

## Caring Education & Meaningful Democracy

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Is it possible to have caring education or a meaningful democracy in a culture that is fundamentally competitive, materialistic, and technocratic? What has brought many of us to this conference is the realization that our political, social, and economic problems are ultimately rooted in a cultural context—the pattern of meanings that guide our lives. The same is true of our educational problems. What makes modern schooling dehumanizing and mechanical is the same set of assumptions, the same taken-for-granted notions about the nature of the world, that underlie our other institutions.

Education in modern culture is defined as a process of training for employment and economic decision making; the procedures of schooling are intended to shape young human beings into components of the corporate machine. Young people's minds are to be molded into predictable shape by a standardized curriculum; their economic value to society is to be assessed by high stakes standardized tests. If this is what the word "education" has come to mean, then the phrase "caring education" is an oxymoron. It is perceived as nonsense, and for the last 150 years, those of us who have advocated holistic or progressive education have generally been dismissed as romantic cranks.

So the push for standardized, mechanized learning has been around for a long time, and the corporate-led crusade in recent years for greater so-called accountability is not new. However, the pressure today is greater, and more politically powerful, than it has ever been. The corporate takeover of schooling appears to be nearing completion. Recently, for example, Mayor Richard M. Daley of Chicago shared his educational vision with reporters at a major computer trade show. The *Chicago Sun-Times* quoted him as saying "If Chicago is going to continue to attract and retain high-tech companies, our schools have to produce graduates with skills these companies require. The idea is not to listen to those who run education, but to listen to the employers. What do they require?"

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The corporate educational agenda could hardly be stated in more naked terms. It is the mission of schools to “produce” a certain type of graduate, as if human beings are not purposeful moral, intellectual, or spiritual agents but the results of a manufacturing process—a process that is run by corporate managers to serve their economic goals. Mayor Daley, like virtually all political and corporate leaders today, begs a fundamental question: What is education for? Our culture now teaches us that children are born on this earth solely to contribute their hearts and minds to the consuming task of generating ever greater profits and shareholder value. That is explicitly how our leaders want us to treat them in school.

Although educators are not infallibly wise, people who actually work with children, who actually pay attention to the intricate processes of teaching and learning, do understand the needs of healthy human development a whole lot better than do corporate employers. If our culture were truly interested in nourishing the unfolding abilities and personalities of our children—that is, if we were interested in providing a caring education—then we would listen to educators and not to employers. Let the employers train their workers at a more mature phase of their lives, when they voluntarily apply to be employed by them. To educate young people means—or it should mean—helping them bring forth their creativity, their compassion, their curiosity, their moral and aesthetic sensitivity, their critical intellectual skills, their ability to participate in a robust democracy—in a word, their wholeness—and a decent culture, a culture that isn’t blind to everything outside the economic sphere of life, would recognize this.

Taking a long term view—which I ought to do, given my training as a historian—one could argue that the mechanization of education is a temporary phase, perhaps a necessary step in the evolution from feudal and totalitarian societies to those that are genuinely democratic and spiritually meaningful. After all, we can be grateful that Mayor Daley and his cohorts aren’t turning children over to the requirements of military leaders. In some sense, the desire for material prosperity reflects the liberation of the masses from cruel forms of oppression and abject poverty that have characterized human society for many centuries. But now, people are discovering that material wealth alone does not

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satisfy the yearning for spiritual meaning and that the single-minded pursuit of wealth is dehumanizing, so our cultural evolution is not yet finished. That is why we are here.

At the present time, our culture operates with a perverted understanding of human development. Indeed, we have inverted the normal, organic way of supporting human growth and we do things precisely backward. Instead of giving children the freedom and encouragement to play, explore, investigate, imagine, and dream—those things that naturally form a healthy and whole human personality—we force them into an artificial, constraining learning environment, and demand that they conform to schedules, routines, norms of behavior, and unforgiving tests that strangers have arbitrarily selected for them, with the threat that we will brand them as failures or drug them if they do not so conform. Then, we have a society full of alleged grownups who, instead of growing in maturity, wisdom, and spiritual depth—the true developmental goal of adulthood—are obsessed with pleasure, play, entertainment, sports, and various hedonistic pursuits, as if to make up for the childhood they were denied.

A culture that is fundamentally competitive and technocratic needs to produce generation after generation of immature citizens who are too busy amusing themselves to raise serious questions about the system. Mindless and spiritually starved consumers buy more stuff to fill the aching void at the core of their lives. Our mechanical system of schooling is intended to raise the gross national product. Advertising in the classroom is only the tip of the iceberg; the entire system is geared to production and consumption, to management and employment. It is not set up to nourish caring or compassion.

What are we to do? How might we bring about a meaningful education that could truly lead to a meaningful democracy? I would like to propose four radical but concrete steps in that direction:

1. Explicitly address the question, “What is education for?” Whenever anyone—whether the President, the state or local school superintendent, or the person behind you in the checkout line—expresses the unexamined notion that we need more discipline or achievement in our schools so that our nation can remain economically competitive, we should step forward and ask “Is that

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really how we want to educate our children? Is the supremacy of American corporations the highest dream you hold for our children?"

2. Challenge policies and practices that narrow education into the meaningless pursuit of grades and scores, and then use these artifacts to stir up competition. Whenever your local newspaper publishes and ranks test results from your community's public schools, write back to the editor to point out how meaningless and reductionistic these numbers are—and demand instead to be informed about the *quality* of learning, and the quality of community life, in your public schools. Instead of bumper stickers proclaiming that "my child made the honor roll," we need more stickers like those produced by a handful of alternative schools that say something like "All children are honored students at our school."
3. Boycott high stakes tests. No, let's go further: boycott and eliminate all standardized testing. Support students who refuse to take those tests; their numbers are growing and this could be the start of a real educational rights movement. Support parents who are beginning to have misgivings about testing when they see the pressure and anxiety it causes their children. And let's support teachers in refusing to administer the tests, or at least, refusing to spend their precious time preparing students for them. Let's treat all young people as valuable, worthy individuals and use assessment to help them improve their learning and reach their goals, not to rank them in some cutthroat academic competition. There are many forms of what's called "authentic assessment" that engage the teacher and learner in meaningful dialogue about the quality of the learning process.
4. Let's build a diverse grassroots movement for educational freedom. There are many pockets of resistance to the technocratic school system, many of them quite well organized with publications, conferences, and active networks, but none of them linked to the others. Consider the Waldorf school movement, Montessori schools, Quaker schools, free schools, and other independent alternative schools. There are many, many educators within public school

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systems who would love to break out of the mechanical routines that throttle their creativity and their responsiveness to students' needs. There are thousands of homeschooling families, and before we "progressives" dismiss the homeschooling movement as a fanatic religious revolt against secular society, or a libertarian uprising against society as such, please consider that many thousands of these families—religious or not—are simply seeking to educate their children in an atmosphere that embodies caring, meaning, and intimacy, qualities they know they cannot find in technocratic schooling. Our task now is to knit this delightfully unruly band of rebels into a social and political force that is strong and united enough to contest Mayor Daley's vision and the agenda of the global corporate system.

In its place, we propose a caring education, an education rooted in face-to-face relationship, participation in community, and social responsibility. We propose an education that respects young people's emotional and spiritual wholeness, an education that allows them to learn in their own diverse ways, according to their own organic rhythms. If we can practice such an education in what we now call "public schools" (a free and universally accessible system provided by the democratic state), let's fight for that opportunity whenever we can. But let us also realize that the modern state primarily serves economic interests, corporate interests, and truly caring educators have faced enormous and discouraging obstacles throughout the history of public schooling. Ask any teacher who is constrained by rigid standards and relentless testing.

If, and only if, a politics of meaning—a holistic movement for cultural renewal—succeeds in transforming the values of society at large, will a caring education be widely practiced within a public system of schooling. Meanwhile, we need to encourage and join with the growing grassroots movements for educational alternatives, for they are planting seeds of the new culture. They show us that it is possible to fashion participatory communities of learning where every child is an honored student, where every young person can follow their dreams

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and live authentic and meaningful lives. We owe such an education to all our children.