

## **Threat to the Public Schools and Implications for Teacher Education**

**By Erskine S. Dottin**

### **Introduction**

The invitation to me to be a participant in this special 25th anniversary issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly*, with its focus on teacher education concerns for the future, aroused my interest in considering the places—schools—where teacher education candidates are expected to work, and caused me to revisit the dictionary to look up the definition of the word threat. According to *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (1977), the definition of threat is an indication of something impending or an expression of intention to inflict evil, injury, or damage.

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### **Putting the Threat in Connotative Context**

The writings of Blythe McVicker Clinchy (1997), Maxine Greene (1997), and Tony Wagner (1997), among others, have reinforced the idea that the threat to public education lies more in the way we conceive and execute the educational process itself than in other variables. For example, there have been con-

trasting views between business leaders and educators about the purpose of education. These connotative contrasts exist toward the end of the twentieth-century just as they did at the beginning of the century (Farkas, 1993).

Jane Roland Martin's use of the concept of school as the moral equivalent of home helps to shed light on these ongoing contrasting views. Writing in Evans Clinchy's 1997 work titled *Transforming Public Education: A New Course for America's Future*, Martin states:

Thinking of school as a special kind of production site—a factory that turns out workers for the nation's public and private sectors—government officials, business leaders, granting agencies, and educational administrators focus today on standards. As they see it, the products of our nation's classrooms, like the automobiles on a General Motors assembly line and the boxes of cereal in a Kellogg's plant, should be made according to specifications. When minimum requirements are not met, the obvious remedy is to tighten quality control. For colleges and universities, this is apt to take the form of higher entrance requirements. For U.S. public schools, it translates into efforts to improve testing, hold teachers accountable for students' failure to measure up, and standardize the curriculum (1997, p. 18).

She goes on to suggest:

In an age when the lives of all too many children bring to mind Dickens's novels, it is perhaps to be expected that young children in school are pictured as raw material, teachers as workers who process their students before sending them on to the next station on the assembly line, and curriculum as the machinery that, over a span of 12 years or so, forges the nation's young into maketable products.

As noted by Martin (1997), in particular, and by others (Noddings, 1997), in general, this factory model of schooling presupposes that the needs and conditions of children, their parents, and the nation itself have already been met when children arrive at school—for example, the need to love, and be loved, the need to feel safe and secure and at ease with self and others, the need to experience intimacy and affection, the need to be perceived as unique individuals and to be treated as such (Martin, 1997, pp. 18-19).

Consequently, the production-line picture is grounded in a tacit assumption that:

... school does not have to be a loving place, the classroom does not have to have an affectionate atmosphere, and teachers do not have to treasure the individuality of students because the school's silent partner [home] will take care of this. (Martin, 1997, p. 19)

The connotative idea of "school as the moral equivalent of home," which places emphasis on transmitting love, care, concern, connection, knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values germane to being a member of culture (Martin, 1997, p. 19), when juxtaposed with the connotative idea of "school as factory" which focuses on

students as raw materials, highlights the threat.

To use a health metaphor, the holistic health of persons in the schools will be seriously impaired by the benign neglect of the factory model in its quest to meet the needs of industrial society. On the other hand, in Martin's notion of school as the moral equivalent of home, in which the school is asked to give attention to some of the functions of the home in light of societal changes and transformations, and to place the child at the center of the educational process, the holistic health of persons is given priority.

### **Current Connotative Threat**

If as stated earlier, the threat to the public schools may lie more in the way we conceive and execute the educational process, then the threat continues to be concerns for efficiency over concerns for human effectiveness. Should the primary purpose of education be to enhance the economic and technological capacity of the nation so that we can compete with other nations and ultimately defeat them? In other words, is the school's primary purpose to impart an established body of facts and skills? Or should the purpose of education be to draw forth human potentials and less a handing down of prescribed facts and skills?

The plethora of educational reform reports within the past fifteen years, starting with the 1983 harbinger of doom report, *A Nation at Risk*, seem more concerned with educational solutions grounded in national productivity and less on enhancing human development. In fact, the current educational vision being pushed by President Bill Clinton through *Educational Goals 2000* is grounded in traditional pragmatic assumptions about students, teaching, and learning that are tied more to notions of schooling for national productivity, and less to concerns for human effectiveness. In other words, knowledge of self is considered irrelevant. Consideration of the human qualities of persons in schools, and persons who teach, is becoming more and more a vital missing dimension of schools and of teacher training (Banner & Cannon, 1997).

Educational Goals 2000 requires states and local districts to buy into mandatory state goals, standards, and tests that are based upon, and similar to, voluntary national goals, standards, and tests. The giving and/or withholding of federal funds is being used as the whip to get states in line with this educational vision. Embedded in this vision or conception of schooling, and teacher preparation, according to Nel Noddings (1997) is an "ideology of control" that neglects "... the personal lives and values of students....[and teachers]."

This vision begs the question regarding the changing nature of knowledge, how students learn, what's really worth knowing, and the essential competencies for life in the 21st century (Clinchy, 1997). The skills necessary for the 21st century as advocated by those like Howard Gardner (1991) and TheodoreSizer (1992), that is, the ability to learn on one's own, to work effectively in teams, to solve problems,

and to take initiative are ignored in *Educational Goals 2000* in favor of the skills of doing well on standardized tests, getting into a good college, and memorizing information. The literature is replete with dissatisfaction of the latter as the purpose of education.

There are those like Anita Teeter (1997) who are calling for a more profoundly different public school system for the 21st century. This system would be based upon constant attention to the lives of individual children, to the familial and community worlds from which those children come, and upon an important aim of education to create decent, compassionate, humane individuals who are "...caring adults, builders of communities, sharers of learning, lovers of the printed word, citizens of the world, and nurturers of nature" (Teeter, 1997, p. 168).

### **Embracing A New Vision**

Such a vision as that espoused for public schools by A.M. Teeter (1997) is congruent with the vision articulated in 1991 by Global Alliance for Transforming Education in the document *Education 2000: A Holistic Perspective*. This view of schooling assumes that man/woman (students or teachers) cannot be ultimately understood in the same manner that we have come to understand atoms, frogs, and machines. Instead, this model of schooling, teaching, and learning assumes that the individual is responsible for his/her own knowledge; knowledge that originates in, and is composed of, what exists in the individual's consciousness and feelings, and as a result, of his/her experiences, and the projects he/she adopts in the course of his/her life. In this model of schooling, individuals are not machines, caught up in the grasp of unconscious motives. Instead, human beings—students, teachers, administrators, parents—embody subjective freedom, and are in the process of creating themselves, and creating meaning in life (Rogers, 1964).

Education, from this paradigm, supports the development of intimate relationships across multiple dimensions of learning: intrapersonal learning (relational experiences promoting full development and integration of mind/heart/body/spirit); interpersonal learning (experiencing intimacy on a person to person basis, building connections that build community); and transpersonal learning (connecting in life-affirming ways with non-human entities and broader social and physical systems and forces).

This transformed conception of teaching and learning shifts the focus from knowledge as commodity to understanding knowledge as gift to be received, developed, and shared by all. In this view, learning involves deriving personal meaning from intense, complex, and multi-dimensional experience. It is through full engagement in such a process that each individual's identity as a uniquely gifted self can emerge. Processes of teaching and learning centered on the metaphor of "gift" defy passivity and uniformity, and challenge current conceptions of predictability and control as contained in the educational vision of *Goals 2000*.

The habits and values of the current consumer-obsessed society—passivity, desire for instant gratification, and self-centeredness—reinforce the idea of knowledge of commodity (Clinchy, 1997). Current classroom realities suggest that students lack the capacity to sustain concentration on difficult tasks and to be alone without distractions for a period of time. These classroom realities pose a threat to public schools if the necessary skills for students of the 21st century are seen as being able to do serious intellectual or creative work, pursue individual interests, use leisure time productively, show emotional vitality and inner discipline required to really understand another person, develop friendships, or be a loving parent (Clinchy, 1997).

### Conclusion

The attempt in this presentation has been to suggest that the threat to public schools, and concurrently to teacher education, lies in the way we conceive and execute the educational process itself. Furthermore, the contention has been made that there is a greater threat to public schools, and teacher education, in conceiving and executing educational processes that are shaped by concerns for efficiency than in conceiving and executing educational process that are framed with concerns for human effectiveness—that is, concerns for personal qualities and aspects of self. Concerns for the latter presuppose the creation of schools, and teacher preparation programs, that enhance a more humane and benevolent society. Such concerns, therefore, call for a set of educational priorities that are different than the priorities delineated in *Educational Goals 2000* or the current standards movement. These priorities couched in *Goals 2000* language would be as follows:

1. By the year 2000, the primary—indeed the fundamental—purpose of education will be to nourish the inherent possibilities of human development.
2. By the year 2000, each learner—young and old—will be recognized as unique and valuable.
3. By the year 2000, education will be construed as a matter of experience, that is, the learner's connection to the workings of the social world will acquaint him/her with the realm of his/her own inner world.
4. By the year 2000, subjects will be studied in a holistic manner, and not as fragmented separate knowledge bases; as a result, educational structures will be congruent with this idea.
5. By the year 2000, teachers will be viewed as professionals characterized by qualities of vision, training, responsibility, and accountability; furthermore, they will be facilitators of the kind of learning that is an organic, natural process, and not a product that can be turned out on demand.
6. By the year 2000, students will be allowed authentic choice and

meaningful opportunities for real choice in their learning at every stage of the learning process; families will have access to a diverse range of educational options in the public school systems.

7. By the year 2000, each student will be seen as a global citizen.
8. By the year 2000, education will spring organically from a profound reverence for life in all its forms.
9. By the year 2000, there will be a truly democratic model of education that empowers all citizens to participate in meaningful ways in the life of the community, and the planet.
10. By the year 2000, all people will be seen as spiritual beings in human form who express their individuality through their talents, abilities, intuition, and intelligence.

When schools, or teacher preparation programs, as Neil Postman (1996) suggests, do not facilitate the traditional stories of America but rather those of the individual, being told as experiments, perpetual and fascinating open-ended question marks, then children will enter school, and teacher education candidates will enter preparation programs, as question marks and leave as periods or exclamation points. The threat to such a conception and execution of educational processes is the traditional limitation for human beings in schools and programs of having their "selves" concealed, of enduring shame of self, and of seeing accomplishment as meriting excessive self pride.

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