

Can Communities of Resistance and Transformation Be Born from the Social Context of School?

By Rich Gibson

On September 10, 2002, the San Diego State University Teacher Education Social Justice Cluster, representing more than one-third of the faculty of the School of Teacher Education, following considerable deliberation, passed this motion regarding SB 2042:

We reject the California Teacher Credential TPA/TPE process for which we initially volunteered, in good faith. Our experience with the process leads us to conclude, furthermore, that we must reject the standards that give the process motion, and the law which gives it force. We believe this is not a process to improve teacher education, but to regulate and standardize knowledge, not only in colleges of education, but throughout the university system, in a manner which is not in the best interest of our students nor ourselves. We believe the standards are partisan standards, the tests that will follow will be partisan tests, with profound problems of class, race, linguistic, culture, and disability bias.

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Therefore, we call upon all college of education faculty in the California university and college system to follow our lead, to say no to this intrusion. Moreover, we will inform our students and the community of our action in hopes that we will be able to spark additional resistance to the one-size-fits-all

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high-stakes testing movement which we believe will not improve assessment, but deepen segregation and promote the irrational worship of exam scores — scores which measure, above all, inherited capital.

We believe that while we are indeed working within a state teacher credential program, we have rights of academic freedom which not only make it possible for individuals to reject this proposed regulation, but which exist as a treasure to the community, reflecting the vital role of a university where people can gain and test knowledge in a reasonably free atmosphere, and to offer that society criticism which may not be possible elsewhere.

This sharp statement of resistance came from a cluster of committed lifelong educators. Their declaration represented, for a great majority, their experience with a process which they came to believe, from their own participation within it, was designed in the manner of the old folk saying: “Come cooperate on my web whispers the spider to the fly.”

SDSU’s resistance to external standards, the regulations on university knowledge, and the high-stakes tests that are their twins, is a recognition of deepening historical experience. Over the last decade, external school standards and tests were used in every instance to intensify segregation and to stifle creativity and freedom in schools. The regulations are designed to rob educators of their most precious commodity; time with unique students. Those who choose not to see this issue of resegregation cannot be dismissed as uninformed anymore, but must be considered incredibly naive or as partisans — on the side of segregation. At issue now is: How can reason connect with power in order to forge a conscious movement that relates social change to education?

Shortly after the motion was passed, the SDSU College of Education withdrew from the California Teacher Credentialing pilot project.

Then parents and students at a nearby San Diego elementary school went on strike for a day against the regimentation of their classrooms via the county school “CEO’s” *Blueprint for Success*, a regimented project that stresses phonics-driven reading programs, and scripted mathematics, and excludes all else. This sharp action followed the efforts of parents, students and school workers in LaJolla, a wealthy area inside San Diego. These people threatened to withdraw their schools from the local system, to turn the schools into charters, if the CEO did not remove them from the strictures of curricula regulations and high-stakes tests. Fearing that LaJolla’s birthright-based test scores would be erased from the district averages, the CEO agreed that those with capital do not have to submit to the *Blueprint*. According to the CEO’s own statements, LaJolla was exempted from stupefying external standards because the area’s kids are born with the resources to get high scores (Magee, 2002)

So far, parents, students and teachers in poorer areas have not picked up the cry that the *Blueprint* is too dumb for their kids, and taken action. Experience elsewhere, like in Michigan where boycotts in wealthy suburbs in part laid the groundwork for

a massive Detroit wildcat strike in 1999, indicates that there is more to come. Resistance among school workers is on the rise, a logical and requisite working out of struggles at most work places where people not only must seek fair pay and benefits, but they also struggle for freedom and creativity. Soon, a dozen Chicago teachers will refuse to administer their "CASE" test, which like the rest of the Big Tests measures class and race, declares that to be science, then sharpens the lines of segregation. However, if education is going to be a place where people can construct real hope by using reason in a relatively free atmosphere in order to gain and test knowledge in a struggle for the truth, then this resistance is going to have to be elevated by deeper theory of how to transform what is to what ought to be. Let us look at what is (Gibson, 1999 http://eserver.org/clogic/2_2/gibson.html).

Jean Anyon says in her penetrating book, *Ghetto Schooling*, that attempting school reform without performing social and economic reform in the communities that surround the school is like washing the air on one side of a screen door. It will not work. Dr Anyon's comment is an axiom: true on the face of it, and tested by history (Anyon, 1997, p. xv).

This puts me at odds with leading lights like Tony Alvarado, a liberal, San Diego's current school guru who believes that social and economic conditions do not matter, that the right systems applied to teachers (who he insists are the main problem in schools) can reform capitalist schooling. Alvarado is growing wealthy as he parades that one-sided idea. The kids of San Diego are abused by a *Blueprint* that outlaws art, music, physical education, and the struggle for meaning in reading. Their teachers are deskilled using the most crude forms of Taylorist efforts at work place control. That runs parallel to the fact that those who are pushing hardest for the regulation of what students know and how they come to know it in school are not coincidentally the wealthy people who benefitted most from the destruction of the tax system over the last 25 years, and the subsequent designs to snare freedom in schools marketed in the name of social equality (Gibson, 2001 online at <http://www.rohan.sdsu.edu/~rgibson/alvarado.html>).

I am going to address the social context of schooling with Anyon's thought as background. This is an examination of the air on both sides of the screen door: school, and the social, economic and political ecosystem that makes school, if not education, possible. I hope to demonstrate that what is taking place is part of a very clear series of phenomena. Once these examples reoccur in sufficiently frequency we can call them a tendency. We can name the tendency. Named, we can begin to act, with reason, in order to change, perhaps overcome it.

I list these as interrelated international and national social and economic tendencies, all existing before September 11 2001:

- ◆ Booming Inequality within the US, and between the US and the world.
<http://www.pipeline.com/~rgibson/inequality.html>
- ◆ Segregation deepening within communities and schools.

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<http://www.law.harvard.edu/groups/civilrights/publications/resegregation99/resegregation99.html>

◆ Irrationalism—rising power of religious fundamentalism in school and out.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/15/education/15OHIO.html?pagewanted=print&position=top>

◆ Regimentation of society via spectacles, surveillance, and the suspension of common civil liberties.

◆ Rising authoritarianism on the job and off, as the vertical discipline of society sharpened. This was especially easy to see in schools.

◆ Militarization of the schools and society (Goodman, 2002).

◆ Technology leading not to better lives for all but to massive unemployment and overproduction.

◆ A mystical economy built on Ponzi schemes like Enron, an economy that was unraveling with the NASDAQ collapse,

◆ A deepening divide of town and country, with masses of people being driven off the land and arriving in cities, homeless and hopeless.

◆ A cultural attack in North America, designed to glorify the military and to eradicate memories of Vietnam.

◆ The privatization of the military, increasing leadership and dependence on mercenaries, secret companies, while special operations forces work under the guidance of corporate leaders.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/13/business/yourmoney/13MILI.html>

◆ Government less and less as a neutral arbiter of disputes, more and more a weapon in the hands of the powerful (Lipsitz, 1994, p.59).

September 11, the despicable terrorist attacks, and what followed, was both a qualitative shift in our social context, and a bright light illuminating what was already going on that went often unnoticed.

September 11 and the events that followed confirmed at least two related contradictions:

1. The contradiction between global capital and the national base of capital's personifications, the people who seek to ride the process. Capital, a system that rules people, is ever on the prowl for the highest forms of exploitation, of raw materials and resources, of markets, and of labor, people. Capital, as an international system which has now invaded the entire planet, knows no boundaries, but its history is bound to a national base, countries. The capital system requires the protection of national armies—which come at odds with one another in an almost infinite variety

of ways. Within countries, capital is represented, personified, by people who, from time to time, possess capital and ride it, until someone else does a better job at exploitation. At every level, all are at odds with all and, in some areas, this persistent war results in either kakistocracy, the rule of the worst conceivable leaders, or Talibanization, the rule of the most irrational and depraved.

Oil is now central to understanding current events and this contradiction. Oil wars play out with the battles between Unocal, Chevron, of the U.S.; Bidas from Argentina, Russia, the countries of the Middle East oil fields, the new central Asian nations, Columbia, Venezuela, Japan, and China, among many others. International capital, as a system, is in discord both with pure individual selfishness and the need for a national army.

It appears that U.S. leaders (who have close ties with oil interests) now seek to resolve that contradiction by invading the world, everywhere from the Philippines to Central Asia, Iraq, and Columbia, and unannounced more to come. So, the U.S. seeks to resolve the national/global contradiction by extending its global rule, by invading the world, with permanent bases everywhere, under its national base. Positioning against China has to be seen as a significant part of this effort to construct uninterrupted hegemony (Meszaros, 2002, p29).

2. That will create another contradiction, the deepening inequality that the wars' costs will lead to, causing intensified suffering among the poorest section of U.S. society and the poorest people in the world. As the economy and efforts to reify a Master/Slave relationship grind on the daily lives of poor and working people, they will fight back, developing wisdom as they go, as they always have — and must.

Nevertheless, there was an outpouring of witless nationalism following the terrorist billionaire's attacks that has to be troublesome, even if it was in fact superficial. There was, for example, no rush to enlist in the military, even though hundreds of thousands of people waived flags at baseball games. There was no patriotic purchase of stocks, even though that was urged by the White House corps. But appearances are important, superficial as they may be, as they can be transformed into something else.

This is, then, an international and national society, steeped in inequality, segregation, irrationalism, heading for a sharp financial crisis, with the most powerful of the nations promising the citizens of the world perpetual preemptive war — the highest stage of what is fairly called capitalist development.

In sum, what is afoot now can best be understood in the context of an international war of the rich on the poor. There is a word for the direct rule of the rich, coupled with the promise of war, the suspension of civil liberties, racism as public policy, a culture writhing in violence. I will leave it to the reader to name the combination of these chilling tendencies.

Such a world, such a nation, is going to make peculiar demands on its schools. No external standard, and no high-stakes test, can stand outside this social context.

It was easy to see war coming, but not this war. Nobody could have predicted

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the act of the fundamentalist Saudi billionaire, bin Laden, on September 11. But it was clear that war was at hand. I wrote, in the respected social studies journal *TRSE*, in an article submitted three years ago, “if you are teaching middle school students, you are looking at the soldiers in the next oil war” (Gibson, 2000, <http://www.pipeline.com/~rgibson/Outfoxing.htm>).

I make no crystal ball claims, but one tendency that I highlighted is worth examining a little deeper in regard to the role of school. That tendency is deindustrialization. Basic industrial production is indeed taking place, and in connection with agricultural labor and the struggle for knowledge, social and scientific, industrial labor makes our lives possible. But industrial production has been nearly obliterated in North America. It has been shipped overseas, outsourced.

Since 1970, more than one million U.S. auto workers lost their jobs, probably forever. Another million steel workers, and miners, and those in rubber and feeder plants, were permanently laid off. Labor analyst Doug Henwood estimates that there are 700,000 industrial jobs left in the U.S. I think he is wrong by about one-third, but let us take that figure as it is (http://www.leftbusinessobserver.com/LBO_current.html).

I offer four postulates which I think are firmly grounded:

1. Factories, once central to civil life in the U.S. are closed, for the most part.
2. The numbers of industrial workers in the U.S. have been slashed to strip the industrial working class of their potential, for the time being, of being serious agents for social justice — even though some industrial workers, dock-workers for example, occupy vital crossroads of capital and can shut them off if they choose.
3. Since the industrial workers, especially those in the Congress of Industrial Organizations were the people who won in the 1930s what we take for granted as civilized life, things like Social Security, the 40-hour week, rights to organize, exercise free speech and assembly, and child labor laws; the absence of their jobs is important.
4. The remaining industrial workers, on one hand, belong to unions so corrupt, undemocratic, racist, and captivated with nationalism that there is no reason to believe that they will soon be leaders for social justice. This has been true for decades (Adamic, Brecher, Serrin). On the other hand, the remaining industrial workers in North America are remarkably privileged, in a relative sense (not to discount their dangerous jobs), and they know it — indeed many of them have been steeped in the AFL-CIO culture which suggests that American workers do better because other workers do worse. Lastly, this work force is aging, and has done nearly nothing at all while hundreds of thousands of their comrades lost their jobs. The only real experience of the key industrial sectors of the AFL-CIO is retreat and loss, a habit which will be hard for them to break, even though they will

be more and more cornered as war costs and production demands crunch on their lives.

From that I submit this:

Schools are now the central organizing places of North American life. More people organize their lives around school than any other force in North American society. While schools do not garner even one tenth of the federal military budget, schools are in every community, everywhere, offering food, knowledge, free space, medical care, and hope — real or false. The military is isolated, deliberately, and does none of that. The tax system is widely distrusted, and social security still directly affects only a small portion of the population. Teachers are also able to exert the most creative control over their jobs, more than any other group of workers with medical benefits in the U.S.

Reflecting the social shift, teachers are now the most unionized people in the United States. With 3.6 million members, the school workers unions are nearly three times the size of the next largest unions, SEIU and the Teamsters. Educators in the NEA have some union democracy available to them, unlike most unionized people, as indicated by their 1999 rejection of NEA's leaders' plans to merge them into the AFT-AFL-CIO (Gibson, R. 1999, http://eserver.org/clogic/2_1/gibson.html).

This means that what teachers and related school workers do now counts more than ever before. This is true not solely because their jobs are located in the central organizing point of North American life, *jobs which cannot be outsourced*, but because most of those teachers are working with those sectors of society which are most exploited, most oppressed — communities of color and immigrant communities. It should not be lost on us that these communities are likely to be both explosive, and, especially in the case of recent immigrants, experienced in the powerful social struggles in their earlier homes.

Given the demonstrable failure of socialism, especially in the sense that socialism failed to create a mass of critically conscious people able to unravel and change their circumstances, failed completely to go beyond capitalist social relations, it would also seem that the very function of school goes to the key problem of our age, a pedagogical question: What do people need to know, and how do they need to come to know it, in order to lead reasonably free, friendly, inclusive, connected, equitable, democratic, lives? Or, to put it another way: What does it take to create the change of mind to call off the industrialized slaughter of millions of people? How do we break the modern habit of scientific murder and create social systems that allow people to care for one another?

The centrality of schools was clear in the early 1980s, when powerful liberals and conservatives joined hands with corporate leaders to seize control of the schools. Key to that was to gain control of the curriculum, both the process and product of school work, and the way to that is easy to see — and it was then, via standardization/regulation of school knowledge and high-stakes standardized tests,

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promoted by the velvet glove of egalitarian projects to save the children of super-exploited workers, people labeled “At Risk,” but in fact the iron fist of a combination of market forces and systematic designs for social control, factors which are always under contest in every work place every day, where the bosses seek to subsume the minds of the workers, and the workers persistently try erode that control in creative ways (Ross, 2000, <http://www.pipeline.com/~rgibson/trsesummer.html>).

Schools in developed capitalist society serve several related functions. They are huge markets (busses, architects, textbooks, consultant fees, etc.). In their role as markets, schools tend to commodify people — and set them apart. For example, results on high-stakes tests, mistaken inside schools for some form of human value, quickly also become markers for real estate operators, churning the housing market. The market profoundly influences every aspect of school, including the struggle for jobs and pay that teachers face at every level.

Schools also warehouse kids, saving the expense of corporate day care. They teach practical skills (reading, writing) and limited critical intellectual skills to select groups of kids. There are, after all, five or six easily identifiable “public” school systems in the U.S., each one largely serving the caste represented by the parents of the children in the school. Freedom to teach is commonly choked as one travels down income scales, with dissimilar methods and different substance taught in each of the systems. At the bottom, we witness the development of pre-prison programs.

Kids may choose to come to school to socialize with other kids, but usually in self-segregated groups inside a segregated community, not unlike many of their teachers. Still, parents send kids to strangers in schools, educators, out of trust and hope, false or real. In a society that has less and less to offer its citizens, one formal function of school would be to tamp down expectations for hope, while many educators still strive to fashion hope that is real. Such is the conflict every day for school workers, with some battling in the open, some working quietly, and others, many others, unthinkingly cooperating in the destruction of social wisdom (Gibson 1998, <http://www.pipeline.com/~rgibson/anyon.htm>).

Let us treat the issues facing the education resistance as internal and external problems, the internal usually being primary. Internally, the teaching force is more than 90 percent white and middle class. It is reasonable to suggest that many new educators will be people moving down from upper-middle class childhoods to the practically working class nature of school employment, not setting their own hours, wages, losing control over the processes of their work, etc. Professional organizations are only adding more barriers to people who have little capital as they attempt to enter the craft. The apartheid nature of the job can lead to two dangerous forms of missionaryism: benevolence driven by hubris, or unwitting missionary work for capital itself. As I noted at the outset, it is quite common to see resistance to state and federal regulations to be led by wealthy districts, people who have the resources, power, and attitude to fight back. That resistance, when it is not reaching

out consciously to poorer communities in authentic solidarity, has a veneer of elitism, racism, that is impossible to ignore.

The education union leaders, structurally trapped inside the racist demographics of the job, themselves are cooperating with the effort to regulate education, students, and teachers. Indeed, the extraordinarily well-paid leaders, who have assisted in organizing the decay of urban education, helped write the regulations and the tests, and they are currently working with ETS to do more. This is true of both the NEA and the AFT, perhaps more so of AFT, which has promoted the standards movement from the start in the open, but NEA leadership has been there all along, ostensibly on the ground that they must choose the lesser of evils. This follows the same predictable line of those who wrote the partisan standards, claiming that other's standards could be worse, and that no test would ever be attached to *their* standards — either a supremely naive or dishonest maneuver, given that many of them profited handsomely (Gibson, 1998, <http://www.pipeline.com/~rgibson/historystandards.htm>).

No matter. The very structure of the unions makes them nearly irrelevant in confronting the coming crises. Historical experience demonstrates that unions divide people more than they unite them — by craft, by race, by sex, by nation, and internally by hierarchical pay rates linked to the level of dishonesty and betrayal of the leaders, more for more. While many people will have to work with one foot in the unions, and one out, only new forms of organizations, deliberately including community people, parents and students and all school workers, not just teachers, will be able to carry forward serious resistance.

People in pacified areas often become instruments of their own oppression. They think with the minds of their enemies and claim those thoughts as their own. They confuse liberation with skills of obedience: High test scores will make you free; the union will take care of this. The struggles of daily life alone will not transform alienated consciousness. Nor will distant calls for freedom and community. The connection of practical life and elevated theory is through informed resistance, and radical reflective friendships — communities of resistance.

It takes courage to resist, or to do more than resist but to seek real transformation. Many educators were good students, the good kids, often obedient, and their training sometimes weeds out those whose attitudes are defiant or rebellious. Nevertheless, a certain kind of ethical courage is built into school work. We do not build Ford Pintos. We work with kids. Many school workers will feel compelled to stand up and say NO to what is clearly child abuse.

Educators' external problems are mounting fast: in California for example, a rapidly collapsing economy, what is likely a true 35 billion dollar budget deficit caused not only by September 11 but also by forces of overproduction, the lies of the NASDAQ, the monstrous Gray Davis-Enron theft, and a soon to burst housing bubble; that alone is a very serious crisis. Connected to a perpetual costly war, the suspension of civil liberties via the Patriot Act, the rise of irrationalism, the

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predictable betrayal of liberals like the union leadership, and the unremitting working of a bureaucracy within all forms of government, now devoted to the direct service of domination; all this adds up to what can appear to be an overwhelming economic, military, educational, cultural, and social tsunami that will ensnare the entire educational system in the absence of serious struggles for justice (Gibson, 1997, <http://www.pipeline.com/~rgibson/fascism.html>). While there is nothing new about the effort to replace the minds of teachers with the minds of textbook authors and the demands of high-stakes testing, the last decade witnessed that movement thrown into high gear (Shannon, 2001; Callahan, 1962).

All of this appears daunting. But the 1930s industrial workers who I mentioned earlier faced much, much harsher conditions, and they made dramatic gains. Then, like now, things were fairly clear, which is a new advantage over the 1990s mythical decade. It does not take much to explain to parents and kids that California is 50th in school library funding with one librarian for every 5300 children, while the national average is one for every 900. That influences more than test scores, but every aspect of learning, creating market-based barricades to curiosity. The chickens from Proposition 13 have come home to roost; the rich won from that tax restructuring and that set up their own separate and unequal schools (Krashen, 2001; Kuttner, 1985). The clarity that is available now will, necessarily, be connected to the fact that people are being positioned in ways that they must fight back in order to live, as the dockworkers are now, and school workers will soon — if they plan to keep their health benefits (McQuillen, 1995; California Libraries online at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/library/libstats.html>).

This does not mean that repression can be dismissed. Prior to Proposition 13, in the 1970s, California jailed about 110 prisoners for every 100,000 people in the state. Then, there were two big jails. From 1978 to now, the state built 28 more. In 1998, California jailed 445 prisoners per 100,000. California now has the largest prison system in the western world. It holds more prisoners than any other state, and 40 percent more than the entire federal prison system. Between 1980 and 1995, the corrections budget increased 847 percent, while spending for higher education rose 116 percent. The prison system, which is in part filled by mandatory fixed sentences, no longer makes any pretense to rehabilitation. The prison system became its own market, the guards' union the fastest growing union in the state, and one of Governor Gray Davis' major contributors, more than one million dollars in contributions. The use of high-stakes tests, which will boost drop-out rates, creates a funnel from school to jail which key players in California have a stake in maintaining (Coomes, M. 2002).

Even that will not block resistance which must rise up as the economy grinds down. It may be that school resistance, which is following the path of the dogmatic regulatory maneuvers that began in the K-12 world, and is now focused on teacher education programs, will pop up in areas we do not expect: middle class communities, private teacher education programs, charter schools, GED promoters, etc.

But if we are to measure where power will most effectively meet power, that has to be seen as the K-12 world, where uprisings of high school students who are offered hope in the form of the military draft, and pre-prison schools, are predictable and supportable. Only a few years ago the kids of Oakland struck their school system under the slogan, "Schools Not Jails," and right now an organization called Californians for Justice is organizing parents, kids, and teachers all over the state with goals like caps on class size, free books and supplies, a more just tax system, and halting the Big Tests.

Shutting down schools, however, is not the desire of any dedicated educator. But opening new schools crafted along new lines, drawn in the midst of social struggle, makes sense if the new schools run parallel to the closed school. I think closed schools, schools struck by student upheavals, may not be that far off. The freedom schools of Mississippi and South Africa, the schools that rose up in the midst of civil strife, were among the most interesting and innovative of all time. If we have limited people who want to lead resistance, it may be that K-12 schools should be their focus (Perlstein, p249).

Even so, we all will also have to fight where we are. What shall we fight for? Better webs to cooperate on with the spiders? Softer cells, roomier jails, nicer tests, softer regulations? During the 1968 rebellions in France, the students covered the walls of Paris with a slogan: "I Participate. You Participate. He, She, Or It Participate. We All Participate. They Profit." The debate of whether to resist, and how, and toward what end, is being conducted on listserves (like *CalCare* led by Oakland educator Susan Harmon, a lifelong great teacher and resister), in small education-based papers like *Substance* from Chicago and the *Rouge Forum News*, and in academic journals like *Teacher Education Quarterly*, *Phi Delta Kappan*, or *TRSE*. In those debates, people are learning once again how to be critical of one another, as we must, but comradely at the same time — understanding that we have all been wrong about important things (http://www.pipeline.com/~rgibson/rouge_forum/newspaper/index.htm).

As we began, I referred to Jean Anyon's idea that school reform without social and economic reform is like washing the air on one side of a screen door. Now I am going to suggest that reform is most unlikely. Gentler capitalism is not to be had. This is as good as it gets. What is needed is a complete transformation, an overcoming, of capital, utilizing what we have created from capital, the international unity of systems of production, exchange, and technology, and going beyond the aspects of capital that separate us: Racism, nationalism, exploitation, sexism, and irrationalism, a recognizing that as we sit in the midst of capital there will be some things we do not see. However, those who solely seek to reform capital's rule will, built into their actions, serve over time to deepen these problems, not overcome them. Just as one's theory sets up what is observed, so does one's long-term goals fashion what is achieved.

In schools, the Achilles heel of the resistance movement is the class, gender,

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and race supremacy that has become the natural backdrop of U.S. society, hubris and inequality so pervasive that it is the norm. The citizens of LaJolla, who fought to opt their children out of the abusive San Diego *Blueprint*, did not do that thinking they were forging a form of racist separation, class separation, but that is a significant part of what they did. Union meetings rarely include parents and kids. Divide and conquer is an old ploy, and we should remember the old answers: solidarity, inclusion, equality, and democracy, in the name of freedom and love — caring communities of all for all (Pang, 2001).

Real school reform, which will allow reason to transcend irrationalism built into the social structure, and equality to overcome inequality, democracy to go past authoritarianism, necessitates deep social transformation.

To do that requires three things that cannot be built into external educational regulations or their mates, the Big Tests:

1. The Critique of Tyranny and its transformation is ages old, but the metaphor of the Master and the Slaves is a lighthouse for understanding what it is people need to know, and how they need to come to know it, in order for *all* to be free (<http://www.pipeline.com/~rgibson/gibson.htm>). This is not only a study of contention, opposition, but a study of overcoming, transcending, transforming; that is, how we can start with what is and get to what ought to be. This goes to the question of how we keep our ideals and still teach within a society that suggests that may be impossible (Gibson, 2002 a online at <http://www.pipeline.com/~rgibson/AlienationRG.htm>).
2. Wisdom, the grasp of the whole, totality, and the potentially profound understanding of the relations of people to each other and their universe — the vast possibilities when people's interactions are mainly friendly, cooperative. Wisdom is understanding the whole, its relations to the composite parts, and humbling action — since knowledge is partial, but not so partial it is paralyzing. Anatol Lunacharsky, leader of the revolutionary Soviet education system in a brief period before Stalin acceded to power, suggested that a good Soviet citizen would be one who could “play one instrument very well, but who could hear and understand the whole orchestra too.” The task of intellectuals has, for too long, been to only construct reason. Now we must consciously think about connecting reason to power. But in daily life, making friends and keeping them over time is a radical notion now (Lunacharsky, 1971, p23).
3. Courageous action. Fear is commonplace in schools now. It is reasonable to be afraid of job loss, the impact of tests, mindless nationalism, etc. How can we get beyond this fear? Courage is not standing in the school house door, berating the tests and the regulations — and getting fired.

Courage is not merely making an ethical point, but getting enough power, and then using it, to make change. Part of the answer to the question that faces so many educators now, “How do I keep my ideals and still teach?” is found in gathering the power found in competent teaching, close ties with colleagues, parents, and students, and the courage of returning to work another day.

Ideas should be a key product of school. New ideas, which we sorely need, require some freedom to have them. Offering freedom to students takes courage.

Courage is developing the critique of tyranny and wisdom to the point of understanding what it takes to win, and then acting—in conjunction with the people who are losing most from the system of capital, and thus are likely to understand it best. Courage is recognizing that what people need to know and how they need to know it, in order to be free, is a process, not a dogma. We all have a lot to learn—and we need to try to learn with good humor.

Courage could mean taking a radical action like making several lifelong friends, or leaving a subversive flyer in a lunchroom, or teaching well, or concluding that one is always too busy to resist and resisting anyway, or visiting a kid’s home to see a parent, or grandparent. Courage can indeed be refusing to give the test—en masse, or denouncing a tyrannical law, or ridiculing an enforcement bureaucrat who deserves to be mocked or simply being patient with a colleague who has run out of patience. Courage can indeed be leading a wildcat strike, or studying freedom schooling to discover what forms of education can thrive in the midst of civil strife.

Value in school, related to the purposes of school described above, is created collectively by a wide range of school workers, interacting with kids and communities. At issue, as in every work place, is who will control the process and product of work. If reason is to connect with power in service to the majority in schools, the locus point of that struggle must first be for collective control of the work place, not the ballot box or the courts or arbitration system. Noticing that is courageous.

Sooner or later, the majority will not be dominated by the minority, the world will not be upside down. Given our circumstances, we need to fashion a patient sense of urgency, an apt description of many teaching days. Communities of resistance, rooted in profoundly friendly educational connections, can be formed within a society whose main message is: Look out for yourself. At issue is just how much we will lose in the interim, because sooner or later we will win. That is the rational optimism built into the structure of pedagogical work. Now, justice demands organization (Kohn, 2001; Ross, 2001).

Note

The term “Communities of Resistance” comes from the book of the same name, by A. Sivanandan, New York: Verso 1990.

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