

EDITORIAL

Partnership Education and Nonviolent Communication

by Rob Koegel, Guest Editor

“I am puzzled why so many traditionalists place the onus on progressive educators such as myself to ‘prove’ that the ideas we advocate can work. I look at our society and I look at our world, and it’s clear to me that traditionalists have had nearly two centuries and I don’t believe we’ve seen their ideas work.”

- **StevenWolk**, *A Democratic Classroom*

Alfie Kohn (1999, 150) has observed that “the story of American schools is-and always has been-the story of doing things to students rather than working with them.” Yet there is another side of this “story”: progressive, holistic, transformative education. The history of traditional education is about authoritarian control and transmission; the history of progressive, holistic education is about democratic empowerment and transformation. It is about empowering students to realize their potential with others, not against others; nourishing ways of being that sustain caring, democratic learning communities; generating the capacities needed to change the world we have into the world we long for. Ultimately, whether we call ourselves holistic, progressive, or liberating educators, our goal is to infuse more respect and partnership into a world based on dominance and submission.

Transformative educators strive to nourish the habits of mind and relational skills a democracy needs in order to flourish. Yet we are constantly challenged when academic achievement is discussed. Again and again, we are told, “There is no evidence that nontraditional education promotes the quality and level of academic success that traditional education does.”

This widespread belief ignores what is perhaps the best-kept secret in the educational world: the documented evidence that, as the following story suggests, nontraditional education “works” even in the terms defined by traditional educators.

The Quincy Method

In the early '70s, the school board members in Quincy, MA, conducted the annual school exam in person. The results alarmed them: The students read well from textbooks but could not understand material from unfamiliar sources. They knew rules of grammar but could not write an ordinary letter; they knew mathematical equations but could not apply them. The students had learned their lessons but the result was rote knowledge they could barely use.



The board hired a new superintendent who immediately did away with textbooks and readers, spelling and grammar books. With his assistance, educators created new materials for students; they moved the arts from the margins to the center of school life.

As they revised what was taught, educators also began to change how they taught. Students spent more time observing and analyzing what they studied. They engaged in experiential learning that provided many ways of appreciating and expressing what they were learning. More and more, students were linking the topics studied to their feelings and thoughts, to their interests and to their lives.

An interdisciplinary curriculum helped students hone basic reading and writing skills while studying topics such as geography or nature. Collaborative learning encouraged students to learn with and from others. Independent learning enabled students to explore topics that sparked their interests. A democratic learning community invited students to have more input into what and how they learned.

Over the next four years, nearly 30,000 educators and reporters traveled from all over the world to study the Quincy Method. Still, the superintendent insisted that the Quincy Method was not original. "I have introduced no new principles, methods, or detail," he said (quoted in Shannon 1990, 19-20).

So begins Francis Parker's report about the 1878-79 school year in Quincy, Massachusetts. No, that's not a misprint: As the superintendent, Parker created the "New Education" well over a hundred years ago. Two years after Parker began the Quincy Method in 1876, the performance of nearly all the Quincy grammar school students tested was rated excellent or satisfactory. In 1880, a survey conducted by the Massachusetts State Board of Education showed that Quincy students excelled at reading, writing, and spelling, and were ranked fourth in their county in math. In less than four years, a failing school system had become a success when judged by conventional standards (Shannon 1990, 47).

Is Progressive Education Effective?

I can imagine someone saying, "As inspiring as this example may be, it is just that: an example. What about other studies? Do they demonstrate that nontraditional education raises academic performance as well as or better than traditional education?" The answer to all these questions is an unequivocal "Yes."

Recently, Alfie Kohn (1999) published a 35-page survey of the hard evidence about progressive and traditional education. Kohn's review of hundreds of studies provides compelling evidence that progressive education is at least as effective as traditional education in promoting academic achievement—and often is more so. Kohn (1999, 212) acknowledges that these studies show that traditional education is able to promote its own notion of academic success. But, he adds, there is a catch:

Success can be claimed only by those who don't care about three other goals: (a) long-term retention of these facts or skills, (b) a real understanding of ideas, along with critical thinking, creativity, the capacity to apply skills to different kinds of tasks, and other more sophisticated intellectual outcomes, or (c) students' interest in what they're doing, and the likelihood that they'll come away with a continuing motivation to learn. (emphasis in original)

Put this way, the results are not at all surprising. Rather, they confirm what progressive, holistic educators have long known: The best way to teach the "3 R's" is to weave the "4 C's" of care, connection, cooperation, and choice into the learning process and the classroom community.

It is worth noting why transformative educators strive to infuse the "4 C's" into all aspects of our learning communities. We do so not only because it enhances intellectual development, though we value this goal. Rather, we champion the "4 C's" primarily because we value the fullest development of human beings for its own sake.



Transformative Educators Embrace The Partnership Paradigm

Equally important, our efforts are inspired by our commitment to nourish compassion, respect, and mutuality-to cultivate what Riane Eisler and David Loye (1990) call the “partnership way.” This is precisely what Parker Palmer (1983, 9) was urging when he asked, “How can the places where we learn to know become places where we also learn to love?” Though we may not use this term, transformative educators want the “places where we learn” to foster partnership-within individuals, among people, in our society, and between humans and nature.

Partnership is vital to strive for and hard to create. As Riane Eisler shows in her essay about partnership education (see page 5 in this issue), much of the process, content, and structure of our present schools was originally designed to support authoritarian, male-dominant, inequitable, violent social structures. As Eisler points out, this may make sense for autocratic societies, but it is not suitable for a democracy. And it is surely not conducive to creating partnership within our classrooms or with our colleagues.

Most K-12 educators work in schools that are committed to top-down control, despite the fact that such hierarchical structures make it needlessly hard to educate for partnership. Nevertheless, as Steve Motenko’s discussion of his work in a public elementary school suggests (see page 21), it is possible, within limits, to live out our deepest dreams within unsupportive school settings.

There is another obstacle that makes it hard to educate for partnership: Relationships based on mutual fulfillment, respect, and empowerment are the exception, not the rule, in our society (Eisler 2002). So are the ways of thinking and being that are needed to sustain mutually respectful, caring relationships (Koegel 1997). To be sure, human beings have an innate ability to tell others what they feel and need without judgment. For example, babies do not blame their parents for their pain; they just ask them to help-by crying.

But we are taught an alien tongue at a young age and soon become fluent in it. This is the language of right and wrong, better and worse, normal and abnormal, judgment and blame. It is the language of coercion and control, dominance and submission, manipulation and invalidation. It is the language of hierarchy and power-over.

As we grow up in this culture, we all are exposed to this alienating, adversarial way of thinking and speaking. In varying degrees, we internalize it. These habits of mind make it hard for transformative educators to educate in ways that further our values and meet our students’ needs. It is even more difficult for us to “walk our talk” when nearly everything around us continues to support old habits and attitudes.

We became educators because we love learning and want to care for students. As we become aware again of what has shaped us, we strengthen our ability to foster partnership learning communities. As we do this, we often go through a painful process of unlearning deeply rooted ways of relating that do not serve us or nourish our students. Fortunately, as Sarah Pirtle shows in her essay (see page 16), we all have a potentially rich tool that can help further this process: an “inner tuning fork” that acts as our compass, telling us if we are on course or not.

Nonviolent Communication

One resource that can help us strengthen this “inner tuning fork” is the process of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) developed by Marshall Rosenberg, psychologist, educator, and international peace negotiator. (For an overview of Rosenberg’s work and how it applies to education, see Kathy Simon’s essay review on page 57.) As Miki Kashtan (page 28) shows, Rosenberg’s framework embodies the core assumptions and values of holistic education. It also provides a practical process by which educators can more consciously, effectively, and lovingly realize the beliefs that inform our vision and animate our work.



NVC can be very useful to educators who are trying to relate to their students and to each other in ways that are more aligned with how they want to live and teach (see Paulette Pierce's and Michael Dreiling's essays at pages 43 and 49, respectively). The process of NVC is not only useful to individual educators or parents; it can also provide the foundational principles upon which an entire life-serving school can be built, as Sura Hart's essay about an elementary school in Sweden (page 38) shows.

Francis Parker noted more than a century ago that these principles are not new. Indeed, they are part of a river whose source is located thousands of years in the past, in the earliest efforts of people to nourish our species' highest potentials. These human innovations, what Riane Eisler calls "technologies of actualization," serve a dual function: They draw forth our minds' largely untapped capacities and they help construct a society that cultivates our highest human potentials.

Creating more and more powerful technologies of actualization: This is what transformative educators have been doing for centuries. This is what Partnership Education and Nonviolent Communication are providing now. There is a river and we are part of it.

References

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