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BOOK REVIEW

American Schools: The Art of a Democratic Learning Community

By Sam Chaltain; Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010

Reviewed by Alice E. Ginsberg

“Reflect. Connect. Create. Equip. Let Come”

If you cannot live by our rules, if you cannot adapt to this place, I can show you the back door. (James Verrilli, co-founder of North Star Middle and High School, Newark, NJ; Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 2004, p. 49)

“Don’t just acknowledge the people who ‘play by the rules’; honor the respectful dissenters” (Sam Chaltain, 2010, p. 80)

There isn’t much room for dissenters in public education today – whether they are *respectful* or not. Playing and/or living by the rules has become shorthand for a philosophy of school reform that has but one major goal: raising standardized test scores. Embarrassed by what Obama has called in a recent *State of the Union Address* this “Sputnik moment” (Obama, 2011)

-- where American schools and students are ranking far below other countries – the language of school reform has become consistently sterner and less tolerant of contrasting viewpoints. As Education Secretary Arne Duncan has been quoted:

The path to success has never been clearer. The educational reform movement is not a table where we all sit around and talk. It’s a train that is leaving the station, gaining speed, momentum and direction. It is time for everyone, everywhere to get on board. (Duncan, 2009)

Many of the progressive reforms of the last few decades – such as smaller schools, collaborative and project-based learning, critical pedagogy, and respect for student inquiry, have given way to a national agenda of *teaching to the test*, *more time on task*, and *no excuses for failure*. There is but one “train that is leaving the station,” and there is but one key directive: “get on board.”

By contrast, Sam Chaltain’s *American Schools: The Art of a Democratic Learning Community* describes a process of school reform based on the principles of collaboration, reflection and informed dissent, which underlie American democracy. This creative and provocative book repeatedly reminds us that public education in America has always been, and must continue to be, primarily about strengthening and sustaining our democratic ideals -- such as freedom of speech, equity, choice, advocacy, inquiry, courage, compassion, and debate.

Chaltain, who served as the director for the *Forum for Education and Democracy*, knows of which he speaks. In his book he examines school reform within the larger frameworks of organizational change, human psychology, systems thinking, and social activism. Indeed, throughout the book, Chaltain includes concrete suggestions to prompt readers to do more than pontificate about school change, but to *engage* in it. In the first five chapters, he lays out an original framework for doing just this: **Reflect, Connect, Create, Equip, Let Come**.

In Chapter One, *Reflect*, for example, Chaltain encourages teachers to: 1) “Make their teaching practices public to one another”; 2) “Ask the kinds of questions that provoke and challenge their assumptions and habits,” and 3) “Believe that together they are more capable of knowing what they need to know and learning what they need to learn than they are alone” (p. 24). Perhaps one of the most provocative questions raised in this chapter is when Chaltain asks students and stakeholders in the change process to consider this: “If you took the risk and this project failed, what would be the worst-case scenario, and would you be ready to face it?” (p. 31).

Why is this question so important? In schools where failure is not an option, we are shortchanging students of the opportunity to learn from and recover from initial defeat. We are likewise suggesting that once we have arrived at a viable solution, it is no longer necessary to revisit this solution from different perspectives, as unpredictable circumstances emerge, and contexts and resources suddenly change. As Chaltain rightly notes: “Solutions to problems with high generative complexity cannot be calculated in advance, on paper, based on what has worked in the past, but have to be worked out as the situation unfolds” (p. 38).

In Chapter Two, *Connect*, Chaltain encourages educators to “spend a day in a different school,” guided by the following

questions:

- What struck me (or surprised) me the most? Why did this stand out?
- With what did I connect most personally? Why did this touch me?
If the shared culture of the school I visited was a living thing, what would it look, feel, and act like?
- If that living thing could talk, what would it say to us?
- If it could develop, what would it want to morph into next?
- What aspects (good or bad) are allowing this “living thing” to thrive?
- If the shared culture of my own school was a living thing, how would it resemble what I just described? How is it different? (p. 49)

These questions underscore one of Chaltain’s main points, that *meaning behaves like energy*: “Before any of us will be willing to change anything, we must first believe the changes will be meaningful to us...this is basic human behavior – the desire for the freedom to choose” (p. 55). Likewise, throughout this book, Chaltain constantly reminds us that “schools are not machines” (p.58) which can be rated and replicated based on decontextualized data such as standardized test scores. It thus follows that we need to be especially careful when we label teachers simply *good* or *bad* (much like coffee makers in *Consumer Reports*); when we suggest that struggling schools should be shut down as swiftly as possible, often without community input; or when we talk about knowledge as if it were a brokered commodity (e.g., Obama’s repeated message that we need to “out-educate the rest of the world”).

In Chapter Three, *Create*, Chaltain underscores this belief: “To fully participate in the world around us, we need to learn more than the history of free speech or individual rights; we need to participate in those rights – thoughtfully and deliberately” (p. 60). He likewise outlines some novel questions for parents, students, staff, and community members involved with schools to consider as they work together for change. Among others, they include asking students to consider, “What are you passionate about? In what ways do you struggle?” and asking staff to consider, “What assumptions do we make about our school that no longer work? What new assumptions do we need to generate? What have we informally agreed never to talk about?” (p. 61). Such honest reflection by those on the front lines is increasingly rare in school reform protocol and policy, and, frankly, threatens to undermine much of the top-down, bottom-line, Wall-Street approaches to decision-making.

I am particularly struck by this last question, as it is often the case in the school reform process that what *does not get talked about* does not have an impact. As Chaltain notes,

Knowing explicit (or visible) goals is the easy part. But the fact that implicit (or invisible) goals exist – and most organizations remain unaware of them – means we often fail to recognize when a balancing process, or system adjustment, is taking place. (p. 44)

This may not seem a particularly radical idea, until you compare it to Duncan’s public distaste for the idea of sitting around the table and talking, which is supported by other major educational leaders, such as former New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein. Klein is quoted in *The Atlantic* as saying that calls for “collaboration” in education reform are simply “bad advice” (Klein, 20110).

By contrast, Chaltain not only strongly endorses collaboration and dialogue as a key to successful school reform, he lays out a number of important strategies for this process to be meaningful and successful. In Chapter Four, *Equip*, for example, Chaltain charts some of the stages of transformation from the perspective of “cultivating the civic habits of mind, heart, and voice” (p.81):

Habits of Mind (understanding):

- Create conditions that allow people to clarify their personal visions and tell their stories
- Tolerate messiness

- Don't try to tell people what to think

Habits of Heart (motivation):

- Strengthen the web of relationships by building a shared sense of purpose
- Be comfortable with the 'discomfort' of people's fears and ideas
- [Ask oneself] For what am I accountable? What are the consequences of not changing?

Habits of Voice (skills):

- Reward, coach, and reinforce new, emerging behaviors
- Unlearn the incompatible behaviors
- [Ask oneself] Who already does this well, and how can I learn from them?
(pp. 80 – 81)

Threaded through each of these habits is the democratic ideal of free speech, which, history has proved, can both slow and significantly strengthen the process of change. Chaltain suggests that rather than viewing school reform as a "speeding train," we must be prepared for a much more messier process that depends on tolerance for contrasting ideas, building a shared purpose, and personal accountability. According to Chaltain: "We must resist quick fixes. And those of us in positions of leadership must remember that our role is to serve as translators, not creators, of people's dreams" (p. 48).

Thus, in Chapter Five, *Let Come*, Chaltain underscores what is one of the main premises of the book: "[A]llowing yourself to be uncertain of what will emerge is the threshold that we must pass through for new ways of being to take root" (p. 91). In this chapter, Chaltain rebukes the idea that "the relationship between freedom and structure is an either/or proposition" (p. 88). He encourages what he calls "more (civil) friction" (p. 92-93), by which he means that conflict can be productive, and that we "practice urgent patience" (p.95), because meaningful transformation takes time.

In the last few chapters of the book, Chaltain provides case studies of three school public schools that have actively tried to create model democratic learning communities. The case studies are particularly compelling because they explore the process by which schools—and the diverse people within them—must continually reflect upon and *negotiate* different values, visions, and definitions of success. This process does not come easily, and does not always work; but we must never give up on it.

The book's Foreword is written by Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, who likewise reminds us that "[k]nowledge about our government is not handed down through the gene pool. Every generation has to learn it, and we all learn best by *doing*" (p. xiii). And as Chaltain consistently underscores, we cannot participate in the process of change by hanging out on the sidelines, embracing memorization and perpetuation of the status quo over critical thinking, discussion, and experimentation.

Chaltain likewise quotes the great American judge Learned Hand in his 1944 speech, noting that "the spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right" (p. 59). Imagine, just for a moment, a public school system based on this premise. Imagine a future in which students are allowed to—no, make that *encouraged* to; no, make that *required* to—question the very concepts of right and wrong. Imagine a school system where all learning begins and ends in inquiry, and respectful dissent is honored. Imagine a school system that is premised on the democratic principles inherent in *Reflect. Connect. Create. Equip. Let Come*.

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