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# ARTICLE

## Universal Public Education—Our (Contradictory) Missions

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Thomas Jefferson (1900), in his autobiography from 1821, clarifies for us where our focus must be if we truly value the education of all people born with inalienable right of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness:

The less wealthy people. . . , by the bill for a general education, would be qualified to understand their rights, to maintain them, and to exercise with intelligence their parts in self-government; and all this would be effected without the violation of a single natural right of any one individual citizen. (p. 50)

And as he charged many years before, in 1786, this public education would be the result of taxation:

I think by far the most important bill in our whole code, is that for the diffusion of knowledge among the people. No other sure foundation can be devised for the preservation of freedom and happiness. . . . The tax which will be paid for this purpose is not more than the thousandth part of what will be paid to kings, priests and nobles who will rise up among us if we leave the people in ignorance. (Jefferson, 1900, p. 278)

But as we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, we have neither fulfilled the dream laid at our feet by Jefferson and others nor protected our commitment to this crippled social institution we call universal public education. In fact, we have demonized schools for over a century and sit poised to dismantle our schools without ever having allowed them to succeed.

For educators dedicated to the tradition stretching from Jefferson to John Dewey to Paulo Freire, we are faced with a paradox when we confront "What education do our children deserve?" Included in the paradox is that we need education reform because our bureaucratic schools are not supporting the agency of all children for a life as free people and that *allowing* and *pursuing* the public and political pursuit of educational reform are masking the need for social reform—addressing the crippling impact of poverty on the lives of children (Berliner, 2009; Hirsch, 2007).

Therefore, I hesitate to offer what education our children deserve because I know that without social reform, all education reform will be distorted, if not fruitless. Against calls for education reform, educators must heighten our acknowledgement of and attention to the equity gap that exists in the lives of children, an equity gap that is reflected in the achievement gap in our schools. So as we examine and call for education reform, we must preface that call with context: To achieve the education our children deserve, we must also provide those children with the lives they deserve.

### What Purpose Schools?<sup>[1]</sup>

The political and public discourses about education reflect a wide array of purposes for school, each one determining how we judge the quality of education in the U. S. Writing as both a professor and a parent, Ganem (2009) identifies the complexity often ignored when we consider what students need to learn—as well as when they need to learn:

When I tutored my other daughter in seventh grade algebra, in her words she “found it creepy” that I knew how to do every single problem in her rather large textbook. When I related the remark to a fellow physicist he said: “But its algebra. There are only three or four things you have to know.” Yes, but it took me years of development before I understood there were only a few things you had to know to do algebra. *I can’t tell my seventh grader or anyone else without the proper developmental background the few things you have to know for algebra and send them off to do every problem in the book* [emphasis added].

Challenging content, Ganem acknowledges, is a contextual term. Simply setting a high bar without regard to any child’s potential for clearing that bar is actually harmful. To identify what education children deserve, then, we must acknowledge the context of what purposes that education seeks.

### School as Preparation for the Next Thing

A traditional way to view school is through an analytical lens whereby each segment of school is preparation for the next segment in school, culminating in students exiting school for some role in the real world. Many teachers and much of the general public *believe* in neat categories such as “a third-grade reading level” and “a high-school education.” This mechanical, linear, and analytic view of teaching and learning, and ultimately the purpose of school, fulfills our quest to be efficient, but many problems exist within these assumptions. Yet, each year of school, many third-grade teachers are determined to prepare their students for the fourth grade (often anticipating what fourth grade teachers expect). As an article on Texas high schools reveals (Hacker, 2009), high schools are *expected* to prepare students for college—as if *high school ability* and *college ability* are easily identified commodities.

Two failures of seeing school as preparation for the next level of school or life include what we know about brain development and that we conflate knowledge with learning. Our understanding of brain development has evolved tremendously over the past century, but how we view learning in school has changed little during that time. While we acknowledge a sequence to cognitive development (such as abstract thinking developing after more literal thinking), we are not certain about when those developments take place *for each child*; our current system of grade levels tied to chronological age is manageable, but does not necessarily reflect cognitive development.

The other failure, associating knowledge with learning, is at best arbitrary. Once we classify a body of knowledge as *third-grade material*, we rarely consider whether or not that material is truly what third graders need to know or even are able to know. If we consider algebra, during the last twenty to thirty years of the current accountability movement, we have started moving curriculum down to earlier grades in order to present those standards as rigorous, resulting in moving algebra earlier in students’ education. The problem? Algebra requires a level of abstract thinking that is related to brain development. Asking a student to do something earlier is not necessarily challenging students academically; in fact, asking a student to do something she or he cannot yet do (due to brain development) is counter-educational (Ganem, 2009).

### School as Test Preparation

In school, children learn quickly that all they need to do is score at certain levels (whatever they or their parents expect) on tests and all is well. Soon, learning is simply passing or scoring appropriately on a test. At the broader level of education, school has been reduced to gateway tests—assessments mandated by No Child Left Behind (NCLB), high school exit exams, Advanced Placement tests, college entrance exams (SAT, ACT)—that often become *de facto* measures of the effectiveness of our entire school system. Despite the pervasive power of tests and the rising focus on test preparation as a major aspect of school, Popham (2001a; 2001b; 2003), Bracey (2006), and many other education and assessment experts continue to warn us of the folly of associating single tests with learning.

Essentially, since the passage of NCLB, state tests tied to accountability have become the curriculum; in other words, teaching to the test *is the purpose of school* in most schools. Florida is illustrative of the current transformation of the purpose of education being test preparation:

Some educators and parents protest that grades have pushed teachers to narrow the scope of what they teach to focus on what counts on the FCAT [Florida’s Comprehensive Assessment Test].

“Teachers are told, ‘You’re an F and you have a year to improve,’” said Latha Krishnaiyer, a past Florida and Broward Council PTA president. “How did they improve? They taught to the FCAT.” (Mazzei, 2009)

Even as parents and other stakeholders call for school reform and higher standards, many of those same stakeholders lament the current test-preparation focus of schools.

The debate over the value of teaching to the test is not one-sided, however. Some advocates of testing believe that having a clear and detailed goal is a valuable asset to effective teaching. Concurrent with the accountability movement has been a rise in teaching by design or teaching with the end in mind (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Others, though, do see tests as only one aspect of the broader purposes of school, standing firmly against prescriptive approaches to teaching, such as relying heavily on teaching to tests (Schmidt & Thomas, 2009).

Although teaching to tests has taken a powerful role in most schools in the beginning decade of the twenty-first century, there remains among those supporting or simply practicing teaching to the test a likely belief that those tests represent some other purpose. Therefore, declaring teaching to tests as a purpose of schools necessarily means it overlaps with other purposes—some that are in fact conflicting—and ultimately, children deserve schools that do much more than prepare

them for tests.

### **School as Preparation for Work**

Few purposes for education have been evoked as often as a preparation for work. Bracey (2004) documents that the impetus behind a *Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) under Reagan’s administration grew significantly out of a belief that the U. S. needed world-class schools in order to compete internationally in business and more broadly in its economy. Since the inception of NLCEB, few comments about the need to raise standards and improve schools have been voiced without mentioning the importance of producing a world-class workforce as a result of better schools.

Progressives (Dewey, 1938/1997) discount the value in preparing students for some specific outcome, such as a job or a profession. Dewey believed the future to be too unpredictable to make such purposes of education effective. Further, Bracey shows that the connections between school quality and economic success when comparing countries don’t exist in the data, only in the discourse.

Nonetheless, school as preparation for work is a compelling argument in capitalist societies. Throughout my teaching career, teachers were encouraged to show students charts equating years of schooling with income potentials—both increased proportionately. This simplistic view of the value of learning fails from the same premise that all external motivation does by making the primary goal *less* valuable through association. If students come to see school and learning as merely a means to a greater end, earning money, the students are actually learning that education is not valuable itself.

Henry David Thoreau (n.d.) writes in his “Life without Principle”: “This world is a place of business. What an infinite bustle!” This mid-nineteenth century phenomenon is even more palpable today. A powerful assumption driving our schools is both that life is for working and, of course, school is to prepare us for that work. Children deserve an education that rises above preparing them for work and an education that helps them embrace a life of *living* within which work is one component.

### **School as Preparation for Life**

Looking more broadly than expecting school to prepare students for work, some advocate for school as preparation for life. Dewey’s warning that no one can truly anticipate the specific needs of anyone in the future—because the future is unpredictable—resonates with many who believe school should focus on ways of being and thinking. Critical educators, Paulo Freire (1993; 1998; 2005) for example, call for an education that provides a different approach to *basic skills* than traditionalists espouse, focusing on literacy and critical literacy as essential to empowerment.

The problems encountered with expecting school to prepare students for life are similar to other preparational assumptions about education. School as preparation for life often devolves into narrow versions of the broader goals: *Literacy* becomes writing memos, job application letters, and other functional behaviors; *critical thinking* becomes memorizing the steps to solving a hypothetical problem. In other words, we often fail the broad goals themselves, as opposed to those goals actually being inherently flawed.

A final weakness of using school to prepare students for life is the artificial nature of school itself, which makes a school setting impractical as preparation for life. Even in the most progressive schools, legal and administrative necessities dictate a structure to conduct school that is rarely experienced in life beyond the halls of learning. For school to be effective as preparation for life, educators have to work diligently to balance freedom and consequences with monitoring the safe and efficient management of a school.

School as preparation for life, just as school as preparation for work, ultimately comes against a central tension between education and indoctrination. If we decide that school is to prepare students for life (or work), then we must ask who makes the decision what life that student leads (or profession that student pursues). These goals suffer from coercion and from the potential oppression of social norms (girls should be nurses, and boys, doctors, for example). While children deserve an education that prepares them for life, we are left with inherent contradictions embedded in how to make that system work equitably.

### **School as Self-discovery**

Neill (1960/1995) is probably the most famous advocate of schools for a child's self-discovery and happiness with his Summerhill school. For advocates of school as preparation for life, school needs to reflect the harsh realities of the *real world* in order to help students prepare for those facts of adult life. But for educators like Neill, schools should be nearly idyllic places where students feel safe and happy, and come to terms with their true selves—regardless of the expectations of society.

There are, of course, ranges of commitments to schools as self-discovery, but for most who advocate student-centered teaching, the focus does include much more than acquiring the necessary knowledge expected or required for a fatalistic life or job after school. Child-centered educators tend to value more than cognition, often raising affect to at least equal footing with thinking. School as self-discovery doesn't fit well with the growing concern about accountability; in fact, many have demonized child-centered educators (including Dewey) as propagating a soft pedagogy that has eroded the quality of schools over the past half-century. Progressive views of education are not *soft* and they are extremely rare in practice, despite what critics claim (Kohn, 2008a). Children certainly deserve schools that invite them to discover themselves, but this goal tends to fall short if those opportunities ignore the realities beyond the walls of school.

### **School for Individual Empowerment and Social Justice**

The traditional view of school and teaching includes avoiding the *political*. As well, many of the purposes of school noted above see the realities of life as fatalistic—realities that we all must prepare to join or simply endure. Critical educators, however, reject both of these ideas:

Thus, proponents of critical pedagogy understand that every dimension of schooling and every form of educational practice are politically contested spaces. Shaped by history and challenged by a wide range of interest groups, educational practice is a fuzzy concept as it takes place in numerous settings, is shaped by a plethora of often-invisible forces, and can operate even in the name of democracy and justice to be totalitarian and oppressive. (Kincheloe, 2005b, p. 2)

As Kincheloe notes, even when we claim to be objective in a school setting (and thus, not political) *that* is a political stance and subjective. Further, many of the advocates for school's purposes noted above would state that they are for democracy and individual freedom, yet their practices fail human agency.

School as empowerment and school for social justice require that we identify and then *change* those aspects of life and society that are inequitable. The *critical* in critical pedagogy is the ability in anyone to step back from the assumptions of existence in order to re-evaluate them. Without a critical perspective, a progressive educator is likely to proclaim that life is not fair, but only to help children prepare for those inequities. Critical pedagogy unmasks and examines the inequities of life. Critical educators are dedicated to creating opportunities for students to discover and refine their own empowerment, leading to their acting *on* the world as acts of social justice.

Since critical educators openly embrace the political nature of teaching and learning, they are commonly demonized as imposing their beliefs on students. Ironically, traditional classrooms are far more likely to indoctrinate:

Recognition of these educational politics suggests that teachers take a position and make it understandable to their students. *They do not, however, have the right to impose these positions on their students* [emphasis in original] . . . In this context it is not the advocates of critical pedagogy who are most often guilty of impositional teaching but many of the mainstream critics themselves. . . Critical pedagogy wants to know who's indoctrinating whom. (Kincheloe, 2005b, p. 11)

Many of the failures I have identified with other purposes for schools above are based on my own commitment to critical pedagogy. Thus, for me, the education children deserve includes a critical commitment to providing students the opportunities for self-empowerment as a mechanism for social justice.

### **The Disciplined Child?**

Writing about American Indian Public Charter in California, Landsberg (2009) explains, "Students who misbehave in the slightest must stay for an hour after school; if they misbehave again in the same week, they have more after-school detention plus four hours of Saturday detention." As we consider the education that children deserve, we must acknowledge that a recent powerful call for *no-excuses* schools is now dominating the public discourse about what

children need and deserve, especially children of color, children living in poverty, and children whose home language is different than their school language—and that call is receiving support all along the ideological spectrum.

“Under [principal] Chavis, the school also relied on humiliation to keep students in line, ridiculing miscreants and sometimes forcing them to wear embarrassing signs,” Landsberg continues. “When one boy was caught stealing, Chavis shaved his head in front of the entire school. (The boy, Jeremy Shiv, now a straight-A student at American Indian High, considers what Chavis did ‘pretty cruel.’)”

Imposed standards for behavior are similar to imposed standards for academic achievement in that both are determined *by* the adults *for* the student, displacing students’ autonomy and denying those students experiences with choices themselves. Advocates of *no-excuses* schools (a *new* paternalism) tend to embrace highly authoritarian approaches to discipline and classroom management. Whitman (2008) explains that

[t]he most distinctive feature of new paternalistic schools is that they are fixated on curbing disorder. . . . That is why these schools devote inordinate attention to making sure that shirts are tucked in, bathrooms are kept clean, students speak politely, and trash is picked up.

Stakeholders in education must not ignore the importance of discipline and classroom management assumptions in our consideration of what education children deserve. Again, despite popular beliefs, the evidence suggests that schools today remain highly authoritarian, and that traditional approaches to classroom management and discipline have always been and remain highly ineffective—particularly if we wish for schools to foster young people who are empowered themselves to lead ethical lives.

A common experience of teachers working in any school at all in points throughout the past century reveals that the same students are punished repeatedly—often by essentially the same behavioral practices that show value for punishment as a deterrent to unwelcomed behaviors. Basing his view of traditional discipline techniques on decades of research, Kohn (1996) concludes that

punishment can be quite effective indeed—but only to get one thing: temporary compliance. . . . The fact that teachers continue to punish the same students over and over suggests that the problem with this strategy runs deeper than the way a particular punishment has been implemented. (pp. 25, 26)

Kohn continues by explaining that bribes are simply *punishments-lite*, exposing the same ineffectiveness of external forces to dictate behavior.

Behaviorism dominates both how we teach and how we manage students in most classrooms in the U. S. Just as tests have come to supplant genuine learning in our classrooms, so has the threat of punishment and the allure of rewards supplanted children learning to negotiate their own lives. Kohn (1996) argues for community over compliance, noting the value placed on silence and stasis in schools, regardless of how these behavioral expectations impact student learning. When making decisions about school reform, then, what should stakeholders value in the classroom management and discipline practices of schools and teachers?

In her *Arts of the Possible*, Adrienne Rich (2001) offers stark options for schooling, with her view of what commitment we have made thus far:

Universal public education has two possible—and contradictory—missions. One is the development of a literate, articulate, and well-informed citizenry so that the democratic process can continue to evolve and the promise of radical equality can be brought closer to realization. The other is the perpetuation of a class system dividing an elite, nominally “gifted” few, tracked from an early age, from a very large underclass essentially to be written off as alienated from language and science, from poetry and politics, from history and hope—toward low-wage temporary jobs. The second is the direction our society has taken. The results are devastating in terms of the betrayal of a generation of youth. The loss to the whole of society is incalculable. (p. 162)

Recognizing traditional education’s premium placed on silence, Rich fears that what is “rendered unspeakable, [is] thus unthinkable” (p. 150). Ayers (2001) offers a similar conclusion that is even more damning:

In school, a high value is placed on quiet: “Is everything quiet?” the superintendent asks the principal, and the principal the teacher, and the teacher the child. If everything is quiet, it is assumed that all is well. This is why many normal children—considering what kind of intelligence is expected and what will be rewarded here—

become passive, quiet, obedient, dull. The environment practically demands it. (p. 51)

As with new paternalism schools, many advocates of school reform seek traditional approaches to classroom management and discipline that is authoritarian, demanding silent children in a setting designed to foster learning. Instead of this traditional view of adults' coercing student behavior, children deserve a move from *scripted talk* and *coerced silence* to *original talk* and *engaged listening*.

*Scripted talk* is the primary endorsed form of talking allowed students; it involves teachers identifying for students what those students are to parrot back to the teacher, either in classroom discussions, tests, or essays. For example, a teacher assigns a classroom text such as *The Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne, 1850/1981). After students are assigned the reading of the book, the teacher carefully reveals to students the authoritarian interpretations of the text (through a variety of strategies not limited to lecture). At various points during the studying of the novel, students are coerced into repeating the interpretations they have been told—sometimes through closed-ended questions in class discussions, sometimes on selected-response testing, and sometimes through a tightly prompted essay assignment.

*Coerced silence* is common in our schools, and many students learn quickly that simple silence will provide students peace in the school setting; talking, especially talk deemed *talking back*, results in quick and often stringent punishment in schools. Coerced silence is typically prompted with periodic hushes and blanket refrains of *be quiet*. This silence does not require any engaged behavior from the student and is requested simply through the arbitrary authority of the classroom teacher.

Scripted talk and coerced silence share a fatal flaw in that neither guarantees that a student is productively engaged in learning. Instead, we should be fostering our students to be *challenging* themselves—confronting ideas, each other, and the teacher in order to reach greater understanding and investment in those ideas (Kohn, 2004). Kohn rejects the premise that we must show children how to behave: “But modeling, like reinforcing, is just another technique for getting someone to behave in a particular way; it doesn’t necessarily promote a dedication to, or an understanding of, that behavior.” Students under the authority of traditional approaches to discipline are never allowed to discover the value of either talking or listening in their pursuit of learning. Kohn warns against the “tyranny of should” that keeps students from taking risks, a primary component of critical constructivism (Kincheloe, 2005a). Without risk and choice, students can fall into the traps of dualistic and simplistic thinking and soon equate freedom with license.

In the context of teacher behaviors, Freire (1998) makes a distinction between *authoritarian* and *authoritative*. The role of the teacher is not—whether we are concerned about learning or behavior—to be authoritarian, but to be authoritative. *Authoritative* means that teachers are knowledgeable in their fields, but that role is to foster the same authority in their students—not to impose that authority on them through coercive acts of punishments or rewards.

To accomplish what Kohn (2004) and Freire (1998) envision, students need experiences with *original talk* and *engaged listening*. *Original talk* must begin with students' making decisions about the content of their learning, such as choosing the texts they read and respond to. Fostering original talk in students is incredibly complex since it is irresponsible to ask students to make claims in a vacuum. Part of being educated includes knowing how others, especially authorities, have reached informed conclusions (and confronting why those authorities have garnered that label). An authoritative teacher knows how to balance a student's original ideas with that student's challenging her or his ideas in the context of what has come before.

*Engaged listening* is essential for original talk. Engaged listening differs from coerced silence in that engaged listening includes some behavior other than silence from the student. Students who are listening and thus engaged are taking notes, jotting down questions, looking up and making connections on the internet or in their notes, and thus actively thinking while they are listening (some, if not many, students may even be able to whisper to a peer while listening as part of their engagement in the material). Interspersed with engaged listening is original talk—often in the form of true classroom discussions where both students and the teacher are contributing nearly equally to a dialogue.

While many stakeholders in the school-reform debate find strict discipline practices alluring, especially when they fear real threats, such as school violence, the choices we must make concerning education must be tempered against what we expect from a school charged with educating children in a free society. Children deserve choice and autonomy, not rigid authority that achieves compliance at the expense of those children.

## Student Academic Engagement Reconsidered

Emdin (2009) offers a hypothetical classroom scenario concerning underperforming students:

You watch a teacher walk confidently to the front of the room and simultaneously hear the noise levels decrease. The teacher speaks, and you can almost hear a pin drop. You look around the class and see deep concentration in the students' eyes as a lesson is delivered. The teacher asks some questions and you see hands rise quickly as each question is posed. Students are quiet, paying attention, and responding to questions. What would you think about the nature of instruction? Would you think that this was the ideal classroom? Would you be impressed by the students' participation? And most importantly, judging by the behavior that you witnessed in that classroom, would you think that the students are on the path to being successful in school? (p. 3)

Emdin's scenario leads to his study in which he confirms that most stakeholders in education associate *compliance* with successful classroom dynamics, including student participation. The image he creates here is a classic representation of the "banking concept" of education that Freire (1993) rejects but that remains the norm of how to conduct classrooms, especially if the students have been labeled as unsuccessful, uncooperative, or both.

But, as captured by Emdin's study, the characteristics of authentic student agency are *unlike* the mechanistic classrooms in the scenario above. That classes are orderly—hands raised, teachers and students speaking one at a time, teachers driving the talk through questions the teachers plan (based on prescribed standards)—does not insure that authentic learning (or even traditional views of learning) has occurred. Emdin notes that orderly classrooms often do not, in fact, result in high or even adequate test scores.

When Emdin interviewed students from orderly classes, he discovered, "It became apparent that the school personnel who visit classrooms and the students in the classrooms have different perspectives on participation and different goals for the classroom" (p. 4). Across the spectrum of stakeholders in education, each type of stakeholder saw different levels of engagement. Notably, students revealed that adult stakeholders were misled by their assumptions about compliance equaling engagement:

[S]tudents had learned quickly that being quiet in the classroom and raising their hands to answer a question was a good way to ensure that the teacher would not "bother" them. In fact, one student responded by saying, "No one really knows what he (the teacher) is doing, but we all know that if we don't act the way he wants, he'll start yelling and giving people detention." Students also mentioned that the questions that the teacher was raising were always straight from the book. For example, one student mentioned, "If he tells us to turn to page 12, and the page is about atoms, and then he asks us what's an atom, all of us will know the answer. We're not dumb. At least we can read." (Emdin, p. 4)

In short, students *have* learned behaviors and have learned them well. But their motivation for adopting behaviors appears to be a way to avoid punishment (a significant failure of behaviorism's influence on our schools). Students have learned to mask their true selves in order to survive the punitive nature of schooling. As a result, in-school adult stakeholders are often fooled by orderly student behavior, and then disappointed when that masking behavior does not result in higher test scores. It is an insidious cycle that is at least one aspect of traditional schooling that we must choose to change.

Emdin asks that stakeholders in education rethink our assumptions about student participation, particularly by those students often associated with the achievement gap—urban students, students of color, students living in poverty, and students whose native languages are not that of their schooling. Initially, Emdin is challenging the belief that hand-raising and question-answering, along with valuing textbooks and quiet classrooms, are default positive behaviors related to student participation. But his argument goes further than that.

School often exhibits a troubling disconnect between the world of the classroom and the world beyond the classroom. Out-of-school factors significantly impact what happens in the classroom (Berliner, 2009; Hirsch, 2007), and Emdin (2009) argues that our narrow expectations for classroom participation ignore evidence about authentic engagement in learning that occurs outside of schools:

These markers of participation—deep involvement in the preparation of the experience, showing excitement through increased volume of speech and heightened use of gestures, having synchrony in movement, and having a "rhythm" of the conversation—which are key identifiers of deep involvement in activities outside of the classroom are not seen in the classroom. (p. 5)

Since we have ample evidence that traditional practices—both academic and disciplinary—are too often ineffective, especially with subgroups of students, a call to re-examine our assumptions about student participation must be a part of



creating the education children deserve. Emdin focuses on *unconventional* practices that he labels as three C's in his science courses—"engaging in dialogues with students (cogenerative dialogues), having students be teachers in the classroom (coteaching), and having them develop a responsibility for each others' learning both within and outside of the classroom (cosmopolitanism)" (p. 5). His unconventional practices aimed at redefining student participation ask for both teachers and students to assume new roles, similar to the roles of teacher-student and student-teacher (Freire, 1993).

The call for redefining student participation means students' involvement in aspects of the classroom that are usually left to the teacher, such as designing lessons and activities, coming up with examples to use in the class, researching best practice for teaching, and assigning roles as interpreter, artist, or even teacher of a certain topic for other students in the classroom. (Emdin, p. 8)

With new roles in the classroom, students experiment with their empowerment and with authentic engagement that simultaneously are driven by their interests and increase or reshape their interests. The new role for teachers pushes them beyond their comfort zones, Emdin adds. His own experience with stretching beyond the classroom involved integrating hip-hop dynamics into his classroom.

Changing how classroom teachers view student participation will be as diverse as the students and teachers who populate classrooms across the U. S. Emdin explains that two types of participation exist in classes—traditional classes exhibit primarily *interactions*, and Emdin advocates classrooms that exhibit *transactions*. Traditional interactions emphasize the information, but "[i]n the transaction, the focus is not on the transfer of information from teacher to student. Rather, it is on the exchange of information between people (between students or between the student and teacher)" (Emdin, p. 13).

Ultimately, moving from interactions to transactions requires classrooms that are communities and students that "see themselves as citizens of the classroom," Emdin (2009) explains (p. 14). Student participation, then, not only raises the academic engagement and achievement of each student but also contributes to students as active and experienced members of a democracy. Emdin believes student participation that is transactional teaches civil citizenship, political citizenship, and social citizenship. Each level of citizenship impacts the heightened role of students as they contribute to the management of the class, the instruction in the class, and the relationships among students in the class—all paralleling more authentically how children and youths navigate these aspects of their lives outside of school.

Before we commit our resources to school reform, all stakeholders in education must be willing to reconsider our assumptions about how learning looks in a classroom. The default belief in orderly and silent classrooms may in fact be serving only to mask the failure of traditional practices.

### **Empowering Education—Conditions v. Outcomes in Evaluating Schools**

To end this discussion, I want to offer an alternative to evaluating whether or not schools are providing the education children deserve. This change is based on seeing schools as agents of individual and social empowerment that lead to social justice and other acts of reforming society both for the good of each individual and the community. My basic argument is to switch from judging schools on *outcomes* to evaluating schools based on *conditions*.

My premise is patterned on Nussbaum (2000) and her work on the conditions of women throughout the world. Nussbaum confronts a dilemma concerning how we judge women's rights in countries throughout the world. She raises the possibility that when women are allowed freedom in a country, some *choose* to exhibit behaviors that conform to the exact oppressive expectations of those women before they were afforded their freedom. This is a common occurrence in terms of some religious practices. Nussbaum argues that if we persist in evaluating the rights of women based on outcomes, we may be misinterpreting the reality of women's freedom.

I make the same argument about the flaws of outcomes as a basis for judging schools, teachers, and entire educational systems. Just as some free women may choose to exhibit behaviors that a U. S. citizen associates with oppression, all students ultimately have power over whether or not they produce outcomes regarding their learning (or they have lives so burdened that they are unable to fulfill their choices). A student's test score, for example, may reflect many facts other than the quality of the teacher; in fact, many students accomplish high scores in spite of poor teachers, just as many students choose not to try despite having been in an exemplary teacher's class, or fail because their lives encroach on their ability to learn.

The school reform debate is clouded by our inclination to judge the quality of schools and teachers based on student outcomes. Instead, we must hold teachers and schools accountable for the opportunities they offer students—the

*conditions* of learning afforded and the equitable access to those conditions. Here, briefly, I want to suggest some of those conditions, often noting how the conditions we should choose tend to contrast what we traditionally expect of schools.

*Teachers should shift their role from transmitting information (direct instruction) to facilitating students as agents of their own learning.* Stakeholders should value classrooms where the teacher is a mentor and a coach instead of the primary holder and disseminator of information. The condition of teaching that many stakeholders have experienced is the least effective in fostering self-directed and engaged learners. The most active person in the classroom should be the student, not the teacher. Students should be making decisions, and the teachers' roles are to provide feedback about those decisions and to monitor the consequences of those decisions. For example, best practice in literacy supports students making their own decisions about what they read and write (Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde, 2005); instead of assigning books and prompting essays, teacher should invite students to choose books and essay topics and then monitor those students as they read and write.

*Classroom management should be negotiated guidelines for behavior created by the entire class for the benefit of each student and the entire class.* Many stakeholders view school as a place where the adults must control the children. Much of teacher preparation focuses on assisting new teachers who fear losing control. In this traditional dynamic, the value of each person's autonomy is lost, and the concern about some arbitrary authoritarian's controlling another person actually works against young people gaining the skills needed to be self-reliant. While Kohn (2008b) offers a compelling argument *against* the value of self-control, I do suggest that the goal of classroom management should be allowing students to experiment with appropriate and fair behavior, both as it impacts the individual student and the entire community (in school and the classroom). We should not be creating school environments where students are under the coercion of rules and the threat of punishment. Children need supportive guidance as they explore and discover the benefits of kindness, fairness, civility, and a wide range of behaviors that contribute both to each child's happiness and safety along with the happiness and safety of the larger community within which each of us lives.

*Assessment should require students to perform in whole ways that reflect similar behaviors in life outside of school.* Stakeholders should be demanding that our schools assessments are *authentic*, not *efficient*. For decades, we have allowed the testing of students to devolve into those formats that are most manageable, not the performances of understanding that are most likely to show what students understand. A simple but adequate example of how stakeholders can better evaluate the quality of assessment in schools is to look at many of the elective courses offered in our schools. Ironically, the more we value a course, the more likely that the course implements the worst types of assessment. English and mathematics are the core of the SAT, an assessment dominated by the selected-responses format and plagued by inequities (Marklein, 2009; Spelke, 2005). P. E., art, band, and chorus remain outside the core curriculum; yet these elective courses ask students to *perform whole behaviors that reflect real acts of the fields beyond school*. Students in art class produce art, just as children in chorus sing, and children in band play music. Stakeholders should ask of schools, *How closely do student behaviors match real-world acts when those children are being evaluated?* As an adult beyond formal schooling, I have yet to have my literacy and numeracy skills judged through multiple-choice tests, and we are all being disserved by narrow forms of assessment that are common in our schools.

## Conclusion

The dream of universal public education has suffered historical tensions of contradictory missions (Kliebard, 1995). As long as we pursue the closing of the achievement gap, while ignoring the larger equity gap in the lives of children, we are likely to fail in any school reform.

But reform schools we must.

Children deserve lives free of danger, abuse, and all manner of oppression that result from living in poverty (Berliner, 2009). But they also deserve schools that confront those inequities instead of pretending they do not exist, instead of hoping the schools alone can conquer those inequities, instead of perpetuating those inequities when children enter our school buildings each day—hopeful, trusting, and deserving much more than we have been offering.

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## Notes

[1] Portions of this essay have been adapted from Thomas, P. L. (2010). *Parental choice?: A critical reconsideration of choice and the debate about choice*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, Inc.