

# New Education, Democracy and Personal Social Growth

March 7, 2019

Dear Friends of the Corrales Institute for New Education,

When I suggested at our last meeting that we might organize around things that can be learned only through practice, I was thinking about democracy, whose common and essential core is conversation, face to face and listening conversation, not voting or political parties or policy platforms or elections or even particular constitutional details, but sensitive and empathetic and enduring conversation, not simulated electronically by posting, blogging, tweeting, face-booking, emailing, texting, phoning or writing, but side by side in each other's presence conversation; conversation among equals in humanity, dignity, respect, mutual concern, honesty, treating others as we would if we loved them within the medium of shared life, shared activity and purposes, in which we walk alongside someone else's shoes, not just imaginatively or virtually but actually on the ground, and then as a consequence we act together to make lives better reflecting the generous human values we claim.

So I think a new democracy starts with something like that, and a new education would reflect this, fostering and utilizing the growth of open conversation at every opportunity.

So far as our search for a new paradigm of public education is concerned, some of the novel aspects of our project, taken as a group, already have been identified (A-E below). I believe that these aspects of education and of our project are so intertwined that they are inextricable from each other, and their apparent separateness is an artifact of analysis and our need to distinguish parts from the whole. But the important experience is immersion in the educational social milieu created by the ensemble of these aspects in concert. These aspects can be seen as aims or purposes in education that are grounded in values deeply embedded in our national, social conscience. They can be used as criteria for evaluating decisions, design, practices, resources, materials for learning. So, for example, we can ask how well a planned activity, book, tool, rule, method, solution, space, architecture, social or educational relationship reflects and supports these purposes or conditions.

A. Creating environments for learning that correspond in their complexity, richness and diverse population as much as locally possible to the complexity, richness and diverse population of our social and natural world; environments characterized by their beauty and comfort, utilizing as many as possible of the resources available; environments for lifespan learning by people of all kinds, accepting and respecting everyone, inclusive of anyone's personal history, economic condition, amount of schooling, primary language, cultural background, race, gender, age and other circumstances of birth, residence or living environment; valuing people for who and what they are right now, rather than what they ought to be, ought to think, ought to know. Shouldn't we be making environments that nurture becoming fully human, rather than admonishing people to overcome environments that don't?

B. Accommodating the biological and biosocial basis of human learning and education, which implies that all learning has a physically embodied basis and a social basis, and as a consequence education has an ethical ground as well; and this biological basis requires an environment as a coalescent constituent of our biology. Organism and environment are co-

determinants. An environment is an environment only so far as it enters into the life of an organism, and an organism is an organism only so far as it enters into the life of what constitutes its environment, so far as they are actually coalescent facets of the same thing. This is why the qualities of environments for learning and education are as significant as the personal and social qualities we embody; we are constituent elements of our own environments and our environments are constituent elements of us. [The idea that someone's mental faculties or intellectual and practical skills can be substantively developed individually, in isolation from their use in actually living in a social, material and ecological environment or community, in an institution of schooling that is in most ways isolated from nature and society, is a fantasy misleading public education.]

C. Emphasizing things that only can be learned through practice: evolving and practicing a new democracy, saving and sustaining the planet, empathy and the capacity to feel what it means to step into someone else's shoes, genuine conversation and the ethical use of language by listening and seeing clearly and accepting and respecting others for who they are, reciprocity and cooperation, mutual caring, developing the control and health of our bodies as the means of our thought and presence and efficacy in the world, growing food, accessing and utilizing all the resources in the local and greater community, taking intellectual risks and ethical social risks, making decisions, growth in all the human arts, and for the lifelong pursuit of developing as a person, treating others as we would if we loved them, and becoming a fully social individual.

D. Growing the affective, emotional and spiritual nurturing of social life that manifests itself in respect and trust, caring and sharing, exuberance and joy, creativity and inspiration, physical exercise and meditation, humor and celebration, invention and repurposing, song and dance, happiness in each other's company and satisfaction in working together toward shared purposes. In an environment of happy affect, all the things that schools find difficult become more effortless. The development of lasting attitudes, behaviors, expectations and preferences are more important in the growth of learning, thoughtfulness and understanding than the contents of any knowledge. They are more important because they matter more in the future. They shape the frames of mind through which experience is understood and applied. They determine what is learned.

E. Developing social efficacy and facility: helping people become better cooperators, critics, supporters, helpers, lovers, parents; to become effective not only at adapting to their changing circumstances, but also effectively to alter and guide these circumstances as participating members of their communities; and contributing their continually developing, personal abilities to improving the life of and within the social, political, economic, cultural, and natural environment. This would necessarily include some facility with historically, socially developed resources, for example, literacy and mathematics, hand tools and computers, but only in the context of what they are used for in the present circumstances of learning, and not the same for everyone. A personal skill or ability is meaningful only with regard to the use to which it is put in the context of one's present life in society. And these uses are subject to judgment by other values.

There are no acceptable public values that accrue exclusively to the benefit or advantage of any individual. So far as education is fixated on training for this or that particular employment and economic utility, or for individual and competitive achievement, personal

gain and status, it misses entirely the central point of *public* education, which is to be continually becoming a more and more effective, contributing member of the public.

Improving and saving democracy, sustaining the planet, realizing equality, living healthily, relating ethically, cooperating, developing and contributing our personal talents, making and creating things of utility, novelty, inquiry, art and beauty, finding the joy in learning and living, these are purposes of public education to be enthusiastic about.

If something like what is contained in these paragraphs actually does characterize a new paradigm that we would introduce to public education, the challenging task is to describe how these things are realized in a place of learning that is not imaginary. What does this look like and how does it work?

We already have identified some outlines of what this might be: a learning environment that reflects the complexity of our social and natural environment that would differ in detail from place to place and that we sometimes refer to as a learning park, a multigenerational and lifelong learning community inclusive of individual differences, a practicing democracy, access to the resources of the surrounding communities, being in each other's presence and conversing and acting ethically while also providing for moments of solitude, practicing social service, following sustainable practices, learning widely valued social media like conversation, listening, literacy and mathematics by choice in one's own time, providing meals and a safe place for adults and children sixteen hours a day, providing resources for creating and making things with people of experience, et cetera.

For many, the purpose of public education is about maintaining the social, political and economic order, the status quo, and ensuring that the future looks like today, or perhaps like a more profitable version of today, and about training or preparing individuals to fit into this order. But this cannot be true in every way, because there are things about the status quo that contradict our values. There are social and ethical choices about what to keep and what to change. And the future is problematic, unpredictable, full of surprises and unforeseen consequences. In our technological economy, public education has largely morphed into technical training, even literacy and math are approached as technical training, and this seems to make the future more predictable and efficient, but it does not have as a purpose to make life in the future better for all.

Education is about change; about personal change we call growth, and about the vision and efficacy to change our immediate circumstances and our social and natural environments for the better. Hopeful change depends on dreams growing out of our moment in history; imagining things that don't yet exist, but that are based in the realities of our time. Many of the educational purposes we have espoused are embedded in values, beliefs and practices held close by many people, but often expressed only in conversations about acts of altruism, or stories about the better angels of our national character. Still, they are there in the hearts of people everywhere, and they are a ground on which to build a better way to educate. Our greatest challenges arise from matters of our own making. We all might benefit from a lifelong education that helps us better understand our values, each other and ourselves.

Greeting a new day,  
Paul