

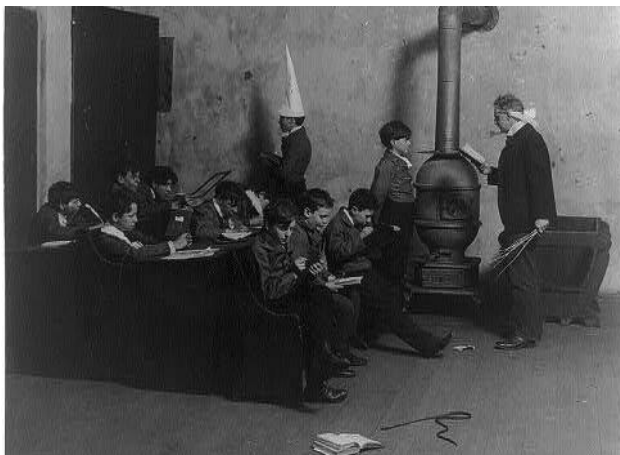
Article VIII

Do Schools Promote Cross-cultural Insensitivity? Alternatives?

Despite our best efforts, including those of us in the progressive 60's to 70's, hippies, teachers, preachers, police, and human rights advocate protesters have obviously still a long way to go.

Because cross-cultural insensitivity permeates our culture, no one group of us can be expected to solve the problem singlehandedly. Schools, however, may have the best shot at addressing root causes and solutions before culture's toxicity set in.

Where did we go wrong? We progressives were rebelling against the staid authoritarian pre-war culture. This is the same culture that enabled the Nazi rise in Germany, the mercantilist arrogance of Britain, and Jim Crow laws in the US. That culture is still prevalent in much of the world. But we progressives succeeded – for the better -- and the worse.



1905, Photo from Library of Congress

We made challenging our teachers and parents more acceptable. We helped to

bring an end to the avoidable and bungled war in Viet Nam in which we youth were dying by the tens of thousands. Progressives got the Supreme Court to integration schools. Youth gained a new voice. Along with progressive educators, we latched on to the older-era Progressives such as Maria Montessori and John Dewey as well as the post-war Reggio-Emilia, Summerhill, and Waldorf pedagogical strategies. To oversimplify, these educational styles all empowered students - - that simultaneously disempowered teachers. Parents and adults were similarly disempowered.

I remember a cartoon from the era that pictured a long haired hippie lounging in the family's big easy chair relaxed with legs stretched out and the humble father standing nearby supplicating, "Son, can I borrow the car keys?" Early childhood teachers were now likewise taught to follow students' interests rather than to lead. Grade school teachers learned not to correct grammar, spelling, or handwriting, but to allow children to express their thoughts unimpeded. Grade inflation or no grades at all fit the same pattern. The worst part, however, was that despite our well-meaning intentions for more freedom and independence, what we accomplished was also many rudderless classrooms and rudderless graduates ill prepared for further education or life.

Teachers were not prepared for the new classroom freedoms. Many teachers still find it hard to get to first base in a classroom of rebellious students given

nobility that would have been unimaginable even up to World War II. The switch, paddle, dunce cap, strict rules, and obedience were never adequately replaced by a more pedagogically appropriate methodology. The two progressive eras had made a similar mistake in overreliance on democracy as a panacea in both governance and education.



Student Power

We continue to not fully recognize that our beloved “democracy” translates to empowerment of some “of the people, by [some of] the people.” “For the people” too often translates to for the better off, more powerful, more Machiavellian, etc. as marginalized populations may attest. Democracy, whether in the classroom or government, reinforces the majority, power elite, and the status quo. French Revolutionaries, not, but the 60’s-70’s believed naively that democracy could bring *liberté, égalité, fraternité* even to the classroom.

The contemporary American educational system in which students and populist politics decide the curricula from preschool through graduate school *is* on the one hand liberating. On the other hand the democratic rule of education has brought us Texas “Lost Cause” biased textbooks

used through much of the nation’s popular demand. We now have not only divisive and, or coercive melting-pot Euro-American centric studies, but now copy-cat African-, Asian-, Latin American-, etc. centric studies adding fuel to the fire – also by popular student and professorial demand. Common Core curriculum even dropped the civics requirement.

Teachers or school boards are at the democratic whim of voters, parents, and students who bring to schools their own narrow prejudices. The technological Juggernaut has further co-opted curricula. A holistic education that objectively sees the big overarching clear-eyed picture opening minds to new worlds beyond what children and parents bring to classrooms becomes difficult. Narrowing education is not what we Boomers intended. A broad curriculum needs to be taught intentionally from nursery to grad school. Yes, even toddlers and two’s can learn to share and care for others – despite some conventional wisdom.

History and social studies in school is crucial in every grade. It allows us to learn from our mistakes. If it is used instead to white wash or reinforce what we have done, we will continue to make the same mistakes. If we teach Chinese, Black, Hispanic, Asian, European, indigenous, or American history, we inadvertently divide. We need to know all of these histories *taught together* to make big-picture objective sense of history. Teaching one or two tends to narrow our thinking, make the others “the bad guy” and our own culture the Great Empire, or the wronged victims who never victimized others if we had the chance.

Better to study the *patterns* of history and their lessons not learned. Include peaceful periods, often ignored, for their lessons. Patterns and cycles are easier to learn and more useful than memorizing wars, dates, battles, war hero names, and Great Empires. Instead, “what has repeatedly gone wrong, and what can we do better?” For starters, ethno-centric, sectarian, “tribalistic” studies may be a new core social studies curriculum, as they are at the root of innumerable genocides and inter-cultural wars.

What we did instead with the help of Montessori, Reggio, et al. was to develop the idea that the best way for children to learn and become creative was to let them discover on their own. Each individual is interested in themselves and their ethnicity, race, religion. Student-directed teaching and curricula focuses in, not out. It narrows knowledge and understanding -- not the best way to develop the intellectual and emotional tools to bring us together. No one would prepare to do a big project in Phnom Penh, Cambodia by studying American history and culture. To interact with others collaboratively, we need to study other cultures, not just our own.

Furthermore, Michelangelos do not arise from an easel, poster paints, paper, and free time to paint to one’s heart’s content. We can provide a great variety of food for our kids, but free choice will leave us with a lot of fat, malnourished children. Likewise, if allow freedom to join the local “tribe,” without very deliberately presenting caveats and the tools to make independent decisions, well, we are setting the stage for a tribalistic society. We need to deliberately teach social-emotional skills, social studies,

higher order thinking and communication skills.

Teachers are trained to be more knowledgeable and wiser than their students. To restrict teachers and schools from deliberate teaching beyond what children and school boards are interested in is to perpetuate a narrow view of ourselves, our nation, our race, our religion, our nation, and the world, i.e., ethno-centrism, xenophobia, racism, sectarian zealotry, etc. The alternative – a *deliberate* big-picture, positive-sum, systems-perspective world view of history and human-social sciences.

Freedom alone does not protect immigrant children, LGBTQ’s, girls, or any marginalized people, for that matter.

Children deprived of opportunities for intellectual and emotional development or exposure to wider interests are especially vulnerable to aimlessness and lack of interest.

Children need social-emotional-communication skills to feel comfortable in a group or to protect themselves from bullying or even from non-malicious exclusion-inclusion by classmates. Or they may become the perpetrator of bullying, violence, name-calling, and ethnic-racial cliques, and other immaturities. All students need structured deliberate introduction of new exciting self-fulfilling worlds that without teachers are unimaginable to children. Understand oneself *and* others cannot wait for crises or bypass the quiet kid or wait for questions and interest that may never come. Intergroup healing requires deliberate education and sensitization.

Many classrooms and schools are not safe places for children or at minimum—some of the more vulnerable children. When children do not feel safe or secure because of insufficient positive, constructive adult guidance enables a take-over of leadership by peers, at an extreme evolving into a *Lord of the Flies* environment. Morality and social norms break down and dysfunctional visceral hate, tribal-gang-groupism, scapegoating, violence, etc. Policemen and, or metal detectors are tardy Band-Aid solutions.

We need to start before the brain begins to develop indelible patterns of fear, insecurity, isolation, or social-verbal-cognitive stunting creating lifelong behavioral handicaps.

Good and bad patterns begin as early as in infancy. When both parents are working, less educated, impoverished, limited-English speaking immigrants, or facing the hardships of marginalized status, they are unable to adequately care for their children. We must counter ubiquitous drugs, alcohol, guns, crime, violence, malnutrition, and paucity of good role models, linguistic enrichment opportunities, or simply quiet peaceful even aesthetically inspiring places to read, think, imagine with safe, emotionally warm and supportive, cognitively and nutritionally enriching pre-school up school environment. Pay on the front end, or pay on the back end, as Jessie Jackson would push us to choose.

“At risk” also are middle to upper-class families and neighborhoods generally preparing children for school more adequately, but loading them with other

burdens -- class biases, racial prejudices, sports-success mandates, sectarian biases, xenophobia, or the like. These families may pay top dollar to place their children in mind-numbing, class-isolating Montessori’s, Walden’s, or Reggio’s. These children also need deliberate cross cultural bridge building as above.

Adding even three years to early education is quite feasible. Poor working people already pay top dollar for all-day childcare. Wealthier families can, paradoxically, with stay-at-home mom or nanny bring their children to free, but part-day, part year *free* public school. If poor people can pay, certainly richer people can share this burden. Second, community based organizations have been providing quality child development for decades and compare *better* on almost all domains the last I saw comparative statistics at CPS. CBO’s, especially non-profits with comprehensive services, do it cheaper and better and must be allowed to do this job without falsely marketed “free” public school preschool competition. In fact, CBO’s are setup already to teach kindergarten and should be contracted to reduce this cost as well. Next, by allowing CBO’s to teach all-day all-year that public schools cannot do, we will enable countless parents to work, pay taxes, or improve their own education and therefore living standards. Simultaneously, without expensive bi-lingual teachers or high school foreign-language teachers, we can teach infants to preschoolers in their prime to speak two languages fluently by native-language speakers.

These solutions are a doable, incremental if we like, positive-sum economic and social pluses.

- By Peter Porr