

Rethinking Educational Failure and Reimagining an Educational Future

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Introduction

At the moment, there are bitter struggles going on over continuing school failures, testing policies, budget cuts to schools and colleges, layoffs, school closings, class sizes, and the establishment of charter schools. There is also an increasingly sharp debate emerging between proponents of what I will refer to as the “new education reform” and a growing multitude of opponents. In those contexts, I’ve been worried that it would be way out of synch to be publishing an article that is primarily concerned with long-term trends and their manifestations in the everyday realities of educational institutions (and vice versa—the production of long-term trends by everyday practices)—especially to the extent that some of what I believe reflects rather badly on the routine practices of teachers, schools and unions. I am not interested in providing any ammunition to those forces that obscure every assault against the well-being of teachers with claims to be acting on behalf of the children.

But I decided to continue down the road I had been travelling on—in the hope that what I have to say might alert some of those involved in various struggles (teachers, parents, community activists) about the profound dangers associated with defending what we might consider to be education as usual. I am aware that an already quite bad situation could be made much worse if forces on the right emerge victorious but, at the same time, I’d like to insist that the bad that we have must be seen by all as indefensible. And furthermore a defense of the existing state of affairs will not get us anywhere that we should want to go.

A recent court case in Los Angeles illuminates the situation. In January, a judge ruled that the seniority rights of teachers employed in the Los Angeles Unified School District would not be fully honored in the case of layoffs—in spite of those rights being enshrined in both the local collective bargaining agreement and state law. Judge William Highberger ruled against the suit brought by the United Teachers of Los Angeles and approved an agreement between the ACLU of Southern California, the state of California and the school district which would shield 45 of the district’s lowest performing schools from layoffs. The ACLU had based its argument on the situation that had resulted from the last round of layoffs at three poorly performing middle schools which have had high rates of teacher turnover and, therefore, few teachers with the years of seniority that would protect them from layoffs. As a result of layoffs in the past two years, more than half of the teachers at the three schools had lost their jobs; in one school, the percent of teachers laid off was over 70% and, in another, almost the entire English department and all eighth grade teachers were laid off. As a result of those layoffs, many of the classes have been taught by a succession of substitute teachers with little connection or commitment to the schools. At the same time, more successful schools in wealthier parts of the city lost far fewer teachers. The ACLU had argued that this disproportionate impact represented a denial of the constitutional right of students enrolled in the three schools to a quality education. Not surprisingly, the union had argued for the sanctity of the seniority principle and pointed out the need to address the real causes of failure at the affected schools. It has promised to appeal the decision. Perhaps needless to say, one thing that the union apparently did not consider was that the actions of its members, protected by the union, had very much to do with failure in those schools. In general, the forces of the organized left, mostly but not all Trotskyist-minded, have rushed to the defense of the union’s position. I’d suggest that if we begin and end where the United Teachers of Los Angeles begins and ends, we will remain trapped in a vicious circle.

Canary in a Coal Mine

Let me begin with the big picture. In an illuminating book, *Global Decisions, Local Collisions*, Dave Ranney has examined the fairly devastating impacts of the collapse of manufacturing in Chicago starting at the end of the 1970s:

In the late 1970s, I lived and worked in Southeast Chicago. At the time, the neighborhood was a vibrant, mixed-race, working class community of solid single-family homes and manicured lawns. Its economic anchor was the steel industry. U.S. Steel Southworks, Wisconsin Steel, Republic Steel and Acme Steel employed over 25,000 workers. Southeast Chicago was also teeming with businesses that used steel or that sold products to the steel mills: steel fabrication shops, industrial machinery factories, plants that made farm equipment, and railroad cars. There were also firms that sold the mills industrial gloves, shoes, tools, nuts and bolts and welding equipment. The commercial strip had retail stores, bars and restaurants. Many of these, like the steel mills, were open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

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During the 1980s, the Chicago steel industry collapsed and took down with it much of the related industrial and service economy that depended on it. Both Wisconsin Steel and U.S. Southworks eventually closed. Republic Steel was bought out by a conglomerate and was greatly downsized. Steel jobs in Southeast Chicago declined from about 25,000 workers to less than 5,000 in a decade. And the decline in manufacturing extended far beyond steel. The Chicago metropolitan area suffered a net loss of 150,000 manufacturing jobs during the 1980s. People's lives were torn asunder in the wake of massive layoffs. Divorces, alcoholism, even suicides were on the rise. Industrial unions were decimated and union membership declined throughout the United States. The new jobs created in the wake of this decline paid far less than the jobs that had been lost. Many were temporary or part-time and usually lacked benefits like health care. Workers taking these jobs no longer made enough to live on. So they worked two or sometimes three jobs to make what they had previously made at one. Many of the dislocated workers never worked again. The struggle over civil rights in the workplace and within the union was over because the workplace itself no longer existed.

Although Ranney modulates his nostalgia for Chicago's lost world by acknowledging the historical significance of racial discrimination (that resulted in constricted job opportunities and lower wages for Hispanics and African-Americans) and the struggles against those discriminatory practices in workplaces and unions, he suggests that something very important had been lost:

Not only were the community and its economy vibrant, there was a system in place that looked to future generations. The mills and many of the related firms had strong unions. Through the union you could get your children into the steel mills to learn a trade or get a well-paying job that would allow them to save and go on to college.

In passing, I'd suggest that this notion of a link to the future is a very important one and that its frequent absence in contemporary life, as a result of the devastation visited upon the productive workforce and the long painful decline in working class living standards, has a good deal to do with what I interpret as a withdrawal from both intellectual and political engagement on the part of many. At the same time, as evidenced by the recent events in Northern Africa and the Middle East, the return of people who thought that they had no future to the stage of history should not be discounted.

Fast forward to the middle of the 1990s and listen to the words of Ms. Sparks, a sixth-grade teacher who had grown up in Chicago, in all likelihood in the same neighborhood that Ranney described, and had returned to teach in the elementary school she had attended:

I am from streets with buildings
that used to look pretty.
From safe walking trips to
Mr. Ivan's family grocery store,
where now stands a criminal sanctuary.
I am from a home and a garage

Illustrated with crowns, diamonds,
upside-down pitchforks, squiggly
names and death threats.
I am from a once busy, prosperous
and productive community;
where the fathers and mothers
earned a living at the steel mills,
And the children played
Kick the Can and Hide and Go Seek
Until they could play no more.
I am from here.
[reprinted in *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*]

The destruction of the world that Ranney and Ms. Sparks remember and its consequences have not received the attention they deserved. Indeed, it seems like we have simultaneously managed to lose the past and the future.

The wave of Chicago factory closings was a canary in the coal mine moment. It signaled the emergence of a new era in American (and world-wide) social and economic life--an era characterized by:

- factory closures and plant transfers to lower-waged locations;
- outsourcing;
- the development of finance as a major source of profits (even for industrial firms);
- the elimination of millions of jobs;
- a rise in part-time or temporary jobs as primary employment;
- the depopulation and physical destruction of cities (such as Detroit and Baltimore);
- gentrification in many urban neighborhoods and the rise in political importance of the social groups formed by that gentrification;
- severe decreases in unionization rates in the private sector;
- lowered wages and benefits in the private sector;
- extensive technical innovation in communication, transportation and production--resulting in still more job losses;
- the increasing commodification of the satisfaction of all sorts of human needs (such as care for the elderly and the very young and the maintenance of households) and an accompanying proliferation of low-waged, on or off-the-books, service jobs; and
- the establishment of credit (at either normal or usury rates) as an indispensable way of life for many members of the middle and working classes.

And perhaps, as a result of it all, it was characterized by the sucking out of the life blood of the collective spirit of the American working class.

The Solution of All Solutions?

It also resulted in an enhanced focus on educational failure as the cause of a wide array of social maladies--such as poverty, discrimination, unemployment, low wages and social despair. The Alliance for Excellent Education, a not untypical advocacy organization, pointed out the negative impacts it associated with what it believed was an education “crisis”:

... high school dropouts face long odds of landing a good-paying job in the ultra-competitive job market of the twenty-first century. In addition, they are generally less healthy, die earlier, more likely to become parents when very young, more at risk of tangling with the criminal justice system, and are more likely to need social welfare assistance (see <http://www.all4ed.org/node/13/print>).

Conversely, educational achievement was portrayed as the solution of all solutions—especially to what was seen as the worsening position of the United States in the world economy. In most policy accounts, this new emphasis on education was seen as all but inevitable, and indeed cause for celebration, since the country had shifted to a knowledge-based economy and it was no longer possible for individuals to earn a living by the sweat of their brows. They now needed skills and credentials—at least a high school diploma but, increasingly, a credential beyond high school and they were advised that the reason why people could not find and keep good jobs is that they lacked the skills they needed—there was a “skills mismatch.” Therefore, education was more important than ever—it was up to individuals to acquire the “human capital” that would make them qualified for employment in what is routinely characterized as a global competitive economy.

Efforts are continually made to help people understand the dollar value of a diploma or a degree—usually claiming that bachelor degree holders would earn a million dollars more over a lifetime than someone with a high school diploma. This differential was, of course, seldom placed in the context of the massive shift of wealth that has taken place in the larger society and is, for all practical purposes, simply urging individuals to compare themselves to other members of the broad working classes and to pursue an individual strategy for relative improvement. As I observed in an article in the first issue of *Insurgent Notes*, the enormous increase in enrollment in higher education over the past four decades provides convincing evidence that workers have, at least on the surface, become convinced of the usefulness of education as an individual strategy in replacement of even modest collective efforts through trade unions.

Recently, in an interesting turn, President Obama has asked every young American to “commit” to at least one year of education after high school so that America can win in the global sweepstakes. So, where individuals were previously advised to get better educated so that they could advance themselves and their families, the president wants them to do it for the country. This rhetoric has become all but completely dominant in educational policy circles. It is long overdue for a serious challenge.

Let’s be real. The reason why there are so few well-paying jobs and jobs with secure benefits is that employers made every effort to eliminate those kinds of jobs and have mostly succeeded—with the partial exception, now being directly challenged, of jobs in the public sector. While there may have been a good deal of personal malice and greed involved in those employer calculations, there was no need for such motives. The logic of profit was more than sufficient. At the bottom of the desperate drive for profit is the still hard to believe transformation of production from what was already a quite advanced stage in the 1960s and early 1970s. A current example from automobile production illuminates the current state of affairs. Hyundai, the Korea-based auto manufacturer, has built an assembly plant in Montgomery, Alabama. It’s not unionized but it pays good wages by Montgomery standards—about \$20/hour and a good deal of overtime. The plant employs 3,000 assembly workers and produces 300,000 cars a year. At that rate, it would only take about 150,000 assembly workers to produce cars at the highest annual level ever recorded in the US. What’s true for Hyundai and the automobile industry is true for many other firms and many other industries—the ongoing and increasing application of scientific/technical knowledge to production has made human labor less and less necessary. What it also means is that

companies engaged in production have too much capacity—those with capital to invest are in a bind—if they invest more in production, they might very well profit less. Therefore, they look elsewhere.

Let's look more closely at skills and credentials. Almost all of what are imagined to be unskilled or low-skilled jobs (such as those in factories) actually require a good deal of skills (see Kusterer, *Know How on the Job* and Rose, *The Mind at Work*). But, in the dominant narratives, the skills of individuals who do all sorts of manual labor are belittled and denied (as retrospectively have been the skills of the industrial workers who made American manufacturing the envy of the world). Ranney tells a revealing story:

During a television debate in the early 1990s, that I had with an economist in the employ of Citicorp she talked about the tragedy of her family—mother, father, brothers and sisters—who had all been autoworkers in Detroit. We were debating the merits of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and a simultaneous proposal then before Congress to raise the minimum wage. She was for NAFTA and against raising the minimum wage. The tragedy of her family, in her view, was not that they had lost their jobs as General Motors and Ford shifted production to low-wage/high-productivity plants in Mexico or that they were forced to take low-wage jobs that didn't pay enough to live on. The tragedy was that the high pay that they had received as autoworkers in the past had destroyed their jobs and undermined their incentive to get more education, which would have made them more competitive in today's world.

There's another, somewhat contrary, narrative which suggests that the era of American prosperity and global domination was the result of American success in educating its people and that the decline in educational achievement (as compared to other countries) is the reason why American dominance is at risk. And indeed, high school completion rates grew from about 10% of the population at the turn of the 20th Century to about 50% in the early 1940s and then up to almost 80% by the late 1960s—although those national averages obscure regional and racial/ethnic variations. Large increases in postsecondary enrollment and completion did not occur until after World War II. It seems more likely that increases in educational achievement accompanied, but did not necessarily cause, American prosperity in the 1950s and 1960s.

The achievements of industrial production had a great deal to do with the power of workers' collective labor on the assembly line and the application of scientific/technical knowledge related to the technologies of the time that was produced by relative handfuls of engineers and other technical staff. The workers' skill and knowledge mattered a great deal but the skills and knowledge they used were not acquired in schools. Often enough, workers had other intellectual and cultural interests, even ones that could be applied to production, but those who ran the factories were not interested in hearing about them (see Watson, "Counter-Planning on the Shop Floor").

What about credentials? Hiring practices in what might be considered the primary labor markets effectively exclude large numbers of people from consideration for better-paying jobs because they lack credentials—adversely affecting those who have been least successful in schools. This is in spite of the fact that there is frequently little evidence that what's been learned during the acquisition of the credential has much to do with successful job performance or even with the more effective acquisition of technical skills (see Collins, *Credential Society*). By way of example, individuals were once able to become nurses by completing a one-year program at a nursing program sponsored by a hospital; then they were required to complete an associate's degree and now, there is considerable pressure on nurses to have a bachelor's degree. (To the best of my knowledge, there is not a single non-degree nurse preparation program in New York City).

Let's put two and two together. The civil rights victories of the 1950s and 1960s initiated a process, uneven to be sure, to end legally sanctioned race discrimination. But, the election of Barack Obama notwithstanding, it is evident that black, and many Hispanic, individuals and communities live in deeply oppressive circumstances rooted in high rates of unemployment and low incomes. There has been a lot of

handwringing as well as lots of vicious drivel about why this is so. But it should be clear that the combination of credential inflation, massive educational failure, especially in black and Hispanic communities, and the elimination of millions of industrial jobs, has all but guaranteed the reproduction of a racially stratified society.

Credential inflation and the parallel effort to insist upon meritocracy as the proof in the pudding of a color-blind society also had effects beyond the black and Hispanic communities. In the last forty years, a wide divide has opened up between the elite colleges and universities and the rest of higher education. That divide is manifest, for example, in the different experiences of the relatively small number of kids who are competing for slots in the relative handful of elite institutions—where the defining experiences are demanding high school coursework, lots of college visits, high quality SAT prep, lots of AP classes, a dozen applications, stretch schools and safety schools, and early admission and early decision, frequently challenging college courses, high rates of degree completion and prospects of admission to prestigious graduate programs or professional schools. For the great majority of kids who are headed for the non-selective institutions (both public and private, and four-year and two-year), the typical experiences include uneven high school coursework, frequently ineffective SAT prep, applications to a handful of colleges unguided by a good sense of what might be a good match, bewildering placement processes upon admission, high rates of remediation, courses narrowly focused on employment goals, low rates of graduation and increasingly uncertain employment prospects for those who do graduate. Perhaps needless to say, the two different roads are clearly marked with signs—the first for the children of the wealthy and the professional classes and the second for just about everyone else.

Failure and Its Discontents

Although they are familiar enough, let me cite a few of the basic indicators of educational failure in America:

About 70% of students entering ninth grade are reading below expected proficiency, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

In 1969, 77% of high school students graduated but by 1997, the graduation rate had fallen to 65.7%. By 2004, it had gone back to about 70% but then started dropping a bit. In other words, almost one third of high school students drop out.

About 70% of high school graduates continue on to enroll in college; about 25% of those who enroll in four-year colleges need at least one remedial course; and about 60% of those who enroll in community colleges need at least one; but only about 30% of those required to take remedial courses successfully complete all of them.

Only about half of students enrolled in public four-year colleges earn a degree and only about 30% of those enrolled in community colleges do so—within six years of entry.

In virtually every case, black and Hispanic students do even worse. According to NAEP results, more than 85% of black and Hispanic eighth graders read below grade level; only 55% of Hispanic students and 51% of black students graduate from high school in four years; only 20% of Hispanic graduates and 23% of black graduates are considered ready for college; and many fewer blacks and Hispanics attend or graduate from college.

These failures, or other versions of them, are continuously cited and, interpreted within the contexts of global competition and US decline, they have been driving the last couple of decades of education reform—pushed forward by policy organizations and a host of foundations. At the same time, they have also featured prominently in what is frequently characterized as social entrepreneurialism, a movement of sorts that is grounded in elite colleges and universities, and manifested in such projects as Teach for America and an array of charter school organizations, such as the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP).

Virtually all of the projects associated with this movement emphasize the notion that the leading ideas should primarily come from those who are unburdened with the beliefs and customs of those with many years of experience in schools. The trend has also been accompanied by the increased involvement of all sorts of financial industry folks in bankrolling school reform projects, such as the Harlem Children's Zone. In spite of all the talk and much of the effort, it increasingly appears that the new reforms have not yielded consistent gains. Higher test scores are increasingly found to be based on student performance on predictable tests with cut points set far below what had been expected; high school graduation rates have increased but the majority of graduates are not deemed ready for college.

There is one other not so small thing—many millions of American students were, and still are, effectively disengaged from the institutions that are trying, with more or less intelligence and more or less integrity, to educate them—that might have a lot to do with the ineffectiveness of the reforms. How and why they become so disengaged is an important matter. There is a good deal of give and take in everyday schooling. Students often enough perceive their classes as really boring and, for sure, a lot of them probably are. But there are classes where the nature of the material requires both prior learning and sustained attention. If students have not more or less mastered what they previously should have and find themselves unable to do much of the work at hand, a claim that it is boring is a lot easier for them to handle than an admission that they can't do it. And if it's perceived to be boring, then there's not much reason to try to struggle with the material to see if it can be understood; once again, failing because you didn't try is a lot easier to handle than failing in spite of trying. This way of thinking about student failure has sometimes been called "learned helplessness."

But there's another part of the story related to student disengagement that is more directly connected to the bigger picture painted above and it's of special relevance to kids in middle school (typically, grades six to eight) and high school. It is generally taken to be the case that middle schools are far less successful than elementary or high schools--student performance on various assessments frequently decline during middle school but students do somewhat better in high school. Middle schools appear to be an educational black hole. One of the most frequently cited explanations for the shortcomings of middle school is the significance of raging hormones among younger adolescents. Although I am no expert on hormones, I find that explanation a bit simplistic since, if hormones make some kids act out, they probably should be making all kids act out and thereby interfere with effective schooling all over the place. But that's not the case. By way of counter-evidence, middle schools in good suburban school districts routinely do quite well, as do handfuls of somewhat selective middle schools in large cities. So far as I know, they are not administering anti-hormonal medications.

I think that a more useful explanation is the recognition that children of middle school age (12-14) are increasingly able to recognize and interpret what is going on around them and to develop a more or less realistic assessment of what their life prospects are and they begin to act on the basis of those assessments. A realistic assessment is one that's going to be grounded in children's perceptions of what's going on in their immediate and extended families, their neighborhoods and, of course, the schools they have attended and are attending and, very importantly, where they think they stand in terms of what they have learned and what they need to learn. What kids know and understand is almost always limited by the simple fact that they're kids—they have limited experiences. It's hard enough for most kids to figure out what's going on within their families, let alone about the ways in which events beyond their family or neighborhood are shaping their lives. But that doesn't mean that they don't notice things—their mom or dad, who finished high school but can't get a regular job; their older brother or sister who started community college but dropped out; their cousin who's spent time on Rikers Island (a New York City jail) who got his GED while he was waiting for trial. And the kids put things together! And when you put things together from the bad end of the American educational dream, it starts to look like a bad dream. So, maybe you don't believe in the dream so much!

Once again, this perception is not limited to black and Hispanic kids. The handwriting is visible on the wall for lots of white kids who attend ordinary high schools and colleges that produce failure more often than success. The dream is not doing so well in their lives either.

A good deal of what has gone on and is going on in lots of schools, especially in schools in cities with large numbers of black and Hispanic students, is terribly disheartening—a lot of kids haven't learned very much (specifically, they haven't learned to read and write very well and they have not really learned arithmetic or elementary algebra); they find themselves increasingly frustrated as they progress through the grades, whether or not they have been left back; way too many of them (mostly boys) have been referred to special education, through the more or less routine functioning of evaluation processes that are all but pre-set to result in certification of students being in need of special services (and being excluded from regular classes); and lots of them have been subject to suspensions for violations of school rules—some serious, some not, and many ambiguous—where the most appropriate response should have been an effort to simply figure out what was going on in a child's life.

Let me emphasize that last point—children are being judged according to criteria that should not be applied to children. Children make mistakes: they act inappropriately; they sometimes act quite badly. It is the responsibility of adults in schools to stop them from acting inappropriately or badly; to explain why they should not have done what they did; to describe what the consequences might be if they act inappropriately or badly again; to insure that parents and guardians are fully informed, **and never to hold a grudge against children for what they have done.** However, that's not what happens—far too often, kids who misbehave are portrayed as demons and monsters. Lest readers think I exaggerate, I took this from a recent teacher's post on the web page of the Independent Community of Educators (ICE), a leftish rank and file opposition group within the UFT, the teachers union in New York City, which I first came across on a Chicago-based teachers' web page:

The Logical Truth: Through no fault of his own, if Dr. Martin Luther King taught in a "rough" school and was given up to 150 students, many highly disruptive, disrespectful and emotionally disturbed that told him to "Shut the F... up or I'll kill your mother," and these students refused to do any work and subsequently failed Standardized Tests, Dr. King would be branded publicly as a Bad Teacher, Bum, Dead Beat and the like by the DOE and newspapers.

(<http://iceuftblogspot.com/2011/02/overwgelming-controversies-defame-nyc.html>)

I don't think that guy should be anywhere near kids. But what I think is an even bigger problem is that an opposition caucus in the UFT or an oppositional educational group in Chicago thinks it's all right to post his rants. One friend, upon reading an earlier version of this article, was puzzled that I felt that it reflected so badly on the teacher in question. Perhaps I let too much of my own experiences in schools get in the way of clarity. Look back upon the quote—the teacher says that many of the 150 students were “highly disruptive, disrespected and emotionally disturbed,” that they cursed and threatened and that they “refused to do any work.” He did not say those things about a child or a few children; he said it about many of them. It seems evident to me that he simply cannot escape from his convictions that black kids are mostly hopeless—and let's be clear about this, the “rough school” is a school with black kids, in light of the sarcastic invocation of Martin Luther King. It is hard to imagine that he could ever be an effective (let alone thoughtful or considerate) teacher in a classroom with black youngsters—especially youngsters who have not done well in school.

I am not suggesting that such a character is representative of all teachers in struggling schools. Indeed, there are many extraordinarily dedicated and very hard-working teachers who are thwarted in their efforts by patterns of unproductive student behavior, especially in schools where the leadership does not take an active role in developing policies and practices that lead to children behaving in ways that are appropriate for learning environments.

If we think about what goes on in classrooms as consisting of a complex interaction between what teachers ask children to do, what children do, how they are responded to, how they interpret the response,

and how they subsequently act, I think we can relatively easily imagine a situation where kids start acting in ways that are probably really quite opposed to their own best interests as learners—meaning that they get to school late, they skip school entirely, they don't do the work they're asked to do, they create disturbances in their classrooms, they challenge and disrespect their teachers and their classmates, they do little homework. Often enough, the kids don't seem able to distinguish between the teachers who disrespect them and the ones who are exhausting themselves in trying to do the right thing. Not exactly a recipe for academic success! But, at the same time, the students remain ambivalent—if you ask them, they will usually insist on how important a good education is and how they want to be successful in school—there are very few student opponents of education at the level of articulations. But there are more than a few at the level of everyday actions. As in many other situations, actions can come before articulations and can even be at odds with those articulations.

What Should Educators Do?

Teachers and other educators should be prepared to act beyond the simple defense of their interests as workers. On the outside, it demands an unequivocal commitment to stand in solidarity with the people who live in the communities where they teach when community residents take steps to address issues of concern (such as police abuse or violence) and not just when those issues coincide with the interests of workers in the schools—as in the case of school closings.

And on the inside, teachers must take collective responsibility for two things: 1) documenting and challenging the ways in which school policies and practices adversely affect some students (such as those being referred to special education and those being subjected to disciplinary proceedings), and 2) enhancing the quality of teaching that's provided to children. The real problem with teaching in schools (and colleges, for that matter) is not that there are lots of really bad teachers; the overwhelming majority of teachers are not lousy. But, at the risk of over-simplifying matters, let me suggest that far too much teaching (including some of the teaching that I've done) is probably not good enough. I would characterize it as teaching guided by common sense and over-relying on telling students what they should know; but as Eleanor Duckworth memorably wrote, "Telling is not teaching and remembering is not learning." Much of what even young children have to learn is the result of a remarkable set of human inventions—such as the alphabet; a place-value based number system; written texts in multiple genres. Unlike what is commonly assumed, what is basic (such as the alphabet) is often times not easy. Teachers need to be sophisticated interpreters of the achievements that provide the essentials of a powerful education and astute observers of human development, not people blinkered by a whole set of commonsensical prejudices.¹ Their work is made much more difficult because of the failures that have come before. Teachers in the upper elementary grades, middle schools, high school and even colleges are faced with a daunting challenge to find effective ways of engaging students in learning grade-appropriate material and, at the same time, to enable them to acquire skills that they should have already learned. Very few teachers are able to figure it out on their own—they need access to sophisticated learning theories, to numerous examples of effective practices and to more skillful practitioners. There are, I believe, more than enough raw materials for the assembly of effective educational institutions but they are not as consistently well used as they need to be.

The current assaults on teachers make the possibility of effective and equitable education less likely—even though they're being conducted in the name of excellence and equity. There's a cruel irony to the fact that a president who cannot recognize tyrants in the Middle East nonetheless feels completely qualified to recognize the failures of teachers at Central Falls High School in Rhode Island and to endorse their mass dismissal.

I'd suggest that there has not been an adequate articulation of a genuinely radical alternative to the prevailing ideas. There have been a number of more or less unhelpful approaches—including diversity

¹ Although it is far beyond the scope of this essay, the work of the Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, is one of the best places to start thinking about these matters.

training and multi-cultural education, a focus in schools of education on matters of democracy and social justice, an insistence that the behaviors associated with poverty are the key contributors to educational failure, and (in spite of its popularity with many on the left) a Paolo Freire-inspired liberatory education. My reasons for describing these approaches as unhelpful are multiple and I should emphasize that they are not all of a piece.² However, most of what might be considered left voices are inadequately attentive to the specificities of the ways in which failure is produced and reproduced in schools and all but completely inattentive to the large scale realities that I've described above. And finally, the unions and the various grass roots and oppositional groups active within them have failed to embrace a politics of solidarity with the children they teach and the communities they teach in. The activists may rail against the betrayals of the union leaders when those leaders maneuver to come to an accommodation with school superintendents, mayors and governors while maintaining their own power, but effective opposition will require a more fundamental break with the common sense of trade union activity and educational practice.

The inability of those perspectives to generate effective solutions has a great deal to do with why many dedicated educators and community advocates have been led to make common cause with an assortment of external actors (including powerful foundations and influential policy groups) in order to address the most pressing issues of educational inequality and failure. As a result, they have found themselves being pulled along in support of the “new education reform” including its reliance on policies and practices that they do not necessarily support—such as test-based accountability, test-based teacher evaluation, merit pay, and an excessive reliance on school closings. Those approaches are now the currency of the education policy realm and the common sense of the Obama administration's education policies.

A Different Approach

In the article thus far, I have relied upon fairly traditional ways of assessing educational achievement or its absence. Those measures are revealing only up to a point. What they effectively leave out is any sense of how impoverished the goals and accomplishments of American education are in light of what they should be. In all likelihood, the great majority of American students are being provided with an education that will leave them ill-equipped to understand, interpret or act to change the world they and their children will be living in. At the end of their formal schooling, even for those who are apparently most successful, they will know precious little of history, literature, science, philosophy or politics. While I would not overstate the point, it may very well be that one reason why students invest so little in their learning is that so little of genuine substance is being presented to them.

The recent renewal of mass political activity around the world and just now making an appearance in the United States might provide new reasons for disengaged and disaffected adolescents to become re-engaged with serious study so that they might acquire the skills and knowledge they need to become full-fledged participants in those events. It would be an especially welcome side effect of the return of politics.

I began this essay by reviewing some of the devastating consequences of the widespread deindustrialization that began in the 1970s. What needs to be kept in mind, however, is that the United States still has the greatest manufacturing capacity in the world—even after all those jobs were shipped overseas. But the manufacturing process is now increasingly organized by the application of scientific knowledge and, as I noted about the Hyundai plant in Alabama, less and less reliant on human labor. The potential implications of this development were foreseen by Karl Marx:

Labour no longer appears so much to be included within the production process; rather, the human being comes to relate more as watchman and regulator to the production process itself. No longer does the worker insert a modified natural thing [i.e. a tool—my insert] between the

² I hope to write a follow-up to this article, tentatively titled “The Politics of Pedagogy and the Pedagogy of Politics,” in a future issue of *Insurgent Notes* that will explore these matters.

object and himself; rather, he inserts the process of nature, transformed into an industrial process, as a means between himself and inorganic nature, mastering it. He steps to the side of the production process instead of being its chief actor. In this transformation, it is neither the direct human labour he himself performs, nor the time during which he works, but rather the appropriation of his own general productive power, his understanding of nature and his mastery over it by virtue of his presence as a social body—it is, in a word, the development of the social individual which appears as the great foundation-stone of production and of wealth.

The “social individual” is the very well educated individual. Marx anticipated that the kind of advanced education that had been and, to a great extent, remains available only to a minority would become something available to all individuals--once people had access to the free time which would be made possible by automated production. The German critical theorist, Iring Fetscher, attempted to articulate, in very broad terms, what might be the essential dimensions of the kind of knowledge individuals would need:

1. As many members of society as possible must become familiar with science; and
2. An end must be put to the isolation of individuals from the creative collective subject which alone is capable of coming to dominate the material conditions of human existence, rather than being dominated by them in the form of a totality subsumed by capital.

It is evident that we remain dominated by our circumstances. But the goal of the whittling away of the distinction between manual and intellectual labor that Marx anticipated can and should become the starting point of our thinking about the kind of education we want to provide for our children. If we start not from the goal of acculturating most children to the demands of an economy which promises only to make things worse, but from the goal of preparing all children to live in a world worthy of human beings, we will find a very different kind of education reform to advocate for. It will have some things in common with some parts of current reform efforts but it will go beyond and transform them.

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