

Chapter 4

Education as the Practice of Freedom

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ABSTRACT

Louis Brandeis once remarked, “Our Government is the potent, the omnipresent teacher. For good or for ill, it teaches the whole people by its example.” In the American juvenile justice system, this is too often forgotten. This chapter addresses, from the perspective of a practitioner, the consequences of a justice system and education system that prioritizes detecting problems over solving them. This chapter will further discuss how the existential anxieties created by such a system weaken not only those systems individually but also, all democratic institutions on the whole. Using these observations, readers will explore innovative ways to promote genuine dialogue and deliberation in the classroom and will be asked to consider public schools as unique, vitally important democratic institutions.

INTRODUCTION

A comprehensive survey by the U.S. Department of Justice found that a shocking 60 percent of children were exposed to violence, crime, and abuse in their homes and communities (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2016). Research has long shown that exposure to violence at any age has a devastating effect on learning and personal growth; however, exposure to violence at an early age profoundly affects a person’s fundamental ability to communicate, form healthy relationships, and otherwise lead independent lives, all of which are necessary for individual health and our political health. By looking at the intersection of education, democracy, and even religion, thoughtful observers have begun developing a more responsive language to the seemingly intractable problems facing children and young adults today. This chapter explores the intersectionality of these subjects insofar as it provides a useful framework for classroom teachers to help students cultivate a sense of moral agency, form secure attachments with their peers, and overcome feelings of vulnerability that may otherwise be transformed into violence. Moreover, we discuss how these ideas can be paired with public policy initiatives that authorize the voices of young people in ways that are not only meaningful on a personal level but also meaningful on a social, cultural, and structural level.

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THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION

There are countless writings on how education should be measured yet far fewer on how education should be defined in the first place. If education is a commodity, it's shocking how much it varies from student to student. If it's an experience, it's shocking how hard we try to standardize it. What is certain is that the language we use to talk about education determines the outcome long before the question has even been asked. Using the metaphor of "road maps," Michael Apple observes how certain keywords (e.g. markets, standards, God, inequality) send us down a particular "highway" in a particular "direction." (Apple, 2001, p. 8-9). For instance, taking the "highway labeled market" (as urged by neoliberalism) sends you in the direction of "the economy," toward the exit labeled "individualism." On this highway, 'freedom' is not defined by "self-denial and moral choice" but by "economic independence" (Apple, 2001 p. 11-12). By defining freedom in these terms, our democratic institutions suppress concern for the needs of others in favor of private profit and power. This is why the justice system and public-school system has been increasingly in a negative feedback loop, often referred to as the school-to-prison pipeline (Apple, 2001, p. 12). Under this system, it would not be necessary to consider trauma or any other potential cause of learning and behavioral difficulties because rewarding high performers and punishing low performance is the only thing needed for a functioning market. Unfortunately, there is a high price to pay when we treat democratic institutions as quasi markets.

As Charles Taylor observes, without a common commitment to each other, the fabric of society itself is "fatally eroded." This is why the political decisions in the U.S. (and many other nations) are increasingly becoming a 'prisoner's dilemma'—where individuals willfully sacrifice collective success for a chance at private gain, even though the risk of doing so is achieving neither. For the purposes of this chapter, this is precisely where the education system needs to assert itself as a democratic, community-based institution capable of promoting the skills and attitudes essential for a healthy, functional citizenry. In accordance with this view, it must also reject the reforms that require perpetual accounting for accounting sake.

As Apple observes, modern society has become besieged by an "audit culture" and this is perhaps no more apparent than in the realm of "education reform" (Apple, 2001, pp. 104, 108). In explaining the roots of this "audit culture," Apple starts with the basic premise that "[m]arkets are marketed," which is to say markets are "made legitimate" by how well they reflect, or are perceived to reflect "effort and merit" in a "natural and neutral" manner (Apple, 2001, p. 58). Therefore, in order to appraise these markets and their products (teacher/student/school performance), "[m]echanisms... must be put into place that give evidence of entrepreneurial efficiency and effectiveness" (Apple, 2001, p. 58). Here we find the direct connection between marketization and policies like "No Child Left Behind," which, along with its progeny, have sought to measure educational success on the basis of high-stakes standardized tests, not democratic principles. Unlike democratic principles, these tests fulfill the neoliberal need for a "manipulatable man... created by the state and encouraged to be perpetually responsive" (Apple, 2001, p. 98). As Apple argues, this breeds "a deep suspicion" of teachers, their motives, and their competence (Apple, 2001, p. 63). This suspicion is also why "neoliberal visions of quasi markets are usually accompanied by neoconservative pressure to regulate content and behavior" (Apple, 2001, p. 63). In the history of American education, liberals and conservatives have become strange bedfellows in the education space, which has made the real challenges of education difficult to parse. We are now at a point where observers on both sides agree that performance needs to be reduced to observable and actionable numbers. Of course, the process of translating qualitative virtues into quantitative values involves a tremendous

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