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Introduction: Diving into the wreckage: Our Schools, Education Reform, and the Future Society

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Introduction:

Diving into the Wreckage: Our Schools, Education Reform, and the Future Society

William Ayers

Multiple Choice Questions:

A typical American classroom has as much to offer an inquiring mind as does:

- A) a vacant lot
- B) a country road
- C) a street corner
- D) the city dump
- E) the custodian's closet
- F) none of the above

Analogy Test:

High-stakes, standardized testing is to learning as:

- A) memorizing a flight manual is to flying
- B) watching an episode of Hawaii Five-O is to doing police work
- C) exchanging marriage vows is to a successful relationship
- D) reading Gray's Anatomy is to practicing surgery
- E) singing the national anthem is to citizenship
- F) all of the above

Education is a perennial arena of struggle as well as hope: struggle because it stirs in us the need to look at the world anew, to question what we have created, and to wonder once again what's worthwhile for human beings to know and experience; and hope because it gestures toward a possible future, toward the impending, toward the coming of the new and the strange. Education is where we ask how we might engage, enlarge, and change our lives; it's where we confront our dreams and fight out notions of the good life; it's where we try to comprehend, apprehend, or possibly even transform all that we find before us.

What does it mean to be human in the 21st Century? What are we? Where have we come from, and where are we headed? Education raises these most fundamental questions again and again. It's a yeasty and combustible brew and a contested space, an essential and natural site of conflict—sometimes restrained, other times in chaotic eruption—and it was always so. In this special issue of the Bank Street [Occasional Papers](#), we will dive into the wreckage, engage the fight, and hope to reclaim the ground of education in and for democracy.

In the U.S. today, we are insistently encouraged to think of education as a product like a car or a refrigerator, a box of bolts or a screw driver—something bought and sold in the marketplace like any other commodity. The controlling metaphor for the schoolhouse is a business run by a CEO, with teachers as workers and students as the raw material bumping along the assembly line while information is incrementally stuffed into their little up-turned heads; within this model it's rather easy to think that “downsizing” the least productive units, “outsourcing” and privatizing a space that was once public is a natural event; that teaching toward a simple standardized metric, and relentlessly applying state-administered (but privately-developed and quite profitable) tests to determine the “outcomes,” is a rational proxy for real learning; that centrally controlled “standards” for curriculum and teaching are commonsensical; that “zero tolerance” for student misbehavior as a stand-in for child development or justice is sane; and that “accountability,” that is, a range of sanctions on students, teachers, and schools—but never on law-makers, foundations, corporations, or high officials—is logical and level-headed. This is in fact what a range of wealthy “reformers,” noisy politicians, and their chattering pundits in the bought media call “school reform.”

The magic ingredients for this reform recipe are three: replace the public schools with some sort of privately-controlled administration; destroy teachers' ability to speak with any sustained or unified voice; and sort the winners relentlessly from the losers—test, test, TEST! The operative image for these moves has by now become quite familiar: education is an individual consumer good, neither a public trust nor a social good, and certainly not a fundamental human right. Management, inputs and outcomes, efficiency, cost controls, profit and loss—the dominant language of this kind of reform doesn't leave much room for doubt, or much space to breathe.

The forces fighting to create the new common-sense—school-reform-normal—are led by a band of dilettante billionaires—Bill Gates, Michael Bloomberg, Sam Walton, Eli Broad, the Koch brothers—who work relentlessly to take up all the available space. Preaching, persuading, and promoting, they often spread around massive amounts of cash to make their points. When Rupert Murdoch was in deep water in the summer of 2011, it came to light that Joel Klein, a leading “reformer” as head of the New York City public schools (and whose own kids attended private schools with small class size, well-resourced classrooms, opportunities for the arts, and more), was on Murdoch's payroll. Apparently the two saw eye to eye on a core set of education principles: that charter schools needed to expand; poor instructors (the now-famous “lazy incompetent teachers”) should be weeded out; and the power of the teachers union must be curtailed. These new “marketeers” aim to create a certain kind of schooling aligned with a particular social vision.

Those of us who resist that narrow vision—who enter the contested space intent on fighting for more democracy, more joy and justice, and more diversity of thought and desire—and who hope to live in a more emancipated society, struggle to create and nurture robust schools. In a vibrant and liberated culture, schools would make an iron commitment to free inquiry, open questioning, and full

participation; access and equity and simple fairness; a curriculum that encourages independent thought and judgment; and a base-line standard that recognizes the humanity of each participant. As opposed to obedience and conformity, the foundational curriculum would promote initiative, courage, imagination, and creativity. Schools in an authentic and animated democracy would put the highest priority on fostering free people oriented toward enlightenment and liberation.

Schools for compliance and conformity are characterized by passivity and fatalism and infused with anti-intellectualism and irrelevance. They turn on technologies of control and normalization—elaborate schemes for managing the mob, knotted system of rules and discipline, exhaustive machinery of schedules and clocks, laborious programs of sorting the crowd through testing and punishing, grading, assessing, and judging—everyone in a designated place and a place for everyone. Knowing and accepting one's pigeonhole on the towering and barren cliff becomes the only lesson one really needs, and all of this offends a robust sense of schooling for participatory democracy; it conforms more easily to schooling for a society at the end of empire, bent on permanent war and experiencing the fatal eclipse of the public square.

By contrast, teaching toward freedom and democracy is based on a common faith in the incalculable value of every human being, and acts on the principle that the fullest development of all is the condition for the full development of each, and, conversely, that the fullest development of each is the condition for the full development of all.

We expect schools in a democratic society to be defined by a spirit of cooperation, inclusion, and participation, places that honor diversity while building unity. Schools in a realized democracy resist the overspecialization of human activity—the separation of the head from the hand, the heart from the brain, and the creative from the serviceable.

On the side of a liberating and humanizing education is a pedagogy of questioning, an approach that opens rather than closes the process of thinking, comparing, reasoning, perspective-taking, and dialogue. It demands something upending and revolutionary from students and teachers alike: Repudiate your place in the pecking order. It urges, remove that distorted, congenial mask of compliance: You must change!

The ethical core of teaching toward tomorrow is necessarily designed to create hope and a sense of agency in students. The big lessons are these: history is still in-the-making, the future unknown and unknowable, and what you do or don't do will make a difference; each of us is a work-in-progress—unfinished, dynamic, in-process, on the move and on the make—swimming through the wreckage toward a distant and indistinct shore; you don't need anyone's permission to interrogate the world.

When the aim of education is the absorption of facts, the acquisition of knowledge becomes exclusively and exhaustively selfish, and there is no obvious social motive for learning. The measure of success is always a competitive one. People are turned against one another, and every difference becomes a

potential deficit. Getting ahead of others is the primary goal in such places, and mutual assistance, which can be so natural in other human affairs, is severely restricted or banned.

On the other hand, where active work is the order of the day, helping others is not a form of charity, something that impoverishes both recipient and benefactor. Rather, a spirit of open communication, interchange, and analysis becomes commonplace. In these settings there is a certain natural disorder, a certain amount of anarchy and chaos, as there is in any busy workshop. But there is a deeper discipline at work, the discipline of getting things done and learning through life.

Knowledge is an inherently public good—something that can be reproduced at little or no cost, and, like love, is generative: the more you have, the better off you become; the more you give away, the more you have. Offering knowledge and learning and education to others diminishes nothing. In a flourishing democracy, knowledge is shared without any reservation or restrictions whatsoever. This points us toward an education that could be, but is not yet, an education toward complete human development—humanization—enlightenment and freedom.

This is the urgency: “Generations do not cease to be born, and we are responsible to them because we are the only witness they have,” writes the dazzling James Baldwin (1985). “The sea rises, the light fails, lovers cling to each other, and children cling to us. The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out” (p.393). This is the burning imperative for school people, parents, and all citizens today, and might become the measure of our determination now.

References

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