

EDUCATING A CULTURE OF PEACE

Ron Miller

The way *education* has been understood for many centuries, as the transmission of a shared cultural reality, is obsolete and inadequate for addressing the severe challenges of our time. As John Dewey observed more than a century ago, the challenges of modernity ought to cause us to radically rethink the purpose and process of education. To sustain a democratic culture in the face of rapid change and extreme conflict, he argued, requires the cultivation of *critical*, not merely technical, intelligence. Rather than instilling obedience and conformity, education for modern times must enable individuals to think deeply and creatively, and to work collaboratively as students and citizens to alter social practices that hinder their freedom or welfare. Education, he asserted, cannot simply look to the past but must be responsive to the pressing issues and dilemmas of a changing world. An education that is relevant to our time cannot simply aim for *transmission*, but must support cultural *reconstruction* or *transformation*.

Unfortunately, in these troubling times many societies are choosing reactionary responses to the unsettling consequences of modernity. This is most evident in the various forms of religious and cultural fundamentalism that have arisen from the Middle East to the American heartland, and in attempts by ruling elites, religious hierarchies, and male-dominated institutions to maintain their control in the face of the moral confusion and psychological disorientation that modernity has brought in its wake. Yet even the most advanced forces of modernization, otherwise so disdainful of traditional restraints, have adopted the educational mode of *transmission* to instill and reinforce a semblance of cultural stability. Ignoring the need for critical intelligence in sustaining a democratic culture, the leaders of government, business, and other powerful social institutions have forged authoritarian educational systems intended to mold a national – and indeed, global – consensus in support of their own economic and political fundamentalism.

By defining learning reductionistically as quantifiable performance on academic tests, these “standardistos” (as teacher-author Susan Ohanian aptly calls them) have isolated education from any meaningful engagement with the disturbing moral, political, and economic realities of our age and made schools the training grounds for mindless conformity and quiescent citizenship. By repeatedly threatening that young people, local communities, and even national economies will fail – that is, become outcasts – if their standards are not worshipped, the elites have persuaded whole populations to maintain, indeed to rigidify, the familiar, old-fashioned ways of teaching that rely on the forcible transmission of approved facts, beliefs and attitudes....

There is another major reason why present educational regimes are dangerously inadequate. The world is in crisis, suffering from insane violence, degradation of nature, rampant greed and commercialization, and loss of meaning and community, but the consuming goal of our schools is to train young people to compete in the job market, reinforcing the domination of the global corporate economy, which fuels many of these problems. Moreover, modern schooling, like any transmission-oriented model, prevents young people from recognizing or addressing critical problems in the world around them. So long as they are made to merely memorize the so-called facts presented in authorized textbooks, students are isolated from the difficult choices they will need to make, and the complex issues they will need to understand if they are ever to respond effectively to this suffering world. If we don't involve young people in reconstructing our societies, in building a culture of peace, justice, and compassion, their future looks bleak indeed, no matter what marketable skills their school provides them. If education embodies a people's vision of the future, what future do we wish for our own children?

....[E]ducating for a democratic and humane society requires qualities such as freedom, creativity, social responsibility, and commitment to moral and ethical ideals that transcend self-interest and corporate profits. The increasingly rigid and constricted scope of present-day public schooling is a key component of the destructive global technocratic monoculture now emerging, and it needs to be addressed just as urgently as the economic and environmental challenges that concern so many of us.

Riane Eisler... is perhaps the best known of the *cultural creative* writers to focus on the importance on the importance of education in reversing the destructive tendencies of both authoritarian traditions and modern technocracy....Eisler concluded that her vision of a partnership-oriented culture could be achieved, in large part, through a deliberate change in educational practices. *Partnership education* is a coherent cluster of attitudes, goals, teaching approaches, design elements and curriculum decisions meant to awaken young people's compassionate awareness of the huge moral and cultural choices that lie before them. In her book *Tomorrow's Children*, which spelled out the approach of partnership education, Eisler used the phrase "caring for life" to describe its essential underlying moral orientation: Where a dominator culture gives priority to top-down control, power and authority, whether in intimate or international relations, a partnership culture seeks to protect the delicate variety, interdependence, and integrity of living beings, human and nonhuman. An attitude of reverence for life is the fundamental basis for a partnership culture, a caring and humane culture, a culture where peace rather than violence prevails. And this attitude can be cultivated, and must be cultivated, in the adult society's interaction with its children – that is, through education....

In a world suffering from obscene violence and wanton desecration, it is time for us to let go of the dominator cultural programming that was inflicted upon us,

long enough to give our children a glimpse and a hope of a more peaceful, joyful and caring world. A culture of peace honors the essential needs and aspirations of all human beings and recognizes, also, that our needs must be seen in the context of the fragile and interconnected web of life. A culture of peace nurtures strivings for mutual understanding, tolerance and cooperation, rooted in empathy and compassion. Surely this must become the primary goal of education in our time.

Ron Miller has worked in the emerging field of holistic education for 35 years, first as a Montessori teacher, and later, after completing doctoral studies on the cultural history of American education, as an activist scholar and publisher. He has written or edited eight books, founded two journals and an independent progressive school, and organized various conferences, networks and other efforts to build a more coherent alternative education movement.

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1. Why does Miller believe that it is essential to change our educational system?
2. What does he perceive to be the flaws of the current system? Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. Miller imagines a system that would better meet the needs of today’s youth. How does he describe this new system?
4. State the thesis of this essay.
5. Imagine that you are part of a team competing to design an alternative school inspired by Miller’s ideas. In a small group, using chart paper:
 - Make a list of the subjects that will be taught.
 - Describe the recommended teaching methods.
 - Describe the features that you would like to see included in the design of the building.
 - What will you call your new school?

Share your ideas with the rest of the class, being sure to explain how each of your ideas reflects the vision of Ron Miller.

Post your chart paper on the wall.

What are the commonalities in these proposals?

Do a walk-around to study the posters further and write your initials on the poster describing the school that you like best.

As a class, further discuss the ideas proposed by the team with the most popular vision.

