

# Cultural Pedagogy

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*This paper springs from a series of talks given to teachers and teacher educators in conservative areas of Arkansas and Texas.*

**E**ducation is, of course, a lifelong experience. As we grow and have new experiences or, if you will, as we change and become, in a sense, new, and as our environments change, we are constantly placed in sense-making situations. The reconstruction of experience that is education is, of necessity, an on-going process. Having said that, however, one is reminded that public **schooling** in this country and in most others is aimed at a select portion of the population, *ie.*, children. Within that select portion of the population, there is growing reason to believe that a two-tiered system of schooling is not only developing but is becoming institutionalized. One system, it might be said, attempts to educate. The other system, if it does anything at all, is content to train children to take their places within a corporate system.<sup>1</sup> Those places turn out to be the lowest range of that system. In this paper, we will look at the education of the immature, dealing mainly with conditions which though not sufficient for the educative process may, indeed, be necessary.

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey, using his own words and those of Emerson, unpacks a "principle of respect for immaturity":

*Respect the child. Be not too much his parent. Trespass not on his solitude. But I hear the outcry which replies to this suggestion: Would you merely throw up the reins of public and private discipline; would you leave the young child to the mad career of his own passions and whimsies, and call this anarchy a respect*

*for the child's nature? I answer, — Respect the child, respect him to the end, but also respect yourself. The two points in a boy's training are, to keep his nature and train off all but that; to keep his nature, but stop off his uproar, fooling, and horseplay; keep his nature and arm it with knowledge in the very direction in which it points.*

And as Emerson goes on to show, this reverence for childhood and youth instead of opening up an easy and easy-going path to the instructors, "involves at once, immense claims on the time, the thought, and the life of the teacher. It requires time, use, insight, wit, all the great lessons and assistances of God; and only to think of using it implies character and profoundness."<sup>2</sup>

So, what else might we tease out about the claims on the teacher, especially as they relate to the respect that is due to the child's *nature*? Perhaps the first thing which springs to mind is that immaturity is at least as much a positive as a negative. The dependency and plasticity which characterize the child put him or her at a cognitive advantage over adult learners.<sup>3</sup> When thinking of childhood, it is always easy to fall into a Rousseauian-like trap of sentimentalizing and hence trivializing the child's *nature*, but even the most hard-boiled, unromantic, conservative educational critic must be hard-pressed to avoid being astonished to realize that portions of the population explore, learn and unpack entire conceptual systems, use those systems to control and manipulate their social and physical environment to their advantage and, frequently, to the advantage of their environment and do all that (a) while learning the language in which those concepts are embedded and (b) without the help of that tool — background knowledge and prior experience which enables other portions of the population to predict and to control so well. In addition, and not unimportantly, that portion of

the population, those children who are fleshing out conceptual systems, do it with apparent ease, good humor, grace, and wit. Put very simply, the child who comes to school on the first day of her or his academic career has already established credentials as an effective scholar and has already demonstrated expertise in a wide range of fields. Laying aside for a moment all of the ethical reasons for treating children as persons and according them all the privilege and rights persons are due, the child is due the respect we might give, say, a professor who has established a reputation for thoughtfulness and intelligence. The child is due respect on the basis of her or his cognitive ability alone.

So, the child comes to school with this well-deserved reputation as effective problem-solver; how might we exhibit respect for that ability and, remembering Emerson's admonition "aim it with knowledge in the very direction in which it points?" Let us suggest, at this point, that the direction involves, in some sense, arriving at "places" where the child might reach a satisfactory accord with his/her environment. Put another way, the child will exist in a future which, in practice, we cannot predict. Education should enable him or her, equip him or her with the attitudes, dispositions, knowledge bases, skills and so on which will enable the child to function and to function well.

To return to Dewey once more, one of the things, and given space limitations we can only talk about one of the things, that seems to work trans-context (from one situation to the next) is knowledge about and ability to use what Dewey calls the "funded capital of civilization" or the child's "cultural inheritance." The child is entitled to the goods of a culture — its great ideas, inventions, historical understandings of itself, its painting and poetry — precisely because this knowledge about and ability to use will put her or him good stead in the environment in which the child will exist.

In the United States we have a long and rather dismal history of attempting to connect the child with her or his inheritance. Conservative critics like E.D. Hirsch, Allan Bloom, and Diane Ravitch have provided ample documentation to support the claim made above. Children do not know what they need to know in order to function well in a complex, changing environment. Schools are failing them.

What then, should the educators do. One

might á la Hirsch build a list attempting to define cultural literacy and then go about attempting, somehow, to infuse bits of "literacy" into the curriculum. A more promising method, at least it seems to this writer, would be to look more carefully at the informal environment, especially the pre-school environment, to see what makes the child such an effective learner there.

When one does look there what one sees, over and over again, is what is, in effect, the operationalizing of Dewey's formal definition of thinking, *ie.*, thinking exists in an arc which begins in a non-cognitive stage, the emergence of the problematic, and continues until it reaches another non-cognitive stage, the finding of a (tentative or otherwise) solution. The key, of course, is that very young children constantly find themselves in situations that are truly **problematic for them**. The environment constantly culls out thought from the child by presenting her or him with things that are and must be problematic.<sup>4</sup>

The question, then, if we believe that the emergence of the problematic is essential to the educative enterprise is how to make the formal environment sufficiently like the informal so that children will be placed in a situation where their cultural inheritance will be experienced as problematic. The following sections of this paper will describe some of the factors which if not necessary to, might best enable the occurrence of the truly problematic in the classroom.

At this point, I am forced by space and time limitations to make a number of assumptions. Those assumptions are fairly straightforward: (1) the mere telling that something is problematic is insufficient to make it be experienced as such. Simply, laying out the inheritance by lecture, by drill and recitation, and so on will not make it truly problematic for the student. (2) tying the problematic to a series of tests will, if it does anything at all, shift the focus of the problematic from the inheritance to that of passing the test. When thinking occurs it will be about the test and not necessarily involved with what the test is about, *ie.*, the cultural inheritance.

Having made those assumptions, and looking to the informal environment for guidance, the question becomes this: How can we model the formal on the informal so that we receive the benefits in terms of cognitive force while at the same time minimizing the harms of indirection, incoherence, and sheer wasted time? Paraphrasing Emerson, the question becomes: How can we

isolate the *naturel* of the informal and bring it into the classroom?

The answer, unfortunately, calls for a radical restructuring of the classroom. If one is to encourage thinking and especially thinking about one's inheritance, one will have to dramatically slow things down and parse things out. The banking model of education where one deposits more and more bits of information fails to recognize the very nature of thinking. Thinking has its own *gestalt*, proceeds at its own pace, and that pace varies from person to person and from situation to situation. If children are to think in the classroom, one has to put limits on the number of knowledge bits presented so that children might have time to try on the ideas those bits represent. This means that children have to be given ample opportunity to think about and talk about that which they are learning, and to inquire into the significance of that which they are learning. In effect the model of the classroom would have to change from that of expert-*acolyte* to that of a community of inquiry where children in cooperation with their fellows attempt to solve real problems which emerge in the community. But again, that calls for a radical restructuring of the classroom. Not only do we have to limit the number of bits and take things out of the curriculum, not only do we have to switch the model of teaching from talking to children to talking and inquiring with children, we have to realize that the curriculum can not be imposed on the child. It has to emerge from the community's own inquiry. If we learn anything from the informal environments it is that curricula invested with essential elements that spring from the minds of textbook creators and educational agencies are not likely to cull intelligent responses from students until and unless they can be contextualized within the community of inquiry.

That brings us to the second problem. One needs school in an industrialized society precisely because the informal environment tends to be an inefficient teacher. The traditional argument is that the informal environment is inefficient because it does not teach enough bits, because it does not yield that knowledge base that citizens in an industrial democracy need to have. There is merit to the argument, but the greater problem, it seems to me, is one more of focus and tenacity than lack of vital information. What the informal environment does so well is to cull thought-

ful response by means of the problematic. But there need be no apparent order to the problematic and what one can do is to flip from one problem to the next never mining problems to their full extent and never seeing connections or entailments within experience. Thought in the informal environment can be, in effect, shallow, never getting below the surface of things. The school could and should be a place in which the child is encouraged to mine his or her experience in a systematic and intense fashion. But then the question becomes, how does one do that? One way is suggested by *Philosophy for Children*. There, one starts with a specific narrative, reads the narrative with a classroom of children, solicits their interest in the narrative, and builds one's curriculum from there. The point here is that this program and similar ones recognize the causal role that interest plays in the educative process but "harnesses" that interest and keeps it from becoming too diffuse by means of a coherent narrative which generates a very large but limited number of relevant questions.

The narrative itself is that which lends a focus to things. It comes with its own temporal and logical sequence and what the community learns is that certain lines of inquiry are called for and are most productive at certain times and not others. Of course, children are allowed to ask any questions that they see fit, but what they **learn**, for example, is that mining certain logical questions is a helpful device for mining other ethical ones. Learning about transitivity and symmetry in logic is, at least, a useful tool for the setting of certain ethical problems.

A process of honing goes on as the community develops. It is not just that self-correction takes place. Perhaps, more importantly, it is that the community refuses to content itself with the superficial. Over and over again, one sees community members urging themselves and others to push deeper into the text, to push deeper into their own concerns and problems.

At this point, one stops and takes stock. Education is a process as complex as it is time-consuming. It involves talking with children, over extended periods of time, about issues that are interesting and important and problematic for them. It involves respecting them as thinking persons, and it involves the recognition of and respect for the very process of thinking itself. It involves, finally, a modelling of the informal environment on a zestful, educative informal one.

That also leads to a problem of no small proportion.

Jonathan Kozol, in his new book, *Savage Inequalities*, deals in a passing fashion with the nature of education mentioned above. He visits some schools where notions of excellence in education are more than various platitudes. He visits clean, well-designed buildings where healthy and happy, well-fed children, in consort with some caring and intelligent adults, have created what Dewey might have called a "busy workshop of skilled craftspersons." Kozol visits schools where children are busily and effectively inquiring into things which are problematic for them. In the course of their inquiry, they are learning and using their cultural inheritance.

Those schools, unfortunately, are the rare ones. The inequality that Kozol sees, the inequality that is so savage, is the difference between education and training or at the extreme, warehousing. The schools and school districts that Kozol cites frequently make heroic effort but those efforts, as necessary as they are, are aimed at getting children to come to school, to stay in school, to pass the test, and to prepare for membership in the workforce. What works against those efforts and what, if Kozol is right, dooms them to failure are a gruesome combination of bad neighborhoods, deteriorating home life, buildings and classrooms that are literally falling down, and ill-prepared, inept teachers.

There is, of course, nothing new in Kozol's critique. Indeed Kozol, himself, along with other radical idealogues in the 1960s like John Holt, Ivan Illitch, Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner made similar ones. What is different now is that the context has subtly shifted. It is nearly a decade since a *Nation at Risk*. As a nation, we have spent that decade talking about excellence in education. To the extent that this phrase is more than a platitude, we have made some strides in respecting children as thinking persons and in providing a context in which they are encouraged to think well and to think well for themselves. What Kozol does is to force us to realize that success, if success it is, has been bought at the expense of certain children. Simplifying the argument when, since there is a limited economic pool, we spend to achieve excellence in one part of the system, we take money away from the other part. Poor African-American children in New York City are paying — paying with their minds — so that children in Scarsdale

might be educated. As we've chased excellence, we have, largely, cast aside any concern for equity.

The conservative argument goes something like this: you cannot expect the schools to work miracles. Children from inner-city neighborhoods live in brutalizing conditions. They are hungry, abused, culturally disadvantaged, and so on. If you are lucky, you give them some marketable skills and then hope that they can, somehow, pull themselves up by their own bookstraps. There is a certain "realpolitik" force to the conservative argument. It says, in effect, that you deal with the situation as you find it and that you educate and achieve excellence where you can and you train and warehouse where you must. And what you wind up with is a two-tiered system in which minorities get trained and whites get educated.

The conservative argument, it seems to me, rests on the significance of the educative impact of the informal environment. It would be a mistake — an educational mistake — to **simply** redistribute funds, making sure that an equal amount of money was spent on each pupil without looking at the informal environment. Of course, we should spend more money on inner-city schools if we want to turn them into educational places. At the same time, however, the informal environment has to be radically restructured. That means, at the very least, putting large amounts of money into social services, health care, housing, to turn that environment into one which is conducive to the educative process that could take place in the formal environment. Unless we are willing to do that, and it is fairly clear that we are not willing to do that, our very claim to excellence in education is a covert admission of the racism and inequity that makes that excellence possible.

#### NOTES

1. Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities* (New York: Crown, 1991).
2. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1966), p. 52.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 43-45.
4. John Dewey, *Logic: the Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), pp. 101-119.

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