

Revolution, Not Reform: Only Radical Transformation of U.S. Education Will Serve Neediest Children

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The search for the “silver bullet” or the “magic wand” continues in the struggle for school reform in the United States. Each week new theories emerge in the literature and in the media. However, one burning question remains: What are we to do about the education – or more accurately the lack of education – of so many of our nation’s children, particularly children of color who are also poor?

Indeed, what should we be doing? My four years of experience as a superintendent of a large urban school district; my years of active struggle for “school reform;” my continuing study and research; and what I have learned from listening to many educators, children, young people, and parents have given me a certain perspective on all of this. I have some ideas about what needs to happen if we are truly going to have a chance to educate all of our children. I am convinced that real changes must be made in governance arrangements, learning approaches, accountability systems, and controls of the financial resources to achieve any significant transformation of the current system.

My views on these and other important issues related to education and learning transformation are based on a philosophical position expressed by Richard Shaull in the preface of Paul Frierie’s book, Pedagogy of the Oppressed. He said:

“There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education functions as either an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the “practice of freedom,” the means by which men and women learn to deal critically and creatively with reality to participate in the transformation of their world.”¹

In order to prepare our children to engage in the “practice of freedom,” it is clear we must fundamentally and radically change the way we approach learning. I believe our educational systems are essentially organized to meet the needs and protect the entrenched interests of adults who work in these systems, not the needs and interests of children and families who are supposed to be served. For the sake of the children we continue to lose each day, ***we must change!***

The only thing constant in the world is change. People, institutions, and processes are always in a state of change: some for the better and some for the worse. But change is an ever-present reality. Far too many of us, however, resist change, or we support change as

long as nothing really changes. So it is with school reform. Many of us give lip service to the idea of reform. But, basically, we only want to tinker, to fool around at the edges. Our kids must have more. They deserve more and it needs to happen now. In fact, our kids need more than reform, they need and deserve a revolution – a radical transformation in our thinking and our practice. To help make this happen we must implement teaching and learning systems and processes that help our children learn.

We must create new systems that provide a wide range of learning options for children and their families. These systems should include home schooling, multi-site learning entities connected by various forms of technology, and non-geographic configurations of radically transformed schools, as well as schools that allow for myriad instructional methods and forms of governance, i.e., charter schools, public/private partnerships, proprietary arrangements, etc. Most, if not all of these possibilities exist somewhere in America. In most cases they are “pilots” or experiments that are too small or too weak to have maximum impact on changing the entire system. In fact, their very existence is cited as evidence that the larger system, which enrolls the lion’s share of students, doesn’t need to change at all.

What is needed is action on the part of elected officials – governors, legislators, school board members – to institute new forms of governance and public-finance structures that put an end to school boards’ monopoly of the development and operation of prekindergarten through twelfth-grade learning options. These changes are a critical piece of the strategy to ensure our kids can learn anything, at any time, anywhere.

Developing effective learning organizations that can deliver these “real time,” authentic learning experiences will require enterprises which, among other things: convey high expectations and a deep love for all children, confront the issues of race and class, willingly accept measures of accountability, provide access to equitable financing systems, and empower poor parents by giving them control over resources.

High Expectations and Love

In an organization truly dedicated to ensuring learning for our children, a key ingredient is the level of expectation adults hold for the students as well as themselves. We must have high expectations and set high standards for all of our children and all adults as well. An environment must be created that will motivate, inspire, and encourage the level of intellectual risk-taking necessary for learning to take place. This requires constant evaluation and reevaluation of all interactions that take place during the learning process. But none is more critical to this process than adults’ most deeply held assumptions and beliefs about the capacity of all of our children to learn at high levels. Educators who fundamentally believe that all children really cannot perform at high levels should not be allowed to continue in a learning relationship with them.

High expectations are crucial, but to reach our children, deeper feeling must be present. It is called love. I believe with all of my heart and soul that we cannot teach our children if

we do not love them, believe in them, and respect the families and communities they represent. In her book, Return to Love, author Marianne Williamson commented on the fairy tale, “The Frog Prince.”

“The fairy tale reveals the deep psychological connections between our attitudes toward people and their capacity for transformation. In the story a princess kisses a frog, and he becomes a prince. What this signifies is the miraculous power of love to create a context in which people naturally blossom into their highest potential... until we love them, we cannot understand them. ...²

If we do not love our children, we cannot understand them; if we do not understand them, we cannot reach them. If we cannot reach them, we cannot teach them.

Race and Class

To ignore the impact of race and class on our children’s lives makes no sense. America is not “color blind.” Additionally, a person’s access to resources has a definite impact on his or her life chances. The reality of the existence of differential power based on race and class affects the learning experience – is either ignored or distorted. On the other side of the ledger, far too many poor children are in crumbling school buildings without the necessary learning materials (books or computers). They come to school without the nourishment their bodies and spirits need. In fact, some of our youngest children should get medals just for showing up at school. They are taking care of themselves, their siblings, and one or more of their parents.

We must, therefore, confront these issues in three ways: (1) We must insist that curricula and learning materials incorporate the entire “human spectrum” of America and the world. The United States is not a possession of white Americans. America belongs every bit as much to people of color as it does to those who are white. Whether it is “politically correct” or not, all our children deserve a learning process that incorporates a multicultural perspective. (2) We cannot use the fact that kids are poor and/or non-white as an excuse not to teach them. (3) We must also fight for policies in this country that will liberate millions of poor and minority children from the appalling conditions that suck the promise out of their lives. It is important to note here that I believe parents must take responsibility for raising their children. Poverty cannot be used as a rationale for child abuse and neglect, or unwillingness to tell kids what is right and what is wrong. The conditions our children face cannot be changed by government alone; parents, guardians, indeed all of us must accept responsibility for the care and nurturing of our children. It is up to all of us to *be there* for our children.

Accountability

To enhance our children's academic success, academic institutions must adopt very definite measures of accountability. Chester Finn's approach to accountability makes very good sense. He stated:

“Accountability in any endeavor today means that specified goals or outcomes are supposed to be achieved, and that people throughout the organization are responsible for achieving them. Not just for following set procedures, putting in time or going through the motions, not even for making a valiant effort, but for actually producing desired results.

“To be responsible for outcomes includes knowing that consequences will follow from one's success or failure. These may be pleasant or not, but without predictable and sure consequences there can be no true accountability....”³

Educators and others connected to the learning enterprise should be rewarded for successfully facilitating high levels of academic achievement, and face a variety of sanctions, including loss of their jobs, for failure to accomplish this goal.

Equitable Financing

Some educators and observers argue that money is not the answer to our problems in education. I believe money is not the only answer, but it does, indeed, make a difference. We cannot continue practices and policies that allow one school district in a state to spend \$10,000 per child, and others in the state only \$6,000. Granted, cost of living differs from one area to another, but fundamental inequities remain in the allocation of resources throughout this country.

Money matters. It matters at two levels: (1) how much is available and (2) how what is available is spent. We must attack both aspects of the problem. It makes little sense to give additional resources to inefficient schools and school systems that want more money to do more of the same. Instead, the allocation of additional resources should be tied to the adoption by a system of policies and practices that change governance structure, transform approaches to learning, create new systems of accountability, and transfer power to parents. At the same time, it is not a reasonable argument to say poor kids can have a world-class learning environment “on the cheap.” The proof is in the pudding. People who make this latter argument would not dream of putting their own children in financially strapped learning environments.

Empowering Poor Parents

Education in the United States is indisputably linked to a person's ability to function as a responsible, independent citizen. If we believe in the fundamental premise of equal

opportunity, we must offer poor children the chance to have the best possible learning opportunity – a chance most of us take for granted for our own children. We must give poor parents the power and information they need to choose schools that are best for their children. We must give poor parents the power to choose schools where their children will succeed – public or private, nonsectarian or religious. And we must give all schools incentives to value parents and children and work to meet their needs. Consider the power of this right in the hands of families who have little power because they have few resources. Consider how this power may change the shape of the future for their children. And consider how the absence of this power may mean their children are trapped in schools that many relatively more affluent parents who oppose choice would not tolerate for their own children.

We support individual choices at the post-secondary level, and our public policy has served us well; our system of higher education is widely viewed as the best in the world. We encourage choice among students of limited means with grants and scholarships that have permitted thousands of low-income students to attend private colleges and universities, as well as public ones.

We can learn a lesson from this success. If we are serious about educational improvement at the prekindergarten through twelfth-grade level, we must shift power to parents. When we begin to treat parents as customers, schools – public and private – will more readily respond to their needs. When we empower poor parents to leave bad schools for good ones, we will fulfill our obligation as a democratic society to provide opportunity for all our citizens. Until we do so, “the system” will continue to hold hostage our poorest students – who are disproportionately children of color – in schools that do not facilitate their learning.

Higher education has many roles to play in supporting this agenda for change. Examples include: giving faculty and staff (including secretaries, engineers, cooks, etc.) paid time off to visit schools to see what is happening to their kids; turning campuses into places where elementary and secondary students are welcomed to learn about not only the post-secondary experience, but also to find out about a campus as a place to work; and encouraging post-secondary students to be involved in service-learning programs that involve them in the real life struggles of poor children at various levels within the communities in which they live.

Perhaps the most critical role for higher education is developing citizens who value learning, are willing to embrace change, and are prepared to fight for the level of transformation of the existing system that is needed. We particularly need educators – teachers and administrators – who exhibit these characteristics. Where else will we find them, except among the graduates of our colleges and universities?

In the case of educators, it is also crucial that we develop people who are prepared to help students learn not only the old competencies (reading, writing, and arithmetic), but also the new ones (systems thinking, teamwork, experimentation, listening skills, and the capacity to make use of all forms of technology). These educators need to be

technologically proficient and capable of connecting in very real and deep ways with their students. They should be able to work in and create a variety of new learning environments.

The challenges are awesome, but in the final analysis it comes down to our will to do what needs to be done for our children. The late Ron Edmonds stated it best:

“We can whenever and wherever we choose successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to know about what to do. Whether or not we will ever do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we have not done it so far.”⁴

Notes

¹Paulo Friere, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Corporation, 1987), [page #].

²Marianne Williamson. *A Return to Love* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1994), [page #].

³Chester Finn, Jr., *We Must Take Charge: Our Schools and Our Future* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), [page #].

⁴Ronald Edmonds, “Effective Education for Minority Pupils: Brown Confounded or Confirmed,” in *Shades of Brown: New Perspectives on School Desegregation*, ed. Derrick Bell (New York: Teachers College Press, 1980), 109-123.

Edmonds, Ronald. (1980). Effective education for minority pupils: Brown confounded or confirmed. In Derrick Bell (Ed.), Shades of Brown: New perspectives on school desegregation (pp 109-123). New York: Teachers College Press.

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