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ARTICLE

Is This What Democracy Looks Like? A Personal Retrospective

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Alice: Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?

Cheshire Cat: That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.

Alice: I don't much care where....

Cheshire Cat: Then it doesn't matter which way you go.

--Carroll, Lewis (1865)

I sometimes feel I'm stuck in an Alice-in-Wonderland world. Other times I feel that someone has created this bewilderment on purpose and I start looking for the Red Queen.

In 1983, President Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education submitted a report titled, "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform." Since the publication of that report, we have suffered continual attempts at reform, having now arrived at a time when bureaucrats and politicians far removed from local community schools can use standardized test results to establish criteria for disciplining schools, removing principals and teachers, and defining school curricula. Reforms based on claims that our public schools do a terrible job and are a cause of America's weakened world position are not being driven by parents, local citizens, teachers, or local school boards.

The controversy that emerges is whether schooling should remain firmly and directly under the control of the constituents it serves--regardless of their race, place of birth, language or social class--or shifted to other, more distant political authorities. Even under dispute is whether there need be any democratically-chosen authorities involved at all, or whether schools, privately run but supported by public monies, can simply be controlled by the marketplace.

While we've been arguing about school reform, however, huge slices of our population have dropped into dire poverty, impairing their physical and mental health and limiting opportunities to be more useful adults in their children's lives. The gap between rich and poor--the 99% and the 1%--is staggering to contemplate. Yet we are told that the gap between the well-off and everyone else is not a handicap to building a better school system, nor a serious impediment to our regaining world-wide dominance--while a gap in test scores is! We are paying an enormous price for our inability to grasp the issues about which, as citizens, we are expected to base policy. But neither schools nor the media see themselves as accountable for providing local publics with the information they need.

Instead, we have a mumbo-jumbo conversation--restricted to a small but powerful group of political leaders, foundations, and think-tanks--about how to turn around mysterious test scores in math and language arts, and about attendance data, drop-outs, and graduation rates. So we have schools designed to focus on *the academics* without asking questions about what constitutes such academics, and how they provide us with the intellectual and social competence to rule ourselves. What kind of math should we all be able to feel comfortable with in order to better understand the world we live in and make the decisions we must make? What aspects of history enable us to see the present more clearly? What literature opens us up to a wider empathy with others unlike ourselves and helps us make sense of ourselves? What principles of science govern the modern scientific paradigms, and what evidence counts?

What would it take to put such issues first and to consider what knowledge and skills are needed to overcome our overwhelming sense of powerlessness in the modern state? It can't be just marching and rallying around the best of all slogans, chanting, "This is what democracy looks like." It takes deeper knowledge about what democracy truly could look like, what it now does look like, and what might close the gap between the two.

We must sacrifice some aspects of schooling in order not to sacrifice the most important ones. We can leave some things for after school or for later in life. But by the time our young people reach 18, they might serve on a jury that will decide my future and yours. And even in what some call our after-school *luxuries*, we would do well to think about what they teach us to do, not to mention what four or five hours a day engaged in virtual realities do for and to democracy.

We're stuck with people as they are, and no reform on behalf of democracy can leap over the present to create a better future. That's why democratic reform is the work of more than one generation. Reformers need to pick their fights

carefully because there is no single reform that in itself can quickly produce the world we dream about. Impatient revolutionaries have a long history of failure; let's not go down that path again.

When I found myself, quite by accident, teaching kindergarten in Chicago in the early 1960's, I brought much life experience with me, including years of political and civil rights activism, but no particular theories about education. My own children and I were experiencing urban public schools together at the same time.

At that time, my first thought was that this surely couldn't be less well-designed for preparing young people to develop powerful voices and skills needed for democracy. It was simply wrong to assume that citizens could defend democracy on the basis of experience in factory-style schools. It was hard to persuade five- to 18 year-olds that the academic disciplines as currently defined are closely connected to what employers are looking for. And it was, for example, hard to defend our no-hat rule at East Harlem's Central Park East (CPE) school in the 1980s and 1990s with the claim that we were preparing them for the *real* world. They came back to inform us that adults wore hats, chewed gum and ... on and on ... in the real world.

To answer some of the questions about how we might prepare our children for the real world, a group of us founded Central Park East in 1974. It grew into three East Harlem Public Schools, and expanded in 1985 into Central Park East Secondary School. We built it on the basis of our experiences as teachers convinced that human beings are innately curious about a wide range of the world's phenomena, whose curiosity could be supported by digging into the disciplines. It was not easy, but over many years we revised, revisited and shifted some of our practices, but never the purpose: to prepare all of our students without exception to become members of a smart ruling class, while also living productive, socially useful and fully human lives.

We were arguing for schools becoming models of the kind of intellectual and practical lives that all citizens need to master so that they can make increasingly wiser decisions about their own futures and our shared one. You cannot become a fan of baseball if you've never seen it close-up, ideally even played it yourself. The self-initiated practice that it takes to be good at something is easily witnessed if one has tried to be good at baseball or playing the flute or building a house. That's how one goes from novice to expert--in the company of experts, not just peers. And few of us, our students and the teachers ourselves, have had the chance to be part of communities devoted to any larger purpose, even one like playing baseball. Few of us have had opportunities to imagine that such belonging is fun, and that people like me might aspire to membership in such endeavors.

We didn't always agree about how to get *there*, wherever *there* was, but we insisted that we decide this together, and not leave it to the authorities beyond the school. We knew we would have to embrace some forms of choice--a word we liked too well at the time--within a publicly accountable system to enable us to push our ideas to their limits. We realized we would need to permit escapes for the students and their families--private schools or home-schooling or other public schools--for those who rejected our premises. But we stood by the proposition that we cannot pretend that democracy is viable because we all say an oath, or salute a common flag, or are governed by common laws.

But on our own, we could not create a single common set that includes all of the informal rules and habits that build the trust needed for raising our children together. So our default position was that decisions should be made as close as possible to those whom they impact. Each exception to this rule, we insisted, had to be defended, as the Founding Fathers tried to do. We needed to imagine the arguments of others with care, while we reached a livable consensus that was never the final word. As supporters of the Supreme Court's decision on behalf of school integration, we were also well aware, by the time we started CPE, of how hard it was to implement mandates. What protected us then and continues to do so now is not the Supreme Court, but the strength of our voluntary compliance built by the cumulative impact of many local decisions.

We built CPE schools on the idea that we'd have to take our chances on more democracy, not less, by placing such relatively basic decisions as how best to educate our children in the hands of teachers, parents, students and members of the community, along with trustworthy information that could help us all arrive at decisions, and a lively media that helped us learn about each other's different solutions.

We were not likely to forget that, on the whole, officialdom during those years seemed willing to let us operate differently from other schools without explicit permission. Of course, we acknowledged that there may need to be boundaries, but the freedom of schools--teachers and students--to explore the world with minimal external interference is to the advantage of all: So we learned not to decide too early on the limits. It was clear from the beginning that such practice attracts wonderful colleagues. The laws we most need are laws that make it easier for teachers and parents to spend time together,

for teachers to visit their colleagues, and for all to feel safe. Luckily, a brave, local district superintendent was inclined to agree with us.

We learned that it's better to accept that some folks will cheat or abuse trust than to embark on an endless effort to insure that no one will be able to do so. Our systems are historically thick with misguided efforts to do so. Perhaps we need a law that wipes them all off the books every five years, and requires us to enact them anew when needed. For example, the rules said that all supplies were to be locked in a closet, and every request for supplies had to be put in writing and approved, and only then would they be delivered with proper paper work carried out by a full-time supply clerk. When we were caught with an open closet and no paper work, our defense was that even if someone made off with everything in the closet, at no time would it equal the salary of the supply keeper. We agreed, however to comply, as soon as we could get around to it.

We put more of our resources into hiring classroom teachers with small class sizes, especially in the secondary school, making inclusion of special-needs students far easier. Smaller class sizes also meant that creating relationships with families, time-consuming as that is, became somewhat reasonable. They made it easier to organize the schedule and physical space, so that colleagues could be in and out of each other's rooms when needed, and could spend extended periods designing and conducting their own professional development. We had brief weekly business meetings where all adults in attendance had an equal voice and vote. We hired and fired together.

It was a perfect civics lesson for young and old alike--far better than Civics 101. We learned about the possibilities that lie within the term *democracy* for our schools. We discovered its trade-offs, warts and all, and backtracked anytime it got too exhausting. Is this too experimental? Only if we forget that democracy itself is our best, and far from perfect, form of accountability.

Democracy is an experiment that allows for many interpretations, even of one person, one vote. We might explore ways to weigh the vote of parents, for example. Every poll suggests that people, above all those with children in public schools, view the world of schooling that they know best differently from schools in general, and far differently from those who now make Big Decisions about what happens in each and every classroom. We need to redress these gaps, and also tackle the other gap that undermines our children and our nation: what my friend Mike Harrington (1962) called *The Other America* of the poor fifty years ago.

"Of the people, by the people, and for the people" (Lincoln, 1863) is easier said than done. We want to try to get our own way, sometimes unfairly; we are sometimes resentful that x's voice is heard with respect equal to our own. And, given that in New York City, our democratic practice had no legal authority behind it--just the behind-the-scenes approval of both management and labor--it would not withstand personnel changes in higher bodies. It would not even withstand having a new principal placed in the school against the parents' and staff members' wishes. The legal authority of a principal can, over time, overstep its executive power and wear away its constituents, who have other demands on their time. We know about this. Emergencies arise, and it seems only natural that decisions be made quickly without consultation or with the consultation of only a select few. We unwittingly design our own Patriot Acts (USA, 2011).

Even so, we are firmly convinced that the success of the school, even in traditional terms, is not disconnected to the attention we gave, in time and resources, to living democratically together. And it's not a surprise that teacher turnover was not a problem, although losing too many at one time, as we did in an effort to export our most experienced staff to new starter schools, was not easy. The school put everyone first. Our needs and capacities differed; thus the advice of the most experienced was weighted with special care, but even I had a veto only on matters that placed our school in legal jeopardy or a member's life or health in danger. But such matters never arose.

Of course, we all brought with us habits from the schools and workplaces we had known before coming to CPE, and these habits came up frequently. But it was easier when I gathered friends in Boston to do the same in 1995. We had much to draw upon in the experience of others by that time. Best of all, we had the upfront, overt support of labor and management; we were designated as Pilot Schools with greater autonomy and our own semi-powerful school board, selected by us--the parents, teachers, and students. Of course, it's still iffy. The secondary school ceased to be part of our network by 2000, after fifteen years. But the other schools, and many like them, remain laboratories for exploring the idea that the best way to introduce the young to democracy is by parents and teachers who are grappling with it themselves, alongside, and in the presence of the young.

Democracy is not merely about rules and laws, enforcement and coercion, of majorities and minorities, although it is also about each of these. It is also a set of habits of mind and work and heart that make the occasional contradictions and

uncertainties tolerable.

Luckily, life itself teaches some of these habits, too. I see rising from the ground up more and more questions about the reforms that have been foisted upon us for the past few decades. Who will win, I do not know. But I've got my fingers crossed for compromises that will allow us to better connect the dots between the work of the schools and the larger work of the nation.

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