reforming schools seem to be falling short. In some ways, that is not hard to figure out. The school reform movements from the perspective of the federal and state governments in the USA have always focused on gaining a competitive advantage in terms of military strength and global economic position (from the Cold War emphasis on math and science, through the Reagan administration's call to action through "A Nation at Risk," and into G.W. Bush's "No Child Left Behind"). While all of these efforts gave lip service to student needs, it was the needs of the social order that reigned supreme. These were clearly nationalistic efforts at positioning the USA as a continuing world power, employing schools as one instrument in that struggle. Even in our current stated intent to "leave no child behind," we are still moving forward with state driven curricula and accompanying tests of performance designed to serve a fairly narrow range of economic and strategic interests. Many of us in the USA argue that the very nature of these efforts not only leave many behind, but they also serve interests that are not in line with a more just and humane society. How can this be?

The answer seems to lie in the conceptualizations of reform and the goals and purposes of education/schooling. Stated simply, if our goal is to increase academic achievement, defined in terms of state sanctioned standards of academic performance and measured by tests of those standards of performance, we have indeed been successful reformers. While we still have a long way to go to completely bridge the gap between the test performance of rich and poor, we are doing much better. This is no small feat, as student performance does play a major role in limiting or enhancing student life chances after school. But those life chances are not without limits, sometimes severe ones. There is still a huge gap, economically speaking, between rich and poor, and no effort on the part of schools can completely bridge that gap. It is only through a radi-

cal restructuring of society, away from the demands and principles of capitalism, that economic justice can be approached (Bauman 2004). We cannot school away poverty, if only for the fact that the economic rewards of schooling attainment come from one's relative position in the schooling attainment hierarchy. As more and more children achieve higher and higher levels of schooling attainment, the relative value of each level of attainment changes. What we have is an ever-shifting target, still reached by only a few, with the rest left to fight over what remains. The uncovering and dissecting of these social and economic dynamics are much harder to perform within schools. When they are attempted, calls of "anti-Americanism," "socialism," and "unpatriotic" behavior tend to drown out reasonable discourse. It is in the realm of capitalist ideology that many of our most serious hurdles arise. We cannot imagine things being different from the way they are – it is only "common sense" that democracy, liberty, and capitalism are intricately and unalterably connected, and that an assault on one (capitalism) is an assault on the other two.

Although we firmly believe that schools can and should play a role in social and economic reconstruction, its role is limited. But schooling is not our only vehicle for educating our populace. There are many non-school educational settings that may offer us other routes to social change. We will come back to non-school educational options later. What can schools do? Schools may become a component in an array of formal and informal collective efforts at building just and humane societies (Freire 2001). Schools can ignite the discussion that will serve to build a collective value system that might help societies to function differently. School also should be able to ensure that every student learns to live and lead productive and meaningful lives by building a culture of dialogue that supports open and active inquiry and the ability to work in democratic groups and societies. To prepare for authentic dialogue we need to give teachers the autonomy, support, training, and inspiration they need to make critical decisions about what is taught and how it is taught (Shor 1992). They need to decide critical questions about school and its purpose, not just follow the standardized requirements developed by legislators and bureaucrats. Democracy is not telling people the truth; democracy is developing and negotiating that truth. We will not build democratic schooling through strengthening control but maybe we can do it through trust and investment.

The culture of control does not support the open, democratic and professional relations in school, nor does it support group reflection, development through cooperation, or the exchange of experiences and/or data. It does tend to support the development of skills in report writing, document production and presentation. What are even worse are the resultant relations between authorities (society) and teachers, which impact the relations between teachers and students. Teachers have often had little or no freedom, independence and real responsibility. Similarly, students are given little in the way of negotiating their lives in school, even though a stated purpose of schools in democracies is to prepare students for the life of democratic citizens. We are disappointed so often that students do not exhibit responsible attitudes. But should we be surprised? They have almost no opportunities to learn the requisite knowledge, skills, and dispositions. A majority of adults treat young people as incomplete beings, as people with some kind of fundamental deficit. Students might gain a right to their voice, but only

after their experience in schools. Openness, readiness to cooperate, understanding values different from one's own, self-awareness, and the desire for taking responsibility for one's actions are not supported in schools. If students are never rewarded with freedom in schools, in their homes, or on the playground, how can they learn to live in our (democratic) societies?

If we are serious about helping our young people become active citizens, we need to help them develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to function in that capacity. Such development is risky for the status quo, as truly creative and critical citizens may force change, and change is always disturbing to those in power. Currently, our schools do not engender such growth. Rather, they work to maintain the society as it stands (both in the USA and in Poland).

Systemic change

The ability to see "the whole picture" is one of the most important skills one can develop, especially in the changing, fragmented, and frequently unpredictable reality created by globalization (Cohen and Kennedy 2007). A new and more critical approach to schooling needs to improve students' (and teachers') understanding of the contemporary world and its societies at the level not only of politics, power and economics, but also at the level of ideology. The belief system that guides social, political, and economic life is often obscure. But cutting through that obscurity may be the primary educational challenge we face if we are truly interested in democratic reform. It is here that schools are limited by their very position as institutional supports for the societies undergoing questioning and reform. Further, as institutional supports for society, schools embody a tension between functioning as instruments of the state and the ideals of democratic education.

Additionally, the discussion of how schools might approach the notion of ideology and its role in limiting our imagination and our action brings to the fore a number of related issues. How, in terms of democratic practice, do we explore the conflicts that emerge between and among the "reformers?" How do we negotiate our own views of education and society with those of our collaborators, who often disagree fundamentally over purpose and desired outcomes? Where does our pedagogy end and imposition begin? How do we reconcile sometimes conflicting beliefs in (a) the value of multiple perspectives found in postmodernism and poststructuralism, (b) the valuing of warrantability as found in Dewey (1933) as a way to determine the relative merits of those beliefs and to evaluate the consequences of acting on those varied beliefs; and (c) a neo-Marxist orientation to the role and functioning of schooling in the social order?

Teachers need to work on creating an atmosphere of permanent learning (institutional and individual) what is impossible without few conditions. First, ideological assumptions must support the belief that everyone can learn and that school is one learning community including students together with teachers and others – learning can not be limited to youngsters. Second, the interdisciplinary team of professionals

(teachers, principals, partners, almost everyone in community) should work to define the vision adequate for the community needs and compatible to national and regional strategies. Third, all involved in the process should be provided with tools that support useful action: basic skills in learning, self-evaluation, reflection, cooperation in groups focused on self-development, reading and discussing important research.

In order to ignite systemic change we need to build a systemic view and understanding of education, a view that will deconstruct the dying elephant of the school system. We must build an effective support system, with educational centers where people's life experiences and needs will be masters, with research centers and think tanks where implementation will happen, with brainstorming that will inspire us for years. We need creative innovators and responsible citizens.

Conclusion

The biggest challenge for all "reformers" may be their (and the target group's) social and cultural background, including the beliefs about education that they "collected" during the socialization process. Quite often reform recommendations that go to the heart of both a democratic education and democratic society are perceived as so radical that the political reaction blocks the implementation of those recommendations even if they are reasonable and/or promising. The mental model of the school is so deeply imprinted in social awareness that every serious change creates wave of protests anchoring democratic education rather as ambitious project than driving and inspiring practice.

The question of whether schools can or should change society is not new. At least as far back as the 1930's radical educators on the left have debated this question. The most famous of these educators in the USA early on was George Counts, of Teachers College, Columbia University. In his seminal work, "Dare the School Change the Social Order," his conclusion was that they must. We recognize the richness and complexity of the historical debate, running from Counts' "social reconstructionist" perspective, through more deterministic Marxist accounts that claim the schools cannot fundamentally change the society because they are merely institutional manifestations of the capitalist order, to the neo-Marxist scholars (Paul Willis from the UK, Peter McLaren from Canada, and Henry Giroux from the US, e.g.) who have pointed out the unnecessarily deterministic nature of reductionistic Marxist accounts. Our own scholarship and experience seems to indicate a rather impenetrable shield around the dominant cultural structures, especially those of capital, that tends to be supported by institutions such as the schooling system more so than called into question by them. And when "reformers" try to open schools to the debate over fundamental aspects of justice and equality, especially but not only in terms of economics, the forces of tradition and stasis combine with the hegemonic force of ideology and "common sense" to thwart such efforts.

Put differently, we do not believe that schools cannot change, cannot be improved upon. They can, and the processes of democracy are central to those changes. We

have seen much in the way of improvement in academic achievement, especially for historically marginalized groups like racial and ethnic minorities and the children of the poor. We have also seen schools become more welcoming environments for children and their parents, especially through what has come to be known as the "small schools" movement in the States. While these reforms are indeed important, and while they have served to improve the life chances of many children severely disadvantaged by an unjust social order, they fall short of calling the structures of that society into question.

As an adjunct to using schools as instruments of democratic reform, we might recall our earlier discussion of artistic metaphors of democratic practice from music, dance, and literary composition. These metaphors suggest to us that many forms of human activity can be sites that engender democratic experience. It may be that truly fundamental social and educational change can come about by marshalling experience in non-school educational settings – NGOs, grassroots community organizations, and other formal and informal collectives designed to address issues and problems through direct social action. Dewey (1916) tells us that not only does a democratic society need education (an educated populace), but also that education needs democracy. In other words, it is through living democratically that we learn best. It would be ideal if schools, although they are not our only opportunities for such experience, were to become sites for and laboratories of democratic living.

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