

THE RAINBOW CURRICULUM IN DEMOCRACY-CENTERED SCHOOLS: A NEW APPROACH TO HELPING CHILDREN LEARN

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The current controversy over multi-culturalism in the New York City educational system—the battle over the Board of Education's proposed teachers guide, *Children of the Rainbow*—has focused much needed attention on the underdevelopment of our city's schools. Just about everyone agrees that there is a lot wrong with the public school system. Certainly, the efforts to direct the curriculum away from a strictly Eurocentric approach have addressed at least some of the most blatant biases in classroom instruction and reading material.

But if we are going to engage in a serious way the fact that our schools—and with them, our children—are failing, we must look beyond simply the content of what is taught. Why? Because improving and diversifying curriculum content will have limited results if we don't also address the fact that our schools are no longer environments in which our children can learn—no matter what the curriculum. That is why growing numbers of educators are advocating a shift from what are traditionally called curriculum-centered schools to what are becoming known as democracy-centered schools: to educational environments in which learning is the collective activity of the entire school community.

If we are concerned to effectively implement a "Rainbow Curriculum," we must examine the learning model on which the school system is presently based. The prevailing model emphasizes the acquisition of knowledge by individual "knowers." Math, history, geography and science are all "subjects" which individual students are supposed to learn. But this approach is failing many, many children. It is also failing our aspirations to teach for critical thinking.

Critical thinking 'pedagogy' includes addressing the need to understand and evaluate the contents of instruction; a multi-cultural perspective gives us alternative points of view from which a more significant and comprehensive evaluation can take place. In addition, critical thinking seeks to promote active learning as it addresses the need for students to become engaged in their learning, encouraging student interaction through dialogue. The multicultural perspective is grounded in theories and practice that place such dialogue at the center of the school experience. Finally, both critical thinking and multicultural education see the outcome of education as empowering students for participation in social and political democracy.

Children of the Rainbow was developed, in part, to ad-

dress such concerns. The thinking was that if you changed the curriculum to include both new subjects and new perspectives that are more relevant to the majority of students then they would be more motivated to learn.

Introducing a "Rainbow Curriculum" will certainly bring a more diversified grouping of teachers and trainers into the school system and provide more positions for minority educators—all of which is very desirable. But there is little evidence to support the claim that a diversified curriculum will necessarily motivate students or facilitate their learning. This is not an argument against a "Rainbow Curriculum." It is, rather, an argument against a curriculum-centered educational approach.

Curriculum-centeredness—the Euro-American model of education—dominates the public school system today, just as it has since public education began in the United States nearly 200 years ago. This is despite the many voices that cry out for reform and restructuring (such as the prominent educator and best-selling author John Goodlad, who has pointed out that observing public school classrooms today is like observing them 50 years ago, and Jonathon Kozol, who documented the "savage inequities" of our nation's schools). It is despite hundreds of studies and reports published by professional associations, scientific institutions, philanthropic organizations and social policy bodies that point to the failure of many conventional practices and argue for a more active and involving curriculum

(the National Science Foundation, the National Council of Teachers of English, the National Geographic Society), call for the end of ability tracking (the National Education Association, the Qualitative Education for Minorities Network, the National Governors Conference), and urge teacher participation in decision-making (Carnegie corporation).

A serious restructuring of our schools to make them truly inclusive and multi-cultural, must not only engage the Eurocentric bias of curricula, it must also engage the Eurocentric bias of a learning model which equates learning with private mental acts.

While most educators and teachers seem to agree that it is important for children to play an active role in learning, there is a tendency to view that active role as the stimulus for something that is assumed (explicitly or implicitly) to go on in the individual mind. The process of learning—the totality of social activities people engage in with each other—is thus separated from the products of learning: an-

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swers, information, knowledge and skills. These products then take on a life of their own, becoming located within certain individuals and not in others. The consequence of such assumptions is that the production of such "products"—not the creation of learners—becomes the goal of teaching. When the "products" are not forthcoming (as they by and large are not in the United States), the children are blamed, the families are blamed, the teachers are blamed, the curriculum is blamed, and demands that the curriculum be changed arise from both progressive (pro-*Children of the Rainbow*) and reactionary (anti-*Children of the Rainbow*) corners.

The equation of learning with the products of learning located in the individual mind has a long history in Western philosophy, science and pedagogy. This way of thinking is so deeply entrenched in contemporary culture that it is difficult to imagine that it may in fact distort our picture of how human beings actually learn, grow and develop. But many re-

searchers and educators are coming to believe that it does. More and more discoveries point to a new understanding of human beings as fundamentally activist rather than cognitive, and learning as fundamentally social rather than individual.

There is, in fact, a long tradition in psychology and education of a humanistic, child-centered, activity-based, social methodology—going back at least as far as the influential work of both John Dewey and Maria Montessori. The 1960s and 1970s saw the next heyday of humanistic and progressive educational practice. The work of creative teachers such as Herb Kohl, Paulo Freire, Ivan Illich and Sylvia Ashton-Warner became models for child-centered, humanistic education which were duplicated in classrooms around the country. Under John F. Kennedy's presidency, the federal government supported innovative interdisciplinary curricula such as Jerome Bruner's "Man: A Course of Study" (its funding was cut after Ronald Reagan spoke out against it in his 1980 presidential campaign). This conception of learning as active and social was articulated perhaps most clearly by the early Soviet psychologist and educator, Lev Vygotsky. For Vygotsky, learning and development are fundamentally social, not individual. And they are activities, not merely behaviors. Activity is the human capacity to reshape what exists into something new; it is qualitative. Behavior is the acting out of existing roles and rules; it is quantitative. Vygotsky discovered that the activities learning and development are actually a unity: *learning leads development*. It is a perspective that is very different from the dominant view, which separates learning and development and assumes that how much and what people can learn depends on such quantitatively measured capacities as their stage of development or intelligence "quotient."

How and where "learning leading development" happens, according to Vygotsky, is in the Zone of Proximal

Development (or ZPD, as it is known among psychologists and educators). The ZPD sounds exotic, but it is simply the ordinary "life space" of infancy and early childhood, where adults relate to infants as "ahead of themselves" and together they engage in all kinds of activities in which the infant must "stretch" and the adults must "cheat for" her or him. Together, through their activity, the infant and adults create the ZPD, the environment in which the infant learns to be a learner. This is how learning actually occurs in the real life experience of human beings.

"Common sense" tells us that education should be organized around a body of knowledge: If we expect children to be readers and writers, to know fundamental mathematical concepts, to be conversant with history, geography, science and the other "subjects;" common sense asks, don't they have to be taught the material? To be blunt, the answer is No. After all, as children none of us were taught to speak in

the same way that children are taught subjects in the classroom. How very young children learn (many educators and psychologists are already aware of this) can be a very valuable guide for restructuring our schools.

Young children learn all kinds of things before they ever get to school. Parents, grandparents and older siblings do not follow a curriculum—and they do a marvelous job of educating. What they, in fact, do is engage in daily life activities with infants and toddlers. Adults and older children relate to little ones as "speakers" before they utter a sound: they participate with them in the activity of speaking, even though the child babbles for quite a long time before saying real words. Through this ordinary social process (which all of us go through) children become learners. In fact, most of us learn and develop at a faster rate during early childhood than at any other time in our lives. The success of pre-school education in the home is directly related to the fact that it is activity-centered, not curriculum-centered.

Most schools are not environments which support the social activity of learning leading development; the high level of violence in our schools and the rising dropout rate are two of the most glaring, and disturbing, symptoms of that reality. The harsh fact is that our schools are just not in the business of developing learners. In order to change that, we must search for new learning models for *democracy-centered education*.

By democracy-centered we don't simply mean that everyone has a vote. We mean that the focus is on the social, collective activity (in which everyone participates) of creating the learning environment. The curriculum-centered school, to the extent that it disregards the activity of creating environment, is, in fact, the opposite of democracy-centered. Not only are teachers and parents virtually excluded from playing any role in school decisions, the students themselves are given

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no responsibility for collectively creating the environment in which learning takes place. Their relationships—with the teaching staff and each other—are mediated through the curriculum. The democracy-centered school, on the other hand, organized selfconsciously to help create learners and focused on this activity, is the truly child-centered school—it is, after all, the children who are being helped to become learners!

There is a growing body of evidence that democracy-centered schools are far more successful than curriculum-centered schools in educating children. There are hundreds of projects and schools that encourage and support the active and flexible participation of children in learning. For example, there are activity-based curricula (such as "hands on" science, "thinking mathematics," "democracy through language"), child-generated curriculums, experiential curriculums, and cooperative learning (where students are encouraged to collaborate in learning the subject matter). These projects are indicative of increased interest in the field of activity-centered curriculums.

Over twenty years ago, James Comer, the Maurice Falk Professor of Child Psychiatry at Yale University's Child Study Center and the Associate Dean of the Yale School of Medicine, developed a program that involved parents, students and staff (including teachers, administrators and social workers) in constructing an environment in which social and educational development happens. Called the School Development Program, it has expanded to over fifty schools around the country in mainly low-income districts. Those schools operating with Comer's program consistently show greater gains in standardized test scores than those which do not. Some schools give the students full responsibility for creating their educational environment: at the Saturn School in St. Paul, Minnesota, activities are generated in a high-tech environment; at the Sudbury Valley School in Framingham, Massachusetts—in existence for 25 years—83% of the students go on to post-graduate study; at the City Magnet School in Lowell, Massachusetts, which is organized as a micro-society, "civics isn't a course, it's a continuous experience."

In addition, Vygotsky's theories are being implemented in schools and day care centers in such cities as Detroit, Chicago, San Diego and Tucson. At the Barbara Taylor School in Harlem, the only Vygotskian elementary school in the country, children and staff together create the ZPD, or C.H.E.A.T.ing (Children Helping to Educate Another Training). Four-year-olds are related to as poets, scientists and mathematicians not through a "curriculum" but through their activity—playing language games, science games and history games. What has been discovered at the Barbara Taylor laboratory is that children who had been high achievers in traditional school settings remain high achievers, but low achievers in traditional settings do dramatically better in the democracy-centered environment. Language and math scores at the Barbara Taylor School are 20-25% higher than the citywide average. Still in its planning stages, the controversial Edison Project—launched by Benno Schmidt, the former

president of Yale University and Chris Whittle, the chairman of Whittle Communications—is developing an ambitious, privately-funded "complete redesign of the way we teach our children." Its aim is to reach over 150,000 students during its first year of operation, and to not simply reform the schools, but to re-examine what is necessary for children to learn—from abolishing current academic subject boundaries to increasing parental engagement.

By all the standard measures, democracy-centered schools have a much higher success rate than their traditional, curriculum-centered counterparts. Their students do better on standardized tests; the attendance of both their students and teachers is usually 90% or higher; their graduates go on to college and professions at a higher rate than the average urban public school graduate.

What does the New York City public school system need? A "Rainbow Curriculum" in democracy-centered schools. If we bring these two approaches together, we'll have a pedagogic model based on development. Our children, and the entire community, will be the beneficiaries.

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HOW GOOD A CRITICAL THINKER YOU'VE BEEN!!!