

I became a teacher accidentally in 1963—first as a substitute teacher in south Chicago’s largely low-income and Black schools and then as a half-day kindergarten teacher. I had no intention of staying with this “profession”—but it seemed compatible with the hours my children were in school and required no after-school obligations! But within a few months of being a kgtn teacher I fell in love with the work—I found it more stimulating, more interesting and more emotionally and intellectually challenging than anything before in my life.

And not because I was a natural child-lover! I had once had a daycare job while in college—for a few months—and concluded that working with young children was not my thing, nor was I entranced by my friends’ children. Of course, my own three—they were amazing.

But so were the 30 in my first kindergarten class. And one thing led to another and so it was that I spent the next forty plus years in public schools in Philadelphia, NYC and Boston.

Given my family’s lifetime obsession with democracy, which I seem to have caught, it helped me understand the fragilities of the democratic idea, as well as optimistic about possibilities.

And while I didn't subscribe to the belief that schools alone could change the world, I saw how critical they were to democratic change. And how convenient it was for some to view our economic and social weaknesses as the fault of teachers!

At the heart of democracy is an entirely unfounded respect for human judgment—as attested to by the remarkable drive to learn, and the intelligent exploration of truth that I found in my 4 and 5 year olds students from the most disadvantaged background.

Anecdote – Darryl

But I also realized that in school systems driven by top-down mandates and docile teachers we'd never capitalize on these most remarkable givens of the human specie.

Anecdote—Chicago and LA/Tokyo
and my colleagues response.

And it took my son's difficulty "passing a reading test" before I
learned enough to realize that standardized testing was measuring
something else than what it claimed to. By design.

Anecdote re Nick

We are now at a pivotal point in America—and worldwide—with important exceptions. Which way shall we go??

Shall we embrace the madness of Ayn Rand and her Greed is Good libertarianism or will we embrace the counter-intuitive claims on behalf of democracy.

Of course, they are counter-intuitive if we spend most of our energy educating against the idea of democracy—of human judgment as the highest metric.

CPESS Habits of Mind.

Evidence – and credibility

How else—other perspectives

Connections—have we seen this before?

Supposing that...

Who cares—why might it matter?

Plus—“compared to what”!

Or said even more simply: Schools are there to hone our capacity to be skeptically curious and empathetic.

Two capacities we are born with, but which formal education rarely connects to. We don't need to "learn how to learn"—we're born as remarkable learners. The question facing us is how in face of the "real world" we can nourish rather than discourage that special talent.

For some of us—these are the metrics—that are immeasurable except through the use of human judgment in exploring many forms of evidence as they help us make sense of our experience of the world.

In the long history of the human species we've had one primary form of schooling—the apprenticeship model. We learn to be what being an adult requires by living amidst the world as it is—keeping company with others who we can trust and who are practicing—in our presence their expertise as older humans, as adults. Most of our fellow mammals learn that way too. It simply takes us longer as being a human being requires a far higher level of skill and judgment.

Schools as we know them today are hardly well suited to that task.

HALF WAY?????

The ratios are all wrong between adults and the young for example, and the adults are rarely demonstrating their adult habits and skills—but rather mostly telling the young about them. And at best demonstrating them in a decontextualized fashion.

(ANECOTE re physics class; and my plants)

(Of course kids actually do learn a lot about the adult world from schools—but NONE of it prepares them in any way for what is essential to nourish for democracy to work the way it's supposed to. In fact, it's embarrassing to realize what they do learn!

Limiting participation has been the traditional answer for the great past democracies we teach about. Even when the good old USA was founded in 1776 it included only white males who owned sufficient property to give them a fiscal stake in democracy—or some such argument. A minority. Today we have aspirationally, at least, included everyone over 18—with important exceptions.

These are the questions we refuse or forget to discuss publicly.

21st century skills is the shortcut slogan for schooling. (As though critical thinking and knowledge and creativity didn't matter in Newton's time?)

Meanwhile the 21st century schools we imagine looks more and more—in the USA—like the 19th century in terms of schooling—at least for the bottom half. Minimally competent teachers, large class sizes, relatively little interpersonal connectedness, top down curriculum mandates and constant measurement. Plus one new ideas: “the market place”. The latter proudly proclaims it possesses the virtues of the market place to regulate itself—to our mutual benefit. This seems self-evident to its fans, and is asserted in some places with as much bravado as if we weren't in the midst of a disastrous crisis of the market place—the worst in 80 years. Meanwhile, the rich get richer, the rest—beware.

It's an educational crisis that has produced a similar response in education and the economy. Known as: Austerity.

Forget about Darryl's feisty insistence on arguing his case—no time for that, and no way that it will improve his test score.

Forget about teacher collaboration since there is very little of importance to collaborate at, and market place thinking reminds us that our colleagues are also our competitors.

Forget about the kids whose test scores reflect thinking that deviates from the language and logic that the test rewards—the Nicky's of the world.

I've traveled quite a bit recently—to Russia, China, Russia, Japan, and South Africa. All intensely concerned about their school systems, but the new language, borrowed from John Dewey's progressivism, turns out to be amazingly like the traditional teacher-centered and exam measured one we've been practicing for so long.

In part because habits are very hard to change. And partly because the idea of turning schools into institutions to learn democracy is not only not the norm, but feared by many—possibly the majority. And in part because there's a reason the ruling class was once called the “leisure class”—it takes leisure to both work for a living, raise a family and govern, and we give ordinary human beings virtually no leisure time for such tasks as governance nor the money to hire their own lobbyists—and we have virtually destroyed

the few institutions that spoke for them collectively—like the labor movement.

If we don't care where we're going, than we might as well choose the easiest path—which long distance learning, for example, is on the way to perfecting

It produces long-distance democracy—which is an oxymoron. We can create “systems” that support democracy or ones that crush it, and all the in-betweens. But it starts with the “idea” of community, made up of individuals, of face-to-face relationships, of directly experiencing what trust and distrust are like, and that let the young see the messiness of democracy, and the enjoyment and power it can also produce without destroying its messiness! It can't be learned “second-hand”.

Or so I would argue by examples if I had the time today. If I had the time I'd describe the extraordinary work going on in the schools networks that decided to create governance systems that created different ways to balance the interests of the school's constituents—faculty, staff, families and community. But ask me – and I'll point you to some sources—including film maker Fred Wiseman's 3 hour film about CPESS. Or go to deborahmeier.com.

These 40 plus years have demonstrated that what I'm claiming is possible—and even possible scaled up.

(And it's helpful to see what success little Finland has had pioneering these ideas on a nation-wide level.)

When I was born—never mind exactly what year that was—the USA had 200,000 locally elected schools boards. Today with over twice the population we have less than 15,000 and they have less power over any important decisions than they ever had. In our large cities we have virtually none anymore! In short, even our Public Schools have only a thin and practically nonexistent connection to a public.

We make fun of the local Boards at home, without realizing that we are bashing the very idea of democracy in the process—when we ought to be bashing what produces this disconnect and putting our minds together about what to do about it. Maybe when democracy isn't working it's because we don't have enough of it.

Count the number of schools whose teachers have a democratic voice and vote in the important decisions that take place within their schools.

If we don't trust the collective faculties that combine both expertise and hands-on direct knowledge to rule a school, how can we pretend to the young that The People as a whole should rule the nation! I suspect they know an absurdity when they see it. They recognize, perhaps, that it works for deciding trivia—our favorite class color—but have rarely if ever experienced it work when the stakes are high.

No wonder we abandon it whenever faced with a crisis!

THESE are the issues we should be discussing, and are busily avoiding.

What kind of childhood makes democracy seem more or less reasonable? How about starting there?

I think we know the answers when we are thinking about our own education—thus the President of the US sends (like all previous presidents) to an expensive private school, and one that doesn't follow any of the new mandated top-down rules.

There's nothing wrong with our concern about the economy—democracy also works best when there is a sufficiency of material goods.

Scarcity isn't good for democracy—which is a problem we need to face as we look at a bleaker future in terms of the resources available to us on this earth. It will put a further strain on the idea of democracy and requires an even greater determination to take it seriously—we aren't born democrats, and it's an idea with a complex history and a need to always restore imbalances that inevitably undermine it if un-attended.

I grew up a fan of science fiction—from junk to George Orwell! It's probably not an accident that the most commonly imagined future was totalitarian, and the average human being in these “utopias” was not much more than a robot. That may not hurt the economy, but it's a bleak picture of human potential.

So we have decisions to make. The future has not yet happened.

I'm honored to be here today to think together about the futures we face—futures that we can collectively put our minds to inventing.

Thank you.

