QUALITY EDUCATION AS A CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHT

Creating a Grassroots Movement to Transform Public Schools

Edited by Theresa Perry, Robert P. Moses, Joan T. Wynne, Ernesto Cortés Jr., and Lisa Delpit

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Reflections

Ernesto Cortés Jr.

A good education is more than a civil right; it is the foundation necessary to sustain our democracy and modern civilization. Without the capacity to engage, question, argue, interpret, and contextualize experiences and encounters, authority is left unchallenged and individuals are left open to misdirection—which leaves them prey to the demagogues of hate. As Gerald Graff reminds us in *Clueless in Academe*, effective argument starts with attentive listening and understanding. Real understanding and insight require not just a grasp of what was said, but also its context—the person’s story, history, and experience. This kind of attentive listening leads to an understanding of differences and respect for others even in the midst of disagreement.

Historically we have learned these kinds of skills through our participation in institutions—congregations, schools, unions, settlement homes—which develop in us a deeper understanding of relationality and the value of engagement. Without the vibrancy of these institutions, our tendency is to withdraw into ourselves and revert to tribalism when confronted with that which is “other.” This is a recipe for disaster in our increasingly polarized nation and globalized society. Given the diversity of culture, religion, economics, and politics, we must assume the existence of contradictions and embrace the tensions that they generate. Given that these differences cannot be eliminated, the question then becomes, How do we deal with them? Properly contextualized, argument and debate can be a substitute for violent conflict, which often leads to war.

Our impatience with the debate and negotiation that is part of the
public decision-making process, coupled with our need for order, security, and decisiveness in times of crisis, can lead us all too quickly into an authoritarian, top-down culture in which we are assigned questions and told to answer. Now clearly in some contexts (the military, traffic lights, etc.) a culture of command and control is not only appropriate but necessary. However, this type of culture tends to reduce people and institutions to stereotypes, which may serve as useful categories for bureaucrats, marketers, and demagogues but don’t lend themselves to the engagement that is necessary for real argument and negotiation.

Unfortunately, our institutions today, particularly our schools, reflect more and more the command and control model. They do not teach the culture of argument or the skills of deliberation. Yet to be an educated person is to understand that the subculture of argument undergirds all academic subjects. Assertions of truth or value in literature, art, history, science, math, or any other area are subject to debate, and, therefore, require the support of a well-reasoned argument. A well-reasoned argument is not the same as assault or mere contradiction. It is grounded in logic and context, and can sustain and respond to challenges.

As Dana Villa so cogently states in *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt*, without the contestation inherent in an argument culture you are unlikely to recognize the limitations of your own. Yet even the argument culture is not enough; to be well educated also requires the development of judgment. Neurological studies indicate that adolescents particularly have a limited capacity to make good judgments; that portion of the brain typically does not fully develop until the late teens/early twenties. This makes the argument culture in schools all the more important. Adults have the obligation to reinforce and challenge what adolescents are learning, and to do that requires that they too be well versed in the argument culture.

Fortunately, the two are interconnected in that it is virtually impossible to develop good judgment without engaging in argument, because good judgment requires considering multiple points of view as well as understanding their contexts. Fully understanding someone’s opinions requires an understanding of that person’s story—the forces and pressures that have shaped his or her moral universe and worldview. To consider another’s point of view is difficult unless you un-
nderstand why someone believes what she believes, or why you believe what you believe. Often the first step is to know your own story. In the movie *Amistad*, Anthony Hopkins as John Quincy Adams makes the point that in all his experience in arguing before the Supreme Court he has learned that the person who tells the best story wins. Logic and relevance are important, but storytelling is essential.

Contestation creates the possibility of an enlarged mentality and imagination. Properly conducted, it allows us to enter into one another’s moral universes and understand the interconnectedness. Without it we become narrow, technical specialists who can do horrible things to one another because we do not consider the consequences. We engage in what Spanish-speakers refer to as consificar—to reduce someone to a mere part of themselves, or a thing.

Hannah Arendt reminds us of this possibility in her discussion of Adolf Eichmann. He was very smart, efficient, ambitious, and competent, but because he lacked an enlarged mentality, he was unable to consider fully the consequences of his monstrous attitudes and practices toward Jews, Gypsies, and homosexuals. He lacked the capacity to understand the humanity of his victims and defended his grotesque behavior as merely “following orders.” Evidence available today indicates that Eichmann was a more central player in the development of the Final Solution than originally acknowledged. This new evidence further reinforces the notion that he was literally unable to consider the fact that “other” people (non-Aryans) were a part of his moral universe.

In contrast, Cornel West cites Herman Melville’s capacity for an enlarged mentality as the genesis for the relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg, a man of color, in *Moby-Dick*. Melville’s ability to imagine beyond the racial prejudices of his time in order to develop the storyline that depicts Queequeg as being more human than most god-fearing Christians clearly indicates not only the ability to get inside the story of the “other,” but also the ability to imagine a context in which the limitations of his own time would be overcome by relationships and conversations.

These examples suggest that a good education is more than literacy and numeracy; it equips people to be able to consider another’s moral universe and recognize the common humanity that we all share. The real question of education should be how do we teach all of our institutions—not just our schools—to be attentive to the formation
of people? Beyond educating and providing services and spiritual
guidance, how do these institutions form people who understand
the responsibilities of citizenship and what it means to be another’s
neighbor rather than just a member of our family, our clan, our tribe,
or our community.

Perhaps these examples seem too esoteric for a discussion of the
value of education. Yet I would assert that far too much of modern
education, and indeed modern life, is about demanding answers to
questions or solutions to problems, when often the real issue is over-
looked. Rarely does anyone ask: Is this the right question? What’s
behind this question? Is it properly formulated, or have we rushed
to judgment without considering all the factors? At the micro level,
when our schools lack a well-developed culture of inquiry and argu-
ment, students learn to conduct searches on the Internet to find
answers rather than puzzling through the relevance and dimensions
of the questions being posed. On a larger scale I would suggest that
without first grappling with the deeper question of why education is
so crucial to the sustenance of modern civilization, we cannot begin
to have a genuine debate about the details of what happens in our
classrooms, on our campuses, and in our legislative bodies.

Our culture’s emphasis on the answers at the expense of the ques-
tions is reflected in the narrowness of the vision of many of our schools.
In most circumstances our schools don’t draw on the intuitive abil-
ity of students to argue or persuade one another (or their parents).
They don’t build on the natural inquisitiveness of children by teach-
ing them to form hypotheses and then test them. Instead, educators
and administrators respond only to our natural desire for certainty
and order. Today the tendency is to warehouse kids and bombard
them with facts and figures—teaching “the truth” or “teaching to
the test.”

Our fear of uncertainty drives us to teach our students to live in
intellectual, cultural, and political silos that leave no room for ambi-
guity, relationality, or engagement. From this perspective, everything
is black or white/true or false in a binary world of artificially-
constructed polarization, a mirror of our institutions, which seem
intent on transmitting the existing culture, and consequently forget
their role in cultivating human potential and preparing students for
lives in a society undergoing constant change.
The desire for certainty and the unwillingness to embrace ambiguity in our culture have led to a system of education that is focused on instruction rather than teaching and on compliance rather than creativity. It ignores the role of teaching as a performing art, in which the practitioner must be entrepreneurial, creative, and willing to take risks. 

Real teaching and learning is based on the understanding that intellectual capital is more than merely information; it is the ability to analyze and reflect. We have to be prepared to teach students the wonder, awe, and beauty of the U.S. Constitution, while also recognizing it as a deeply flawed document that ignored women, propertyless men, and the horrors of slavery. Teaching should transmit the value of a culture while at the same time preparing students to challenge it and to learn from its shortcomings.

Education is also complicated because it does not occur in isolation from other issues. If children come to school hungry, sick, homeless, scared, or with uncorrected vision problems or if they come from homes warmed by high-sulfur heating oil or with inadequate sanitation systems, their education is compromised, if other institutions refuse to step in and address these life challenges. In his book *Class and Schools*, Richard Rothstein cites countless studies that document specific challenges to educational achievement, which are directly linked to socioeconomic status rather than to traditional education concerns. For example, he cites the fact that student mobility has been linked to academic performance and that 30 percent of the poorest children had attended at least three different schools by the third grade, in contrast to only 10 percent of middle-class children.

In no way do I cite these factors as an excuse for public schools that are not achieving adequate standards of education. Rather, I intend to remind the reader that this is not the problem of a single institution, an individual, or even groups of individuals.

Moreover, mounting evidence indicates that the vast majority of children, regardless of wealth and income, spend increasing amounts of time with a growing force of electronic gadgets, televisions, computers, rather than in conversations with adults. These one-way systems of transmission might provide visual or auditory stimulation, but they do nothing to engage the child in practicing his or her own orality, which “provides the foundation for literacy.” That this is an
issue for middle-class and upper-middle-class households as well as for poorer ones speaks to the sociological phenomenon of isolation and withdrawal referenced on the first page of this chapter.

Arendt makes the point in *Men in Dark Times* that human beings have an inclination in times of crisis to retreat into themselves, to seek the comfort of that which is familiar and similar, and to withdraw from public life. We become preoccupied with preservation and withdraw from the public square. While she does not criticize this survival instinct on its face, she wisely draws the connection of the power vacuum it leaves behind to the rise of demagogues who both prey on fears and anxieties and take advantage of the absence of participation in public life to create oppressive regimes. Specifically she cites this as a factor in the rise of the Third Reich in Weimar Germany. I would submit that to the extent that we are not teaching the argument culture either in our schools or in our democracy as a whole, we are in fact reinforcing this dangerous inclination to withdraw from public life in “dark times.”

The phenomenon becomes self-reinforcing in that schools do not prepare students to argue. When, as adults, they then withdraw from debate, this in turn creates a culture that does not value the very tradition on which democracy is based. There is no democratic culture without public education. As far back as the 1830s, free public education has been promoted as a “crucible of democracy, a blending of all children to function from a common set of values.” We have to understand that when we give up on public schools, we give up, at a minimum, on one of the most important pillars of democracy—and maybe on democracy itself.

Our commitment to a constitutional democracy is predicated on the belief that there will be conflict—conflict not only between the branches of government, but between groups of organized citizens, intermediate institutions, corporations, etc. The only question is how those conflicts will be resolved. The role of debate and argument is present throughout the system of democratic politics but is particularly embodied in the judiciary branch. The courts require a sophisticated culture of argument and contestation; judgment is rendered only after the consideration of the merits of the arguments of both contesting parties.

Daunting though it may seem, the Supreme Court of the United
States has given only one institution the charge to teach the habits and skills requisite for a democratic culture—the public school. Chief Justice Earl Warren clearly outlined the civic mission of the public schools in the Court's 1954 ruling:

Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship.¹³

However, it was never intended that the schools perform this task alone, but rather that they were embedded in a network of overlapping institutions such as churches, synagogues, settlement homes, unions, neighborhood associations, lodges, clubs, and mutual aid societies. The assumption was that the mutual engagement of the public schools with all these institutions would underpin what we now call civil society.

It is in these networks of institutions that adults developed the skills of attentive listening and understanding that undergird the culture of argument and deliberation. It is in these kinds of conversations that people get to know one another's story and thereby develop a deeper understanding of alternative points of view. In the early 1980s, for example, when the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) Network was organizing to support a new education finance and accountability system, one of the biggest stumbling blocks for the network was the issue of funding for bilingual education. Members of some of the more middle-class Anglo congregations involved in the network thought bilingual education was a strategy that kept students from learning English and becoming "more American." It was only through conversations and engagement (twenty-seven small group meetings in one congregation alone) with those who had experiences different from their own that a common understanding emerged. The respectful contestation that resulted in the emergence of that common understanding made the congregations ready allies to fight with the parents and the schools to fully fund bilingual education.¹⁴
Frequently even the relationships inside schools benefit from the engagement with networks of other institutions. Robert Cordova, principal of Harmony Elementary in the Los Angeles Unified School District, initially saw his work with the congregations and unions of One-LA IAF as a way to deflect the concerns of parents onto different institutions. However, once Cordova began to have conversations with and be mentored by other institutional leaders in his community, he began to see himself not just as a manager of crises, but as an educational leader in a network of institutions with a broader vision for the transformation of his school and community. He began to see the benefit of working with people outside the walls of his campus and started thinking of parents as assets rather than liabilities. Today, parents hold positions of responsibility on the campus's core leadership team alongside educators and classified employees. Harmony has also begun organizing Achievement Academies to identify and develop additional parent leaders, as well as equipping them with the academic content knowledge necessary to participate more fully in their children's education.

The attention of One LA-IAF to this type of transformation grew in part from similar relationships forged on campuses working with the Texas IAF network throughout the state. In just one example, teachers and parents developed new relationships at Zavala Elementary in Austin in a context that, on the face of it, appeared to have little to do with education. In 1991, a meeting between Zavala parents and teachers about test scores and student achievement had reduced teachers to tears. Parents were angry; teachers felt attacked. Through individual conversations with parents and teachers, organizers with Austin Interfaith (the local IAF affiliate) uncovered a common concern: health care for the students. Teachers identified poor health conditions as one of the factors related to student achievement; parents mentioned the two-month waiting period at the local clinic as their first concern. When the city announced that the clinic would be closed for the removal of asbestos and mold, organizers posed the question: Why not provide immunizations and other basic preventive services for students on the campus itself?

More than two hundred parents and teachers came together to strategize about the possibility. For many it was the first time they had witnessed both sides working toward a common, concrete goal.
The health department agreed to the proposal, but the school board hesitated in the face of a vocal minority from outside the school community who raised the question of whether school-based health services opened the door for reproductive health services (condoms for kindergarteners!). At a December school board meeting, sixty parents and twenty teachers stayed well into the night to testify on behalf of their common agenda. Leaders from Austin Interfaith’s religious institutions spoke in favor of the proposal as well. The board’s favorable vote was unanimous.

Parents and teachers at Zavala had been transformed through their engagement with one another and their common struggle to secure health care for their children. They went on to organize a new curriculum for the campus, creative after-school programs, and a science-intensive program designed to help students achieve admission to a science magnet junior high school, where only one Zavala student had achieved admission in the previous ten years. The Young Scientists’ Program was particularly noteworthy because, despite the fact that only a minority of the campus’s fifth-grade students would directly benefit, hundreds of teachers, parents, and other Austin Interfaith leaders made the case before the school program and, ultimately, secured members’ support.

These three examples highlight the potentially transformative nature of relationships between schools and other community institutions, the networks of which have produced well-documented improvements in academic achievement, teacher morale, and so forth. At their best, these networks of institutions are developed into broad-based constituencies which also support the tax increases and bond elections necessary for investments in public education more broadly. To the extent that they remain focused on more traditional kinds of support for public schools—guest speakers, volunteers, and fundraising events—the unintended consequences of these relationships are that their voluntary dimensions allow us to indulge in the belief that public education can be sustained on the cheap. This belief was further reinforced by the fact that, until recent decades, the public schools had a virtually captive labor market from which to draw.

Gender discrimination meant that teaching was one of the few professional paid-employment options widely available to women. In short, it was a buyer’s market, and schools benefited by being able to
pay relatively low wages to dedicated teachers. Fortunately for women, those labor market conditions have changed, providing a wide range of opportunities for educated professionals. Unfortunately, public schools have not had the resources to respond to the change in market conditions by increasing salaries and benefits in this more competitive labor market.

At the same time, the rise of the high-stakes testing regime has robbed teachers of much of the power to determine what goes on inside their classrooms and on their campuses. This hierarchical system does not value the collegiality and mentoring relationships that are central to the social dimensions of teaching.

Recent decades have also witnessed the deterioration of the relationships among schools and the other mediating institutions in their neighborhoods and communities. The mediating institutions themselves have experienced a decline as economic pressures have forced adults to work longer hours, leaving less time for voluntary associations. At the same time, the testing regime has left teachers and principals with less time and energy to invest in relationships outside the campus. The absence of these relationships—of an external constituency that cares about the success of the school—leaves the campuses short of both human capital and the financial capital generated by taxpayers demanding a greater investment in public education.

Given the demands of a twenty-first-century economy and a growing population of Social Security recipients, it is in our national self-interest to invest in education and to educate all children. There has always been a debate about who should be educated in America. Thomas Jefferson’s proposal for a public school system in Virginia excluded women, slaves, and farmers. Of course, Jefferson’s commitment to maintaining a small, agrarian economic system didn’t require the economic growth fueled by universal education. As America’s leaders began to recognize both the potential and the challenge of a much more diversified economy, education took on more significance. By the 1840s, Henry Clay’s American System required expanding investments not only in infrastructure throughout the nation, but in education as well.17 As the manufacturing industry was fueled by the Civil War, the westward expansion, and the emerging Common Market, the demand for immigrant workers increased and the need for a universal common school became self-evident.
Today a small but vocal minority argues that the children of undocumented immigrants should be excluded from our school systems, just as they argued against educating African Americans, Catholics, and a host of other minorities throughout the history of the United States. From an economic perspective alone, it is in our self-interest to educate children regardless of whether their parents have papers. Countless studies have documented that a well-educated workforce earns higher wages, pays higher taxes, requires fewer government services, and generates economic growth through both production and consumption.

Notwithstanding its value in preparing an educated workforce, the real reason taxpayers should support public education is its role in the value and vision of a democratic culture. Only if education is about teaching people—particularly young people—to understand other perspectives and points of view while maintaining the ability to debate and argue their own can we hope to sustain democracy in the face of the growing isolationism, cynicism, and polarization not just in our own nation, but also in the global community.

That our Constitution exists implies a right to an education; why guarantee a set of rights and liberties unless you presuppose that citizens will be sufficiently well-educated to understand them? President Ulysses S. Grant understood this when he encouraged Congress to pass a constitutional amendment guaranteeing a free quality public education to every child in the United States in 1875. His claim that “free public education lay at the root of the nation’s liberty” clearly indicates his belief that education is a prerequisite to freedom. The fact that the language of his proposed amendment created the right to an education for “all children, irrespective of sex, color, birthplace or religion” is a reminder of the lessons he drew from the institution of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction: as a nation we are inevitably interconnected. Or, as Benjamin Franklin so adroitly stated: “We can all hang together or we can all hang separately.”

If democracy is to last, we must also learn reverence—which means we value something beyond ourselves and our bank accounts. It means we understand and value responsibility, obligation, duty, and a consideration of long-term horizons. Reverence reflects the public piety of Emerson and Whitman when we recognize our economic, social, and spiritual debts to those who have gone before. It requires
courage and imagination and a realization that the self emerges only
in relationship with others, with an understanding of the different
cultural contexts of ourselves and our neighbors. Otherwise, we are
at risk of producing a nation of people who are too imprisoned by
their fears and anxieties, by their needs and necessities, by the culture
of consumption, to have any sense of reverence at all. This is surely
a path to destruction. While we search the globe for monsters to de-
stroy in the name of exporting democracy, we should sustain it here
at home.

NOTES

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