

Can schools help to build a bridge to a new democratic future?

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Many gurus, journalists, and ordinary people these days are saying that nothing will be the same in the world after September 11. Many are talking - often very vaguely and grandly-about a New World Order - influenced by the inevitability of Globalism, the pervasive power of electronic communication, the impact of mass popular culture, and our long-term struggle to reduce terrorism.

But, we must ask what will be the shape and spirit and substance of this changed world and the New Order. Predicting what will be is a very uncertain proposition, so I find it more interesting and more important as an educator to ask *what should be* the shape and spirit and substance of our future? But, this question is even more difficult and certain to produce disagreement and controversy. But, that is the way it should be.

This brings me to the question I have been wrestling with ever since the truly horrible tragedies in my country on September 11 and aftermath of those events, which are still unfolding.

Here is the question and the frame for my brief comments here this morning:

Can the school have a significant impact on the shape and spirit and substance of our world in this new century?

Can the school make a real difference? You can imagine that I am talking about schools in

America only, or schools in the Western world, or schools everywhere.

I have been wrestling in an often confused and sometimes rambling state of mind with this question and its more specific and personal follow-on:

Can the school make a real difference? Can teachers, parents, and communities help the bridge that is needed to reach a more democratic future, a new world social order?

Here, I must put in my own and inevitably controversial personal views about the direction of change. Because without some clarity and some agreement about direction, the new world order might be that envisioned by Hitler, or one of the early Popes who spurred the Crusades, or by Osama Ben Laden or other radical Islamic fundamentalists, or by American politicians who want a world that looks exactly like our prosperous, supposedly all-powerful, capitalist, materialist, Superpower America.

So, my question then becomes: Can the schools contribute significantly to a new changed social order:

- In which we share material resources more equitably.
- In which we make more widely available decent housing, health care and opportunities for work, leisure, and education.
- In which we have greatly reduced violence of all kinds (including, of course, terrorism).

- In which we have learned how to reduce and control hatred, hostility, suspicion, and fear between and among people across boundaries of nations, regions, continents, races and ethnic groups, religions, genders.
- In which we have achieved a good, workable balance between individual freedom and, and responsibilities and between local and collective, social interests.
- In which social justice is more widely practiced for all.
- In which we have learned better to enhance to protect our natural environment and our cultural and esthetic treasures.

That long list of *'in which's'* point to most of the main elements of my own vision of a more *democratic* society, of what I mean by a new social order. Now, what can and should school do to help to build a bridge to that future?

First and most importantly They should not and cannot do much that matters - except in collaboration with their students, the families of those students, and the community institutions, agencies and residents.

Among the most helpful ideas I have found in the past few weeks is in a book written seventy years ago by George S. Counts, then a well-known educational philosopher at the Teachers College of Columbia University, where I studied (but not quite 70 years ago). His 1932 book (now largely forgotten) was entitled *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* It created a huge stir in the educational world.

I just have re-read it and find much of it very relevant in 2001.

Counts pointed out that Americans have a sublime and naïve faith in education. Many are convinced that education is the one unfailing remedy for every ill to which mankind is subject. Some Americans speak glibly about the reconstruction of the society through education. He rejected this idea that the schools can do

everything but at the same time asserted that they can and should do a lot toward the kind of democratic social order that he believed in which is quite similar to the vision that I have sketched here.

Counts thought that the unique power that school possessed was its ability to formulate and articulate the ideal of a democratic society, to communicate that ideal to students, and to encourage them to use that ideal as a standard for judging themselves and their society.

I agree with this point, and I want to build on it, and to suggest briefly some work and action for schools, families, and communities together in order for the school to help build a new more democratic order. I will briefly suggest four arenas for possible work and action:

1. What children are taught: content and experience.
2. The school as a model of democratic practice.
3. School and community exchange.
4. Leadership by teachers unions and parent associations in support of a progressive social agenda.

Please understand that I have neither the time nor the capacity to offer specific details, prescriptions, or advice about how to do it. I ask you to be patient with general ideas and directions.

First, what children are taught: content and experience

Problem: Most countries now use textbooks and curriculum which either subtly or blatantly to promote only national pride and values and an ethnocentric Establishment-authorized view of history. Examples: In the US few schools teach children much about our treatment of the Native Americans, which was sometimes out and out genocide. Most countries push patriotism, but seldom salute the world globe as well as their own flag. Few of our schools give a balanced view of the struggle of labor unions in years past

and their mistreatment by corporate America and the government. Many schools stress only the academic development of children neglecting their physical and emotional development.

Clearly, we need to offer children more multi-cultural, multi-national content and experience and we need to help children develop the confidence and skill to analyze both past and present events critically.

At the same time we need to attend both the intellectual and the physical and emotional needs of learners. We know that children that are hungry, frightened, ill-clad, or emotionally unstable can not be good learners.

In my opinion children in a new democratic order need to understand and respect their own roots, culture, language, and community traditions as a needed foundation for understanding and respecting the roots, cultures, and traditions of others.

I recognize that what I am suggesting is politically impossible in a democratic society, and can't even be approached in a limited way without the support and collaboration of families and the decision-makers in communities, state, and national capitals. A supportive political climate is needed, and as Counts said, schools have only limited capacity to affect the broader political and economic system.

Second: the school as a model of democratic practice

Problem: In the US and many other Western countries there is a huge gap in academic achievement and success between children of poor, working class and immigrant families and children of the dominant middle class and more affluent families.

In the US and many others many schools operate with tight, top-down management, which allows for little if any participation in decision-making by students or parents. In these schools is honored

in books, ceremonies, and lectures, but not actually practiced.

Democratic practice requires more than talk. It requires policies and practices that promote academic and social success for all children, regardless of their background. The new democratic social order will be impossible if societies continue to practice educational triage, consigning a substantial percentage of young people to second or third class roles in life.

Closing this gap would be a big contribution to building the new social order, but everyone here will agree, I believe, that this cannot be achieved without real and continuing support and collaboration of parents and the key institutions and agencies in the community.

A school can also work in other ways toward becoming a model, an example, of democratic ideas in practices. These ideas are obvious to us, including.

Respect for others, including those that are different.

Opportunities for all in the school community - students, teachers, parents, administrators, school staff to have influence on the decisions that affect them.

Workable mechanisms for decision-making allowing parents a real voice in the important decisions of the school and school system - decisions about budgets, curriculum, and personnel.

Mechanisms for resolving conflict and differences through negotiation and compromise.

Recognition of the different needs, talents, and learning style of students.

And, of course, many of you will agree that students (and parents and teachers) learn more about democracy from being a part of it in a school than they will by reading textbooks or hearing lectures about democracy.

A few schools in the countries represented here are making some progress on this front, as we are hearing at this conference.

Third, school-community exchange

Problem: In the US the traditional isolation of schools from other community institutions and agencies continues in many places. Too many schools in the US see connections with the community as a process of getting money, equipment, and political support rather than a genuine exchange.

My experience over many years has shown me that the most productive relationship between a school and its community is based on mutual self-interest theory and requires the school to expand the contribution that it can make to the community just as it seeks to increase the resources that the community can offer the school. Schools have facilities and equipment, the expertise of teachers and administrators, jobs for local residents, and the energy and time of their students.

Community Services programs for young people are a good way to help both the young people and the community and an interesting way to help shape a democratic future by reinforcing the belief of young people that every individual can make a difference.

(An example: Providence College in Rhode Island is using foundation grant money to create a network of 250 public high schools to advance civic engagement, beginning a student led civic audit to assess what their schools are doing well to provide opportunities for them to participate in the public life of their communities and what areas could be improved.)

In addition, the school I am envisioning will be a genuine community school offering needed courses, training, meeting places and help to parents and other adults in the community in collaboration with other community institutions.

Such a school is lively part of the life of the community.

Fourth: the role of teachers unions and parent associations in support of a progressive social agenda

Problem: Teacher unions in the US, which quite properly and by definition attend to the economic interests of their members, often drag their feet and oppose school reform efforts, including any serious involvement of parents and the community.

Our unions have tended (with some important exceptions) to be cautious about promoting progressive social agenda. And, in at least a third of our states they are politically very weak.

In the US parent associations have seen their role as primarily to raise money and support the school leaderships agenda on educational matters. They have seldom been out in front on progressive social issues and have often been very conservative and cautious.

George Counts in *Dare the School Build a New Social Order* strongly advocates a more aggressive and progressive role for organized teachers.

He makes this statement, which educators today will see as radical: 'The power that teachers exercise in schools can be no greater than they wield in society. In order to be effective they must throw off the slave psychology that has dominated the mind of the pedagogue since ancient Greece.... In their own lives they must bridge the gap between school and society and play some part in the fashioning of those great common purposes, which should bind the two together.' (p. 29 *Dare the School Build a New Social Order* (new edition) Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale Illinois, 1978).

Counts makes an interesting point here, but it is politically unrealistic in most American communities, unless the political and social leadership of teachers is strongly supported and protected by their unions.

Counts urged organized teachers to spark the labor movement to lead efforts to democratize American life, focusing on improving the conditions of socially marginal people and what he called the 'lower classes'.

It would certainly be a useful contribution to building the kind of social order I have been discussing here if teachers' organizations in the US would take the lead on a progressive social agenda, including issues of immigration, mistreatment of gay people, affordable housing, and economic policies that damage the working poor.

Unfortunately, Counts ignores the role of parents and parent associations. Robert Putnam, a Harvard political scientist, has written a widely discussed book, *Bowling Alone, The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Putnam's studies demonstrate that one important element of a civil society and stronger communities is networks of civic associations. By civic associations he means organizations such as parent groups, local choruses and orchestras, sports clubs, neighborhood. Putnam says that various forms of parent involvement - which we now often called partnership - can be helpful in democratic societies seeking to sustain and advance democratic principles and to build a more civil and prosperous and productive community. Independent, community based parent and citizen organizations working on school issues can also help to enliven local democracy. These organizations and parent associations linked to the schools can be seen as having a potential positive impact on the school's contribution to building a new democratic social order, if they deliberately and aggressively seek to do this.

Conclusion

A final point - one that is both scary and offers hope. Samuel Huntington the Harvard Political Scientist wrote a book in 1996: *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World*

Order. He predicted that 21st Century global conflict will occur not between nation states such as the United States, Russia, and China, but between civilizations defined by shared values, culture and religion. None will clash more violently than the predominantly Christian nations of the West and Muslim nations that stretch from Africa to Indonesia. That is scary, given the events of the last few weeks.

But, the hope lies, Huntington says, in making progress toward a more peaceful, universal civilization - which can emerge gradually through the exploration and expansion of our commonalities.

Helping young people discover these commonalities while not losing the special, positive things that make individuals and groups different is a task within the reach of educators and parents everywhere. And, this task, which calls for collaboration and partnership. Discovering commonalities is form of building the bridge to the future, isn't it?

As I see it just now, the challenge in these troubled and troubling times for my country and yours is to move toward a culture that values diversity as well as traditional identity, that puts social justice ahead of profit, reconciliation ahead of revenge, and common humanity ahead of tribal interests. It is a culture that can face and not deny its shortcomings and seek to remedy them. To go back to the question I began with: Parents and teachers and communities *can* help to build the bridge to a more democratic future, to that new social order I envision. But, we must not burden them with super-inflated expectations nor underestimate the barriers and the political and social realities.

What I have wanted to say today is that we should do what we can in the spirit of school-family-community partnership, and in that way, we CAN make a difference.