

Decentralizing Educational Authority

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What does the word “education” mean to us? Does it refer to the state’s power to shape the minds and attitudes of citizens to provide human capital for economic and political purposes? Or is education, instead, an intimate human encounter between caring elders and young people with their own aspirations and potentials?

If we believe that genuine education has more to do with the latter, then the hierarchical and authoritarian structure of our present system of schooling is absurdly inappropriate. All important educational decisions are made by distant, impersonal forces completely out of human scale, turning teachers into technicians, parents into consumers, and young people into products. The standardization of teaching and learning through prescribed curricula and textbooks, and the obsessive pursuit of accountability through relentless testing, reflect the concentrated power of political leaders, corporate CEOs, influential foundations and the mass media. *No Child Left Behind* (sic) is the educational policy of a technocratic empire.

Through much of the history of public schooling, but especially since the publication of the Reagan administration’s report *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, educational decisions have not been made by those most intimately involved in the educational endeavor—teachers, parents or young people—but by technocrats pursuing their agenda of centralized social management. Policymakers are not concerned with the experiential

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quality of life or learning in schools, but only with measurable results, with “outputs,” with the economic value of the nation’s human resources.

There is an alternative to this model; indeed there are numerous educational alternatives outside the managed system, from Waldorf and Montessori models, to progressive, learner-centered schools, to homeschooling and travel adventures, and many others. Advocates of educational alternatives aim to give parents and students a wider range of learning options, to engage them in meaningful ways in the decisions affecting their education. The alternatives movement represents the decentralization of educational authority. It redefines learning as an intimate, human scale relationship through which young people are empowered to discover their own inner resources and their own unique relationships to the community.

Educational alternatives promote participatory democracy. As described by Vermont’s own progressive philosopher John Dewey, “participatory democracy” means a society that encourages individuals to take an active part in shaping the social and political lives of their communities rather than entrusting decisions to policymakers and other elites. It is not enough to elect representatives periodically, or to passively accept the decisions of bureaucrats and technocrats. But how can we best prepare each new generation to participate in a more robust democracy? Dewey explained that education must encourage active, personally meaningful learning and critical inquiry; he argued that the coercive transmission of an authorized curriculum can only educate youths to become passive citizens in an authoritarian social order.

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Educational democracy involves the redistribution of cultural power from the hands of a few policymakers to local communities, parents, teachers, and youths themselves. By repealing standardization and obsessive testing, we would enable those most closely involved in the learning process to determine their own educational goals and methods. In taking greater responsibility for education, citizens would participate more vigorously in shaping the intellectual and moral climate of their communities.

Let's consider a few examples already operating in Vermont. There are several Waldorf schools around the state, and each of them has attracted a community of parents and educators who seek organic, holistic, "green" variations on modern life, such as whole food, holistic healthcare, and a more deliberate connection to the rhythms of nature through festivals, stories, art and other endeavors. These school communities give people who hold a transformative cultural vision places to share, refine, and practice their ideas. Another educational community thriving under the radar in Vermont is the network of "unschoolers"—families who believe that the most authentic learning takes place in daily life, when young people become engaged in the social and natural world around them and pursue their own purposes and questions. This practice promotes the sort of intellectual and civic self-reliance that our most visionary thinkers, such as Thomas Jefferson, Henry David Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, considered essential to a democratic society.

But not all families or communities want to raise their children with a "transformative" vision or with quite so much self-reliance. I am not suggesting that these educational alternatives should simply take over from traditional education so that all citizens have to share such values. Educational democracy, educational decentralization,

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means that all families should have the ability to find learning environments aligned with their values and with their children's personalities and styles of learning. Schools (and homeschooling situations) that are more highly structured or academically oriented, or more concerned about moral or religious instruction—alternatives that already exist outside public education—would continue to be an important element of the educational environment. The coexistence of diverse educational visions and experiments would nourish a more vibrant democracy.

A frequent objection to this goal of educational freedom is that it would surrender the public school ideal of a shared social purpose, a common good that transcends parochial interests (which Dewey also emphasized as a key element of democratic life). Wouldn't our society splinter along lines of religion, ethnicity, class, race, political belief, or petty local interests? If we allow people to gather in separate enclaves to practice their own educational philosophies, wouldn't this give a green light to all sorts of religious extremists, left wing radicals, white supremacists, or tree huggers to freely teach the next generation their weird beliefs?

There are at least two ways to address this concern, both of which challenge the very basis of the technocratic model of schooling. First, we need to separate the educational task of mentoring young people from the political task of forging a democratic community in a diverse society. We need to get over, once and for all, the Platonic notion that the state should be molding children into citizens. When Jefferson proposed a system of public education to support the new American democracy, he sought to spread the intellectual tools of reason, skepticism and critical inquiry among the

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population, not to establish a “curriculum” authorized by elite policymakers, especially one that promotes mindless celebration of existing institutions. (He would be horrified, I think, by *No Child Left Behind*). When we put educational and political tasks in their proper places, we will see that children who have their developmental needs (such as the need to learn through play) and their individual learning styles well met are more likely to become thoughtful, caring, engaged citizens than those who are bullied and processed by the system of social engineering the technocracy has established. The proof is in the creative, active, generous, socially engaged lives of many thousands of alumni of independent schools and homeschooling.

The second answer to the fear of social fragmentation is to recognize that people will always identify with communities that share their beliefs and values, and that this is a basic, normal human need. Unlike a managed social system or a colossal nation state, a genuine community provides the experience of *communion* with others; we become involved with people who know us, who understand and appreciate us, who share certain aspects of our identities. In a healthy democracy, as Tocqueville keenly observed in the pre-imperial American republic, there is space for these kinds of connections; they do not threaten the political coherence of the larger community.

Granted that a functioning democracy requires citizens to reach out to each other across partisan or parochial lines to find common ground and collaborate for a common good, the desire for cultural uniformity can be pushed too far, until it becomes oppressive, even totalitarian. Social engineering is counterproductive: By forcing everyone into the ideological mold demanded by standardized education, the state drives

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people to separatist enclaves and makes them suspicious of commonality. Standardization fans the flames of extremism, while honoring diversity invites participation in the larger society.

There is a huge difference between a democratic sense of social responsibility and public spiritedness (which Dewey so thoroughly described), and the technocrats' goal of social control. Rejecting the yoke of standardization and enforced conformity does not mean "privatizing" education, making it a commodity that only the privileged can afford. A democratic society must provide all its youths equitable opportunities for cultivating their unique gifts and achieving their potentials. It will surely be a challenge to publicly fund a decentralized system without standardized accountability, but that is a task we must take on. We need to figure out how to encourage educational democracy without invoking the awesome power of the national state to enforce some authorized model of cultural conformity. For when the state becomes an all-consuming empire, this power is dangerous indeed.