

Education After the Empire

Originally published as Chapter 9 in *Education and Hope in Troubled Times: Visions of Change for Our Children's World*, edited by H. Svi Shapiro (Routledge, 2009).

We are living in a fragmented and troubled world at a precarious moment of history. The technocracy that rules modern civilization may be entering its final, desperate phase, its “endgame” as Derrick Jensen (2006) calls it. The industrial, political and cultural practices of modernity, he argues, are not sustainable, indeed are on the verge of chaotic collapse. Along with Jensen, various prophetic observers, including David Korten (2006), Charles Eisenstein (2007), and Joanna Macy (2006) among others, have recently declared the approaching end of technocracy, the end of empire (Bennett, 2007), perhaps even the end of America (Wolf, 2007). Indeed, various authors, such as Thomas Berry (1999), Richard Tarnas (2007), and Malcolm Hollick (2006), have asserted that we are experiencing one of those rare historical moments when an underlying worldview, the very basis for defining civilization, collapses and gives way to a new historical era.

The core problem with modernity, according to these observers, is that we have alienated human experience from the rhythms and processes of nature in order to assert self-serving control over the earth and its biosphere for short term gains. Not only does this alienation render us psychologically, existentially, and spiritually bereft—confused, lonely, depressed, and afraid—but it unleashes the monstrous violence of colonialism, imperialism and resource wars. Furthermore, the desire for control over nature is

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ultimately *futile* because the earth's resources are *finite*, and we cannot indefinitely consume them and convert them into waste. We face a crisis now, in the opening decade of the twenty-first century, because the most important resource enabling our drive for domination—cheap energy derived from fossil fuels—is dangerously altering the planet's climate and, at the same time, beginning to run out. Industrial culture and all that it implies—urbanization, mechanization, globalization—*cannot be sustained*. If we do not thoughtfully design and start to build a new civilization better attuned to the patterns and limitations of nature, then the old one will collapse into an ugly, destructive mess, of which post-Katrina New Orleans was a modest preview.

If there is any truth to these claims, then it is terribly insufficient to tinker with existing educational practices and policies to try to make our current schools more effective or even a little more humane. If this historical moment is so critical, then no educational agenda is fully responsive to the conditions of our time unless it radically questions the foundational assumptions that produced, and continue to prop up, the educational arm of the technocracy—the corporate state institution of mass schooling. While acknowledging our responsibility to the millions of young people who attend public schools today, I argue that we need to envision an entirely new educational culture that will replace an obsolete industrial-age system with a pedagogy that embraces the emerging postmodern worldview.

In this essay, then, I am not looking for ways to fund public education more equitably, or to fine tune the curriculum so that we might teach young people to be a bit more environmentally conscious or tolerant of diversity—although in the near term both

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of these goals need to be pursued and achieved. I will not even condemn the travesty of No Child Left Behind, though it surely needs to be repealed for the sake of meaningful, engaged learning, for it is merely a symptom of our age, a logical result of deeper cultural assumptions, and it is these that must concern us.

The perspective that I bring to this volume is from the countercultural tradition of “holistic” education (Miller, 1997)—the disparate assortment of radical educational alternatives that includes free schools and other independent progressive schools, Montessori and Waldorf education and other approaches rooted in spiritual philosophies, and that side of the homeschooling movement inspired by the democratic decentralism of Ivan Illich and John Holt. This countercultural stream was first evident in the responses that the New England Transcendentalists—Emerson, Alcott, and Thoreau—made to Horace Mann’s common school agenda in the 1840s. From the point of view of their holistic cosmology, they recognized immediately that mass schooling represented an industrialized, mechanized, standardized pedagogy, a technique for shaping a homogenized culture and compliant workforce rather than an organic nurturing of the human spirit. At the time, and for most of the 160 years since, the triumphant industrial culture has considered this critique to be merely “romantic” or “child-centered.” But as this culture now begins to show signs of imminent collapse, I believe the time has come to take their prophetic vision seriously.

The tradition of alternative/countercultural pedagogy seeks to replace a mechanistic and technocratic system of schooling—education for empire—with approaches that are more organic (attuned to the rhythms and processes of nature),

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personalist (respectful of the uniqueness and inner depth of each individual), and authentically democratic (responsive to local communities). Holistic education espouses a cultural and educational agenda grounded in several essential principles:

- 1). A holistic or integral perspective
- 2). Respect for every person, including children (human rights)
- 3). Decentralization of authority (human scale democracy)
- 4). Noninterference between political, economic, and cultural spheres of society
- 5). Balance (openness rather than fixed ideology)

Despite the philosophical and methodological differences among the various alternative movements—a Waldorf educator and a radical unschooler, for example, would argue over numerous issues—I am convinced that these core principles are widely shared by the dissident educational approaches that have arisen in response to industrial-age schooling. I believe that they represent the post-industrial, postmodern worldview that is seen emerging across many domains of culture, from holistic medicine to organic, local agriculture to “green capitalism” and beyond. Holistic pedagogy is not an attempt to fix the public school system as we know it, but to fashion a radically new system from a radically different cultural foundation. By considering the principles that constitute this foundation, the possible shape of a “radically new system” starts to emerge.

A holistic perspective. This alternative pedagogy is firmly rooted in a coherent philosophical rationale—a clearly articulated holistic worldview (Miller, 2000). Over the past thirty years, a serious yet still largely obscure literature has been emerging from various intellectual perspectives, including science, philosophy, cultural history, and

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religious studies, that challenges the basic epistemological assumptions of modernism, particularly its reductionism and materialism. These thinkers assert that reality is more expansive and dynamic, and human consciousness more nimble and subtle, than technocratic culture allows. They propose that there is an organic relationship between humans and the natural world, that we are intimately involved in its rhythms and processes in ways we cannot recognize when we analyze nature into discrete components and blind forces. Some deeper dimension of existence—physicist David Bohm called it the “implicate order”—gives structure, meaning, and perhaps even purpose to the processes of nature. Biologists such as Francisco Varela and Humberto Maturana describe the phenomenon of self-organization or self-emergence in living organisms, evidence that nature does not work merely through blind chance or purely physical cause and effect. Consciousness or intelligence of some sort appears to play an active role in shaping the world, and, according to holistic thinkers, we may gain access to this dimension of reality through ways of knowing that modernism and its pedagogy have abandoned, such as insight, intuition, imagination, and contemplative practice (Sloan, 1983; Palmer, 1993).

Although many of these authors specifically describe their approach as “holistic,” another term is frequently used in the literature, influenced by the prolific work of Ken Wilber, who calls his approach “integral.” Since his first book, *The Spectrum of Consciousness*, was published in 1977, Wilber has established himself as the pre-eminent theorist of this postmodern worldview. Based upon extensive research across numerous disciplines as well as his own contemplative practice, Wilber’s work provides

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sophisticated intellectual substance to a movement that the dominant culture is prone to dismiss as too romantic or mystical to take seriously. Among other authors who have provided the philosophical foundation of a holistic/integral worldview are Anna Lemkow (1990), Ervin Laszlo (1993), William Bloom (2004), and Malcolm Hollick (2006).

This emerging worldview is concerned with connection and relationship, with finding meaning through larger contexts. It recognizes that the incessant evolution of the cosmos continually changes these contexts. Meanings are not fixed; they are open-ended, dynamic, contingent. Therefore all of life is engaged in an ongoing process of transformation. No single way of knowing (or “single vision,” as the poet William Blake called reductionistic science) can adequately encompass the dynamic complexity of the world. When we define any phenomenon without considering the multiple, shifting contexts that give it meaning, we are what Wilber calls a “flatland”—a partial, distorted picture of reality. In his recent book Hollick (2006) explains that a holistic science

welcomes and values perspectives and insights from all sources of knowledge. . . .

We begin to see that the marvelously diverse images from science, the humanities and the arts, and from the religions and cultures of the world are all partial representations of the true Reality. We begin to see that each reflects a different fact of the wondrous, jeweled whole (pp. 53, 57).

If this is how the world is constructed, if this is how reality actually works, then an education adequate to our existence needs to respond with dynamic open-endedness also; it needs to foster renewal and transformation, not mindless obedience to fixed standards or ideas. The holistic worldview challenges any educational approach that

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enshrines a selected body of “facts” into a fixed curriculum. In an information-saturated culture, no such curriculum can give students a complete picture of reality. Any educator’s or technocrat’s list of “what every third grader should know” represents a partial view of the world, based on one particular, necessarily biased and limited, point of view. It utterly loses a vision of “the wondrous, jeweled whole.” From a holistic perspective, the primary goal of education is not to transmit portions of knowledge but to help students experience a sense of wonder and passionate interest in the world, along with habits of open-ended inquiry and critical reflection.

Respect for the person. By shifting the focus from the transmission of culturally sanctioned knowledge to the self-organizing intelligence of every learner, the new education holds deep respect and even reverence for the human being. The individual is not defined primarily in terms of his or her socially constructed roles as a citizen or worker, but as an end in oneself, possessing inherent worth. Holistic pedagogy is concerned, as Scott Forbes (2003) puts it, with “ultimacy”—that is, the highest and noblest qualities of our existence, such as our aspirations toward truth, goodness, wisdom, compassion, and love. These ultimate expressions of our humanity are inherent in our nature; they emanate from within the person, not from the authority of society. As human beings, we carry the seeds of our highest aspirations and potential evolution within our own hearts.

The visionary educator Maria Montessori saw each child as the builder of a unique human personality, driven by a creative force from within to engage the world inquisitively and purposefully. Each person possesses both the capacity and the spiritual

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imperative to fashion a personality, an individuality, that will experience and live in the world in ways that no other does, and we require autonomy and security in order to fully achieve this potential. Because this individuality begins in childhood, young people are entitled to educational and existential freedom necessary for them to accomplish their task of building a mature individual. They should not be subjected to a mechanistic pedagogy that treats all “fourth graders” as a homogenous mass, or to a standardized curriculum established and enforced by distant, elite policymakers. Emerson gave the most eloquent statement of this position in his 1863 essay on education.

I believe that our own experience instructs us that the secret of Education lies in respecting the pupil. It is not for you to choose what he shall know, what he shall do. It is chosen and foreordained, and he only hold the key to his own secret. By your tampering and thwarting and too much governing, he may be hindered from his end and kept out of his own. Respect the child. Wait and see the new product of Nature. Nature loves analogies, but not repetitions (1965, p. 430).

A pedagogy that reflects a worldview more attuned to organic processes, and less interested in controlling them, would “wait and see the new product of nature” in the emerging life of every young person. Our entire educational structure of approved curriculum and textbooks, hierarchical management of school systems and buildings, tightly scheduled time periods, clever instructional methods, testing and grading, would be seen as “tampering and thwarting and too much governing,” and we would do away with it.

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Generations of holistic educators have confirmed that young people do not need to be herded and controlled in order to learn, that they achieve healthy, productive maturity by interacting freely, actively and purposefully with their world, engaging their senses, feelings and desires as well as their minds. Developmental psychologists and researchers in neuroscience have provided a rich and complex picture of how children grow and learn, and we now know, just as we know that the earth isn't flat, that the process of human development is holistic, creative, and spontaneous. The mechanical management of a child's learning may serve the ends of a society's authorities, but it does not support the fullest, healthiest development of that child's potential intelligence or character.

The principle of respect for the individual child's developmental process places the notion of *human rights* at the center of holistic pedagogy. The Declaration of Independence inspired modern democratic thought with its assertion that every person is endowed by the Creator with unalienable rights. The human being possesses inherent worth and dignity, a vital spiritual core generated by God, nature, or the cosmos—not something contingently granted by any faction of society. American history tells the story of a gradual cultural awakening to the power of this vision, the gradual acknowledgement that *every* person, not only property-owning white males, possesses inherent rights. Educational liberation movements insist that young people possess them as well. If democracy represents trust in each person's ability and right to manage his or her own life, and if we were to discover that in the proper settings young people, even at quite

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young ages, exhibit this ability to a significant degree, then are children not entitled to greater autonomy in the unfolding of their personalities?

Decentralization of authority. A commitment to personal rights and autonomy raises the question of cultural and therefore educational authority. The holistic perspective generally embraces a decentralist view of power and authority, because living systems are too complex and dynamic to be governed distantly, or from above. In the tradition of Jefferson, Dewey, and the student rebellion of the 1960s, this view envisions a grassroots, participatory democracy (Miller, 2002). Authority should be close to people, not held by distant, impersonal institutions or governing elites. Individuals, including young people in their education, should be actively engaged in the affairs of their communities, in the decisions that affect their surroundings and their lives. Authority wielded for its own sake, to maintain “order” or “standards” as these are defined by ruling elites, should not be trusted because it is removed from the fluid existential realities of life.

Perhaps the countercultural tradition invites the epithet “romantic child-centered” because its resistance to such authority appears individualistic to the point of solipsism. There is, in fact, a distinct anarchist/libertarian element in the tradition, exemplified in the early twentieth century by the Modern School movement launched in Barcelona by Francisco Ferrer and later in the century by free schools (such as Summerhill) and vigorous advocates of “unschooling.” Nevertheless, it is a mistake to paint the entire spectrum of holistic alternatives with that brush. I see the libertarian element as an ideological reaction to the overbearing authority of established educational practices. In

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practice, virtually all alternative educators recognize, indeed honor, the importance of community in a young person's learning and development, and all recognize teachers and other adults as wise mentors in students' lives. Decentralized authority, as it is understood here, is not an atomistic individualism, not some Ayn Rand-style celebration of the self-centered, self-satisfied ego.

The anarchist thinker Paul Goodman and his younger colleague George Dennison laid out the case for decentralized authority in the 1960s, cultivating ideas they found in Dewey and then bequeathed to the New Left and the free school movement. Goodman argued that

living functions, biological, psychosociological, or social, have very little to do with abstract, preconceived "power" that manages and coerces from outside the specific functions themselves. . . . Normal activities do not need extrinsic motivations, they have their own intrinsic energies and ends-in-view (1968, p. 180).

Given this premise, it follows that

free choice is not random but responsive to real situations; both youth and adults live in a nature of things, a polity, an ongoing society, and it is these, in fact, that attract interest and channel need (1969, p. 99).

Dennison, in his inspiring account of the inner-city alternative school he ran in the early 1960s, similarly claimed that

the educational function does not rest upon our ability to control, or our will to instruct, but upon our human nature and the nature of experience. . . . [including]

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the life principles which have in fact structured all the well-structured elements of our existence, such principles as our inherent sociability, our inherent rationality, our inherent freedom of thought, our inherent curiosity. . . What this means is that we must rescue the individuals from their present obscurity in the bureaucratic heap. . . (1969, p. 253).

Goodman and Dennison, then, were describing an organic relationship between individual and community, student and teacher, based on an understanding that the human being possesses an intrinsic striving for growth and that our experiences are therefore inherently meaningful. Authority, when it is abstract, distant, overbearing—as it surely is in most aspects of public school policy and practice—does not support organic growth but thwarts it. A contemporary feminist theorist, Riane Eisler (2000), makes much the same point in distinguishing between “hierarchies of domination” and “hierarchies of actualization”; there are organic structures in human communities and institutions, but the authority they embody can be used either to control people through fear and powerlessness (as in high stakes testing) or to bring out everyone’s highest potentials through empowerment. Eisler uses the term “partnership education” to describe a holistic pedagogy that embraces the latter.

Radical educators argue that the curriculum itself tends to become an agent of impersonal authority. If education is to be an organic relationship between the learner and the world, then curriculum must be allowed to emerge through meaningful inquiry and interaction. Standards imposed by policymakers reflect a judgment by certain elites that in a diverse and dynamic society there is one set of information and skills that all students

need to learn. In the modern technocracy, most of us have come to accept standardized curriculum and homogenized knowledge as a given, but from a holistic perspective, this is a deviation from the ceaselessly self-renewing democratic culture that Thomas Jefferson envisioned for America. In a 1789 letter to James Madison, Jefferson said that the question of “whether one generation of men has a right to bind another” is a “fundamental” question of government; he thought that “no society can make a perpetual constitution, or even a perpetual law,” and then pronounced his famous statement that “the earth belongs always to the living generation.” While Jefferson probably did not have schoolchildren in mind (indeed, his own pedagogical theory, lacking the insights of constructivism or multiple intelligence theory, was rooted in the classics), I believe his democratic sensibility would be horrified by the extent to which relentless curriculum standards imposed by government authorities thwart students’ ability to practice thoughtful, critical engagement with their world. Holistic educators consider young people to be a “living generation,” and their insistence on students’ fully engaged participation in learning surely reflects the spirit of Jefferson’s dynamic, self-renewing democratic vision.

Noninterference between political, economic, and cultural spheres of society.

While we are on the subject of the founding fathers, we might consider what is perhaps the most essential feature of the American Constitution—the principle of the separation of powers. The founders addressed the potential concentration of state authority with a specific strategy—delineating boundaries between the power that each branch of government could wield. In the early twentieth century, a remarkable Austrian

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philosopher named Rudolf Steiner (the founder of Waldorf education, among other initiatives) proposed a model of the “threefold” society that similarly divides its functions and aims to limit the concentration of authority in any one institution or sphere. Although Steiner justified his model according to his esoteric spiritual cosmology (which I, for one, find incomprehensible), I have found that the “threefold” idea stands on its own as an insightful conceptual tool for analyzing and critiquing the politics of modern schooling.

To summarize briefly, Steiner asserted that the three basic functions of social life are the economic, political, and cultural. The economic sphere, he said, is concerned with the production and distribution of commodities, or more broadly with the relationship between human society and the material world. The political sphere is the domain of justice and human rights, or the proper relationships between people. The cultural sphere involves the spontaneous creative activity of the human mind; the arts and sciences and the practice of education (which he saw as an art) are expressions of this free flow of spiritual energy. Economic activity, which involves differential and fluctuating material values, should not influence political judgment, which must be based on absolute equality of legal rights, and neither of these modes of social endeavor should interfere with the creative freedom of the artist, scholar or educator. As Steiner saw nearly a century ago, in modern society economic enterprise has spilled over its proper boundaries, and the result is that every aspect of our lives, including education, has become a commodity—something with a market value rather than intrinsic value.

In other words, trying to apply economic or political criteria to creative or intellectual expression can only reduce or distort it. Economic and political endeavors use

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categories and criteria that are adequate and appropriate for dealing with the material world and social relations, respectively, but they cannot fathom the deeper, spontaneous sources of our ideas, or the disinterested pursuit of truth or wisdom. This is why the principle of academic freedom on university campuses has been held sacred, and it is why education at all levels should be independent of the state—especially the corporate state that fuses economic and political authority.

The invasion of the educational process by economic forces is clearly evident in the standards-and-testing movement. The corporate state provides the funding for education, considering it an economic investment and expecting a good return. Young people are considered to be intellectual capital, their learning a product with a certain value to the economy. Knowledge is packaged and delivered, increasingly through textbooks and other materials produced by corporations with political connections. Students and teachers are accountable to these investors, and must demonstrate their success in mastering the authorized body of knowledge. There is little recognition of the student as a unique individual, motivated by a spiritual yearning to reach out to the world for purposeful understanding. There is little recognition of teaching as an art form, requiring a carefully honed sensitivity and thoughtful responsiveness, because teachers increasingly become technicians tending to the authorized lessons and administering the prescribed tests. In Steiner's terms, education has been uprooted from the cultural sphere, where it belongs, and engulfed by the economic sphere, which turns it into a commodity, a soulless object to be bought and sold.

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There are many dedicated teachers in the public schools, many schools with healthy roots in their communities, and many idealistic reformers who believe that a public system is the only equitable and democratic way to provide learning opportunities to all. But this system has become increasingly dominated by forces that are not truly educational, and it has become more and more difficult to realize the public school ideal in a technocratic empire. The principle of noninterference between the distinct functions of society warns us that the corporate state is not the proper provider of a truly nourishing education. School and state need to be separated, just as church and state were separated, to preserve the autonomy of each, to allow each to exercise its proper function without distorting interference.

Holistic education seeks to return teaching and learning to the sphere of intellectual freedom and creativity. The educators, parents, and young people who have left public schooling for independent alternative schools or homeschooling are not simply out to privatize the educational system, for this is still to treat learning as a commodity in the marketplace. Rather, they are intuitively (or sometimes quite deliberately) responding to the awareness that Steiner articulated a century ago, that genuine learning is an organic, spontaneous, and deeply meaningful encounter between person and world that requires autonomy from the political and economic forces that have taken over public schooling.

Balance. Holistic pedagogy shares the view that John Dewey (1960) expressed in his critique of the “quest for certainty”: human existence is complex, fluid and contingent, and our experience can give us only partial and tentative truths. It is natural to

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want certainty and security, which we attempt to find through dogmatic belief and self-assured ideology, but this expectation limits our ability to adapt intelligently to an ever-changing world. An educational system rooted in a more holistic worldview would recognize the endless diversity of students' learning styles and temperaments, personal goals and interests, as well as the diversity of their multiple social/cultural identities. It would no longer be the purpose of schooling to mold human energies into some model of intellectual and cultural conformity, to find the one best curriculum, instructional method, or school management scheme.

The underlying principle here is not simply diversity, though, but *balance*. Recognizing that human existence contains endless possibilities does not mean giving free rein to every impulse; it is not a prescription for the moral relativism that conservatives so quickly associate with any whiff of progressive pedagogy. Finding balance in education means that freedom exists in relationship to structure, individual in relationship to community, rational intellect in relationship to our complicated emotional lives. This breakdown of either/or dualisms is just what Dewey insisted on doing throughout his work. There is, he argued, a dynamic tension between opposites, and it requires intelligent judgment to determine where, along any continuum of choices, to find the most appropriate (reasonable, pragmatic, *and* moral) response to a given situation.

An educational policy striving for balance would no longer be devoted so exclusively to standards, accountability, and the authorized curriculum; there would be room for individuality, local autonomy, and experimentation. Above all, balance would mean that a public system of education does not, and should not, represent a coercive

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monoculture sanctioned by the power of the state; the system itself would seek balance by providing diverse alternatives representing various philosophical and cultural possibilities. Parents and communities could choose more rigorous academic environments or more child-centered schools, spiritually-influenced or more rationalist approaches to curriculum and teaching, programs that lean toward social renewal and critical pedagogy or those that emphasize respect for tradition. All these options would be available and supported by society, giving parents and communities the responsibility to acknowledge the tension between their competing claims and make intelligent, informed decisions.

I want to emphasize that under a system inspired by these five foundational principles, I do not see this diverse offering of educational alternatives as an educational free market that invites competition, entrepreneurial ambition, or gross inequality. This is not “school choice” as the typical conservative agenda promotes it. Rather, it is a societal commitment to the best, most appropriate and relevant learning experiences that can be provided to every child. Our political culture will need to evolve beyond its technocratic fixation on standardization and narrowly measured accountability, and be willing to underwrite, as do several European nations, diverse educational options as communities and families desire them. There would be publicly funded “alternative schools” not only for the discouraged or rebellious students who would otherwise drop out, but flexible and responsive learning environments for all students so that far fewer would become discouraged or rebellious in the first place. The proposal here is for *all* education to be what we now euphemistically call “special” education. Pedagogy would not be tailored to

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some bell curve that defines a mass of normal students flanked by special learners on one end and “gifted” youths on the other; every young person would be treated as both special and gifted, each in his or her own way.

This is an educational agenda that transcends the usual conservative and progressive framing of school policy. It was Montessori, again, who envisioned a postmodern understanding of schooling in society, many decades in advance of the culture, when she declared that society could set aside its divisiveness by focusing on the inherent developmental needs of the child and honoring each child’s task of constructing a unique human personality. When we drop the modern agenda of shaping children to cultural expectations (more specifically, to the contested expectations of dominant elements within the culture), we are free to offer diverse and flexible alternatives, and to achieve a dynamic cultural *balance* in place of a static pedagogical monoculture.

The principle of balance applies to education at the classroom level as well. It enjoins the teacher to approach each learner with sensitivity and flexibility, not with ideology and method. A school may have a specific philosophical orientation but it does not need to be completely limited by this perspective. Even a school or homeschooler committed to children’s freedom will face situations where the healthiest and most authentic response is to exercise the authority, expertise or wisdom that adults possess; to refrain from expressing themselves in these moments is to turn freedom into an obsessive ideology rather than a condition for growth. Similarly, even the most imaginative and carefully conceived curriculum (the Waldorf schools, for example) loses its magic when it is applied indiscriminately to all learners in all situations at all times. Clearly, we

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will need a new attitude toward teacher education; it would not be so focused on methods, but would strive to cultivate personal qualities of self-understanding, sensitivity, presence, and responsiveness. Holistic education theorists such as Jack Miller, Rachael Kessler, and Parker Palmer have all emphasized that such qualities are essential for teaching in this way.

Conclusion

Despite the hope of many educational visionaries over the past two centuries, it seems quite clear that pedagogy does not shape culture so much as reflect it. Teaching schoolchildren about our chosen causes—democracy or ecology, social justice or religious pluralism—does not seem capable of significantly altering the political or intellectual life of society if the essential culture, embodied in powerful economic and political institutions, mass media, and the constructed landscape that surrounds young people, embraces other values. The radical educator John Holt gave up on school reform (and turned toward Ivan Illich’s notion of “deschooling,”) when he realized that social change is a political task, the responsibility of engaged adult citizens. He wrote to George Dennison in 1976 that “to suppose that someone who is really concerned about poverty and injustice in this country can best oppose it [sic] by talking against them in public schools seems to me so nonsensical that I can hardly think about it” (1990, p. 195). Trying to change a culture through schooling is futile if the culture is not otherwise prepared to change.

Indeed, the influence works the other way around: The constellation of values, beliefs, and epistemological assumptions that define a culture effectively determines what

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purposes schools will be called upon to serve, and what will actually take place in the daily life of most classrooms. When a culture is under stress, as ours is today, its dominant elements become more determined, even desperate, to defend its continued existence. Hence, we have seen ever tighter authoritarian control over public schools since the cultural earthquakes of the 1960s. From Nixon's educational policies to *A Nation at Risk* to *No Child Left Behind*, the conservative restoration has sought to ensure that schooling reinforces rather than threatens established cultural beliefs, reaffirms rather than questions the technocratic worldview. If we deconstruct the meaning of "standards" in education, we will find that this is ultimately what they are about.

The alternative ideas and practices of holistic education have remained on the "romantic" fringes of modern culture. Significantly, they began to gain more widespread recognition after the cultural upheavals of the 1960s, and I believe they will become the mainstream of educational thought if and when the emerging postmodern culture becomes established. A truly open, flexible, democratic system for educating the young and promoting lifelong learning throughout society will emerge as the culture of technocracy and empire collapses and makes room for a more organic, local, human scale and life-affirming culture. We are not there yet, but in many parts of the world, thousands of NGOs, grassroots networks, and visionary individuals are establishing promising new approaches in all fields of endeavor. Wherever this transformational movement has addressed the challenges of education, it has seized upon ideas and practices pioneered by the holistic tradition, or introduced exciting new ones fully aligned with that tradition. The days of standardized learning are as numbered as the days of cheap fossil fuel.

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