

Decentralizing Educational Authority

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What does the word “education” mean to us? Does it refer to the state’s power to shape the minds and attitudes of citizens to provide human capital for economic and political purposes? Or is education, instead, an intimate human encounter between caring elders and young people with their own aspirations and potentials?

If we believe that genuine education has more to do with the latter, then the hierarchical and authoritarian structure of our present system of schooling is absurdly inappropriate. Through much of the history of public schooling, but especially since the publication of the Reagan Administration’s report *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, educational decisions have not been made by those most intimately involved in the educational endeavor—teachers, parents, or young people—but by technocrats pursuing their agenda of centralized social management. All important educational decisions are made by distant, impersonal forces completely out of human scale, turning teachers into technicians, parents into consumers, and young people into products. The standardization of teaching and learning through prescribed curricula and textbooks, and the obsessive pursuit of accountability through relentless testing, reflect the concentrated power of political leaders, corporate CEOs, influential foundations, and the mass media.

Policymakers are not concerned with the experiential quality of life or learning in schools, but only with measurable results, with “outputs,” with the economic value of the nation’s human resources. People don’t much matter—systems do. Standardization endorses the ruthlessness and rootlessness of the global corporate system and insists that young people dutifully play their roles as producers and consumers to keep the system functioning. Standardization rewards robotic learning, not creativity or imagination or critical thinking or self-awareness or moral judgment or compassion or wisdom or loyalty to community or place.

This is not an education for democracy or human fulfillment, it is explicitly an education for empire.

Authoritarian educational policy is truly a bipartisan effort. The Bush administration’s “No Child Left Behind” was followed by the Obama policy called “Race to the Top.” While “No Child Left Behind” was a dishonest, deceptive term for a draconian policy of intellectual conformity (it should more accurately have been entitled “No Child Left Untested”), at least we can embrace its literal meaning, which is the polar opposite of “Race to the Top,” as the goal of a truly decent and democratic education. To conceive of education as a “race”—a competition forcing schools, teachers, and students to contend for some sort of victory—is to poison the inherent human striving for understanding and meaning.

Defined as a competitive race, education is not a collaborative art of mentoring and nurturing the young, but a frenzied scramble to succeed according to some external measure of success—to reach some goal line established by those in authority. Teachers and schools are considered to be successful if students score well on tests. Period. The actual quality of their knowledge and understanding and the moral, emotional, and cultural meanings of what young people experience in schools are irrelevant and disregarded. Education is defined as mechanical academic performance, diminishing the possibility of providing a meaningful journey toward ethical maturity and democratic citizenship.

We need to ask, as Wendell Berry once did, *what are people for?* and the question that should follow from it: *what are schools for?* There is a fundamentally different way to define education, success, and the purpose of a life well-lived. As Berry and many others have described it, it is the way of authentic human encounter, collaboration, and fellowship, not the way of empire. It is the way of community, stewardship of place, and human scale. It is the way of decentralized power and authority, of partnership, not domination.

Numerous educational alternatives challenge the agenda of technocratic schooling. They give parents and students a wider range of learning options and engage them in meaningful ways in the decisions affecting their education. The alternatives movement represents the decentralization of educational authority. It redefines learning as an intimate, human-scale relationship through which young people are empowered to discover their own inner resources and their own unique relationships to the community. Young people thrive in these learning environments and come out brimming with self-confidence, multiple competencies, and a strong sense of purpose. They consistently prove that abstract, rigidly imposed standards are not necessary for equipping youth with essential life skills.

Let's consider a few examples already operating in Vermont. There are several Waldorf schools around the state, and each of them has attracted a community of parents and educators who seek organic, holistic, "green" variations on modern life, such as whole food, holistic healthcare, and a more deliberate connection to the rhythms of nature through festivals, stories, art, and other endeavors. These school communities give people who hold a transformative cultural vision places to share, refine, and practice their ideas. Another educational community thriving under the radar in Vermont is the network of "unschoolers"—families who believe that the most authentic learning takes place in daily life, when young people become engaged in the social and natural world around them and pursue their own purposes and questions. This practice promotes the sort of intellectual and civic self-reliance that our most visionary thinkers, such as Thomas Jefferson, Henry David Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, considered essential to a democratic society.

A few years ago, an idealistic teacher named Tal Birdsey started an alternative school for young adolescents in Ripton, Vermont, called North Branch School. He tells its story, with delightful wit and penetrating insight, in his inspiring book *A Room for Learning*. We see how an authentic teacher builds a caring, loving community of learners. Every page, every incident and observation Birdsey relates, is a gentle but firm repudiation of technocratic schooling. "The first parents gravitated to the school," he tells us, because

something entirely different could be made. . . . [C]urrent political debates about accountability or state funding fell far short of meaningful discourse about the education of children. These parents, no matter their income, education, or political views, were seeking education that involved something closer to the heart. In particular, they seemed to want something more creative and free . . . in contradistinction to schools tethered to right, standards-based approaches or school officials bombarded with federal mandates to test (pp. 31–32).

A Room for Learning shows exactly what "something closer to the heart" looks like in education. Birdsey sees each of his students as whole persons, with their own challenges, inclinations, learning styles, quirks, and insecurities. Most of them have been "wounded by school" (as Kirsten Olson systematically documents in her compelling book by that title); they are afraid of ridicule and rejection, suspicious of adults who judge them and of peers who band together in cliques to exercise power. They are reluctant to open themselves to others, to test their own limits or pursue their deepest dreams. Birdsey tells how he created a safe, nurturing space in which these young teens could find and test their best, authentic selves. "I asked them to embrace the personal pronoun I so that we might come closer to what was sacred inside of them. Those truths—their truths—would

bring us closer to what mattered” (p. 59). Ultimately, what really matters to Birdsey and his students is a community where everyone feels cared for, a community rooted in love. This, not triumph in the corporate race, is what people are for.

Educational alternatives promote participatory democracy. As described by Vermont’s own progressive philosopher, John Dewey, “participatory democracy” means a society that encourages individuals to take an active part in shaping the social and political lives of their communities rather than entrusting decisions to policymakers and other elites. Dewey explained that education must encourage active, personally meaningful learning and critical inquiry; he argued that the coercive transmission of an authorized curriculum can only educate youths to become passive citizens in an authoritarian social order.

Educational democracy involves the redistribution of cultural power from the hands of a few policymakers to local communities, parents, teachers, and youths themselves. By repealing standardization and obsessive testing, we would enable those most closely involved in the learning process to determine their own educational goals and methods. In taking greater responsibility for education, citizens would participate more vigorously in shaping the intellectual and moral climate of their communities.

Decentralizing education would allow all families to find learning environments aligned with their values and with their children’s personalities and styles of learning. Alongside progressive and culturally alternative places for learning, there would continue to exist schools (and homeschooling situations) that are more highly structured or academically oriented, or more concerned about moral or religious instruction. The educational alternatives movement transcends conventional liberal and conservative ideologies; the coexistence of diverse educational visions and experiments would nourish a more vibrant democracy.

A frequent objection to this goal of educational freedom is that it would surrender the public school ideal of a shared social purpose, a common good that transcends parochial interests (which Dewey also emphasized as a key element of democratic life). Wouldn’t our society splinter along lines of religion, ethnicity, class, race, political belief, or petty local interests? If we allow people to gather in separate enclaves to practice their own educational philosophies, wouldn’t this give a green light to all sorts of religious extremists, left-wing radicals, white supremacists, or tree huggers to freely teach the next generation their weird beliefs?

There are at least two ways to address this concern, both of which challenge the very basis of the technocratic model of schooling. First, we need to separate the educational task of mentoring young people from the political task of forging a democratic community in a diverse society. We need to get over, once and for all, the Platonic notion that the state should be molding children into citizens. When Jefferson proposed a system of public education to support the new American democracy, he sought to spread the intellectual tools of reason, skepticism, and critical inquiry among the population, not to establish a “curriculum” authorized by elite policymakers, especially one that promotes mindless celebration of existing institutions. (He would be horrified, I think, by No Child Left Behind.) When we put educational and political tasks in their proper places, we will see that children who have their developmental needs (such as the need to learn through play) and their individual learning styles well met are more likely to become thoughtful, caring, engaged citizens than those who are bullied and processed by the system of social engineering the technocracy has established. The proof is in the creative, active, generous, socially engaged lives of many thousands of alumni of independent schools and homeschooling.

The second answer to the fear of social fragmentation is to recognize that people will always identify with communities that share their beliefs and values, and that this is a basic, normal human need. Unlike a managed social system or a colossal nation-state, a genuine community provides the experience of communion with others; we become involved with people who know us, who understand and appreciate us, who share certain aspects of our identities. In a healthy democracy, as

Tocqueville keenly observed in the pre-imperial American republic, there is space for these kinds of connections; they do not threaten the political coherence of the larger community.

Granted that a functioning democracy requires citizens to reach out to each other across partisan or parochial lines to find common ground and collaborate for a common good, the desire for cultural uniformity can be pushed too far, until it becomes oppressive, even totalitarian. Social engineering is counterproductive: By forcing everyone into the ideological mold demanded by standardized education, the state drives people to separatist enclaves and makes them suspicious of commonality. Standardization fans the flames of extremism, while honoring diversity invites participation in the larger society. There is a huge difference between a democratic sense of social responsibility and public spiritedness (which Dewey so thoroughly described), and the technocrats' goal of social control.

Rejecting the yoke of standardization and enforced conformity does not mean "privatizing" education, making it a commodity that only the privileged can afford. A democratic society must provide all its youths equitable opportunities for cultivating their unique gifts and achieving their potentials. It will surely be a challenge to publicly fund a decentralized system without standardized accountability, but that is a task we must take on. We need to figure out how to encourage educational democracy without invoking the awesome power of the national state to enforce some authorized model of cultural conformity. For when the state becomes an all-consuming empire, this power is dangerous indeed.

One vital goal of Vermont independence is an educational culture that respects and encourages learning on a human scale, that supports caring and loving communities of learning. National educational policy is one more reason why we need to challenge the burgeoning power of the American empire. Because Vermonters value genuine democracy, treasure individuality, and hold as precious the local land and community, we ought to decline the federal government's inducements to participate in any "race to the top."