Imagining futures: the public school and possibility

MAXINE GREENE

A vision of what public education in the US might become is here prefaced by an examination of the fin de siècle social and political turbulence, with new problems and old issues surfacing to influence the possibilities for schools. Two cornerstones of a vision are then articulated: the need for community, for a coming together with something to pursue, and the importance of the imaginative voice of the artist in human conversation. These cornerstones yield a description of the kinds of reflective encounters for children along with the aesthetic necessary for the development of social imagination and the development of an articulate public.

The ‘facts of the case’

To project a vision of what public education in the US might become in the 21st century is to move back and forth between the predictable and the possible. Changes wrought by technology, by demographic shifts around the world (the movements of refugees, the diasporas), by decolonization, by the new pluralization in tension with media-imposed uniformity, make it impossible to think in terms of continuities in the histories of schools. New populations being initiated into a democratic way of life in the US come from backgrounds and hold expectations that were seldom taken account of in time past. The perceived absoluteness of value systems and moral codes has changed with a growing regard for diversity and, at once, the discovery of ‘otherness’. Notions of liberalism and what is called ‘neo-liberalism’ have altered, especially in the light of what appears to be a newly coherent US conservatism. And in the USA obligations to the poor or unfortunate in the shape of social support systems have become problematic for many people. Yet under the surfaces of a prosperous, self-confident social order in the USA there exists undeniable social suffering, resulting ‘from what political, economic, and institutional power does to people, and, reciprocally, from how these forms of power themselves influence response to social problems’ (Kleinman et al. 1996: xl). All such changes affect, in some measure, conceptions of education as well as conceptions of democracy.
Defining the possibilities of schools and the purposes of a system of US public education is therefore an uneasy task. Familiar certainties have slipped. Upsurges of optimism with regard to technical and economic advances have become more startling. Yet the tendency to ignore the growing gulf between rich and poor is all-pervasive, and ethnic and racial prejudices are seemingly insuperable. No serious consideration seems to be given, perhaps especially among public school curriculum framers, to the traditions that should be kept alive, of the ‘conversation’ Michael Oakeshott (1962: 199) saw as the bearer of liberal education. Conversation, he said, is an ‘unrehearsed intellectual adventure’:

... Education, properly speaking, is an initiation into the skill and partnership of this conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices, to distinguish the proper occasions of utterance, and in which we acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to conversation. And it is this conversation which, in the end, gives place and character to every human activity and utterance.

Such a ‘conversation’ raises questions that need attending to: the matter of the canon; the fixation on the West; the suppression of colonialist perspectives; the exclusion of women’s voices, working class voices, the voices of the oppressed.

In the search for a vision of education, what is called ‘reality’ must be understood to be interpreted experience. Interpretations and perspectives on the world are bound to differ. Children’s poetry and paintings now give some idea of how young people look upon schoolrooms and schoolyards and the surrounding streets. Teacher research offers a viewing of contemporary schools by those held central to what happens there. On occasion, renderings of parents’ responses to what they see and hear are made public. Through partnership arrangements, the voices of artists, scientists, and local businessmen are heard. Reports come from various levels of administration. Stories of classroom veterans often conflict with those starting out on teaching careers. Voices come these days too from kitchens, courtrooms, and the waiting rooms in welfare offices. Immigrant voices come from the so-called ‘borderlands’ (Anzaldúa 1987) as they tell stories of tyrannies and massacres. They try to say what it means for their children to learn in a free country. Some are hypnotized by images of success. Fundamentalists of all religions make themselves heard, men and women intent on their own orthodoxies. The children of all such families are the newcomers today, each of whom, as Hannah Arendt (1958: 177–178) put it, inaugurates a new beginning as she or he brings into the social grouping something ‘which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before’.

The poet, Derek Walcott (1987: 79), gives an implicit warning to the theorists at odds with one other, empirical scientists, psychologists of various perspectives, curriculum designers, management specialists, social scientists, and philosophers. ‘To have loved one horizon is insularity,’ he wrote, ‘it blindfolds vision, it narrows experience’. Monological naming and seeing, and one-dimensional thinking is so appealing so much of the time. Against that is what critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1981: 288–300)
called *heteroglossia*, becoming more aware of the diversity of horizons in the discourse, and of the danger of reducing what is known to a single consciousness, rather than a multiplicity of voices in any gathering of persons.

The work of US schools used to be an expression of a consensus, a set of agreements on the nature of adult society and what ought to be transmitted to the upcoming generation. The diversity of voices, horizons, and opinions from the outside was distracting, at odds with the culture of public schooling. The task of the American school was to assimilate those who were different, to enable them to stand on common ground. Schools would wall out the polyphony of the ever-changing culture; something better, something more democratic, something more ‘American’ would counteract the heterogeneity that seemed to many to threaten the existence of community.¹ Such a stance is no longer possible. The multiplication of dissonant voices and the proliferation of what used to be called ‘antisocial’ sub-cultures, the languages, the costumes, the symbolic codes and gestures cannot be denied their reality nor their intrusive power. Music identified with popular culture—rock, rap, hip-hop, and the rest—must be granted its integrity and its importance in expressing widely shared concerns in young people’s lives. That some of it is marred by sexism, racism, unwarranted spurts of violence and hate may mean a need for critical understanding rather than censorship and disapproval.

The implications for curriculum and for an approach to older traditions are multiple. It will be both necessary and interesting to involve students in the shaping of curricula, especially those geared to the teaching of the many modes of literacy now required for making sense of a changing world. It may be that the ‘conversation’ described by Oakeshott can be expanded, again with the help of young people, not only to include those voices so long excluded, but the popular and folk arts as well. Street theatre, varieties of graffiti, murals: all may be absorbed, as the population becomes all the more multicultural, as intermarriage increases, and as new immigrants exert more influence over television and film.

Collaborations now vaguely anticipated will become commonplace. Churches, neighbourhood groups, clubs, informal organizations of many kinds may be playing parts in the construction of new traditions and new curricula. At once, differences among diverse groups, gangs, coalitions, and the rest will have to be confronted and, when possible, resolved.

American young people are presently often called upon to make the kinds of choices their elders seldom had to confront: the use of drugs; birth control and the problem of abortion; decisions with regard to handguns; the predicament of foster children or abandoned children; child abuse; the disintegration of numerous families. Questions about birth control, sex education, and single motherhood are questions that radiate outward; but most schools do not treat such matters as relevant to the larger issues of literacy. Schools of the future, no matter what their origin or allegiance, will be called upon to do more than what is loosely called ‘community service’. Young people need to be coached, at the very least, in the skills required to cope with institutions, agencies of various kinds, family illnesses, the complexities of ‘welfare-to-work’ regulations. To do this well
may mean to integrate certain of these concerns, as well as students’ ability to cope with losses and catastrophes (and the kinds of learning, including film, that they entail), into interdisciplinary curricula. For example, writing about a notorious assault on a woman jogger in Central Park in New York City a few years ago, Deborah Meier (1995: 61), once a New York principal, stresses the importance of addressing the children’s reaction to something that had happened nearby and to the teachers’ fears and angers as well.

The events unfolded in such a way that adolescents in East Harlem were perceived as a threat to decent middle class joggers. It was easy for kids to fall into the trap set by reporters and the general climate and respond as though they were defending the alleged attackers and distancing themselves from the victim. . . . Our school’s size, our simple and flexible schedule, the advisory system, and our collegial organization made it feasible to address the crisis together and immediately.

In a New York school like Central Park East, there was no problem in making what occurred part of a subject of study. Clearly, the tensions and violence that mark much of urban life could become relevant issues in social studies or in the arts and humanities. Rigour and quality of research need not be sacrificed when problems close to students’ lives force a recognition that students and teachers both need help in reading the surrounding culture, in naming what is lacking, in identifying what might be done in efforts to transform.

Until a community discovers how to make technology serve its articulated needs, there will be no knowing whether or not it serves the human cause. Preoccupations with testing, measurement, standards, and the like follow from a damaging approach to children as ‘human resources’, their supposed malleability and the belief that they can and should be moulded in accord with the needs of the technological society. Assessments are important if they do more than simply sort people out for places on a hierarchy. Standards are important if they connect with learners’ own desires to appear as the best they can be, to achieve in response to what they hope to be. Extrinsically imposed they can deny the human effort to reach further, to imagine possibility.

Similar things might be said about the uses of television in recent US history. The rendering of demonstrations, marches, sit-ins, and of the attacks on civil rights workers surely helped to change public opinion about the civil rights struggle. The federal government might not have felt it politically expedient to intervene if public attention had not been drawn to the struggle. Television images may have fueled flames of racial hatred in some places, as they brought ancient prejudices and fears to the surface. The focus on such events as the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King helped bring into being a number of cultural myths, widely shared experiences that helped create (at least for a while) common memories, if not a common world. Similar responses to the deaths of John Lennon, Elvis Presley, Princess Diana, and John F. Kennedy, Jr. have helped to draw public mourning away from centres of
benign and romantic power to what is described as ‘celebrity culture’, something that calls for attention from the schools.

Seeking role models of authentic excellence and not celebrity for its own sake, teachers and students in all their diversity may be drawn to reflect on the standards or norms that become summonses in their lives—what is attainable, what is only glitter and show, the contemporary Jay and Daisy Gatsby (Fitzgerald 1991: 104):

The truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God—a phrase, which, if it means anything, means just that—and he must be about his Father’s Business, the service of a vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty. So he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end.

Gatsby’s was not merely a dream of wealth and status. It was accompanied by unembarrassed racism, anti-Semitism, and a fearful ‘carelessness’. Jay and Daisy ‘were careless people ... they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made’ (Fitzgerald 1991: 187–188). For all the sentimental, romantic, and sometimes pietistic hopes of certain educators, the common dream and dominant hope of the contemporary American is for personal wealth and prominence, if not for a kind of boundless security.

The sociologist-philosopher Pierre Bourdieu (1999) is among those who believe that television is today largely responsible for identifying ‘reality’ with economic reality. The media, he argues, imposes an acceptance of the claim that democracy can best be insured by the so-called free market economy. The free market, along with worldwide monetary controls, globalization and the insistence that social spending must be cut in order to prevent inflation and economic decline, are all ascribed an objective existence, bringing with them an increase of the ‘social suffering’, the erosion of social services, support for health and education, and new explosions of nationalism and chauvinism.

Yet, even if we were to take for granted the need for such cuts and controls, television disseminates a myth of liberal triumphs. The suppression of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, the so-called winning of the Cold War, the apparent withdrawal of a few of the worst modern tyrants, the ‘victory’ over Saddam Hussein, have each been used to justify the control by the International Monetary Fund, in some fashion linked to neoliberalism. If photographs of starving children and homeless adults and corpses spread upon roadways no longer appear on television, we are somehow convinced that peace and security have been won in those countries. Distancing, abstractness, wishful acceptances take over, even when current events are talked about in schools. For all the talk of global citizenship, multiculturalism, social justice and the rest, an untroubled positivism (an unexamined split between facts and values) has taken over in too many classrooms. Reflectiveness and critical inquiry by children will be increasingly difficult if this particular mode of ‘carelessness’ is not allayed.
These then may well be called ‘the facts of the case’ at the end of the 20th century.

**Coming together in the name of ‘something to pursue’**

Discussing the role of the disciplines in US scholarly life, John Dewey wrote that, for all the effort put forth in the sciences, social sciences, and philosophy, the results were not adequate when measured against the energy exerted. What is wrong, Dewey (1931: 11) argued, lies

... with our lack of imagination in generating leading ideas. Because we are afraid of speculative ideas, we do, and do over and over again, an immense amount of specialized work in the region of ‘facts’. We forget such facts are only data; that is, are only fragmentary, uncompleted meanings, and unless they are rounded out into complete ideas – a work which can only be done by hypotheses, by a free imagination of intellectual possibilities – they are as helpless as are all maimed things and as repellent as needlessly thwarted ones.

The claim about the incompleteness of mere facts remains important, as does the linking of imagination to possibility.² Yet teacher educators and school administrators do not think speculatively despite all the work towards fruitful conceptions of active learning, critical questioning, and the construction of meanings. There is almost no mention of imagination or of its relation to notions of the possible. No attention is paid to Dewey’s idea of the incompleteness of meanings when not rounded out by the imaginative projection of possibilities.

‘The Possible’s slow fuse is lit by the Imagination’, (Dickinson 1960: 688–689), but there are no single views of the possible, any more than there are ways of measuring what it signifies in anyone’s imagination. Imagination summons up visions of a better state of things, an illumination of the deficiencies in existing situations, a connection to the education of feeling, and a part of intelligence. Mary Warnock (1978: 202–203) evokes Derek Walcott’s view of the enlargement of experience and the need for more than one horizon:

The belief that there is more in our experience of the world than can possibly meet the unreflecting eye, that our experience is significant for us and worth the attempt to understand it ... this kind of belief may be referred to as the feeling of infinity. It is a sense that there is always more to experience and more in what we experience than we can predict. Without some such sense, even at the quite human level of there being something which deeply absorbs our interest, human life becomes perhaps not actually futile or pointless, but experienced as if it were. It becomes, that is to say, boring. In my opinion, it is the main purpose of education to give people the opportunity of not ever being, in this sense, bored; of not ever succumbing to a feeling of futility, or to the belief that they have come to the end of what is worth having.

On the importance of having something worth pursuing, Warnock (1978) quotes a few lines from the British poet William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* (1805), subtitled ‘The growth of a poet’s mind’. The poem is studded with accounts of moments when the boy and then the man feels
himself to be in touch with something larger, something that activates his imagination and moves him to reach beyond himself. Writing about ‘School-Time’, recalling horseback riding with his friend through the countryside, Wordsworth recaptures such moments and asks ‘who shall parcel out/ His intellect, by geometric rules,/ split like a province into round and square?’. No one can predict the experiences of wideawakeness, of insight that at least allow a young person to drink the visionary power. Remembering, he ‘retains an obscure sense of possible sublimity’. And then, aware of growing up, aware of his ‘growing faculties’, he feels they have something to pursue.

There is something vitally important to education in the idea that the consciousness of growing, becoming different, can be tied to some memory of feelings of wonder, of recognition, that can counteract the feelings of futility Warnock (1978) speaks of feelings that so often block any intention to learn. A practitioner too can respond imaginatively to educational deficiency. Thinking about a small school in which people come together in community, a teacher may be provoked into a critique of a large, bureaucratic, depersonalized urban school that had never occurred to her or him before coming on an example of the way schools ought to be. The thought of the difference between a school caught in the lockstep of 45-minute periods and one allowing for flexible time periods for, say, social studies and the humanities may sharpen the teacher’s feelings of frustration at inflexibility and move her or him to call for change. There are many instances of images of the possible calling attention to what is lacking that break through the boundaries laid down by the taken-for-granted.

When we think of the boredom in US high schools and the nihilism that can and has led to fearsome violence, we need to explore the ways there are of overcoming senseless fury at existing conditions, feelings of pointless-ness, even despair. All this argues for an encouragement of imaginative reaching out that finds responses in the community. It argues for an opening of spaces for dialogue, for shared memories, for a coming together in the name of ‘something to pursue’.

Clearly, the creation of communities in classrooms may be one of the most difficult and yet the most essential undertakings in the schools of the future. The fascination with cyberspace communications rarely leads to those face-to-face relationships that enable persons to be open to one another. Nor does it lead to the active empathy, made possible largely by imagination, which draws young people together. It is not simply a passive intuition of what others are feeling but individuals moved to be there for each other in times of difficulty, confusion, suffering, making more likely a sharing of what Alfred Schütz (1961: 220) called ‘a common vivid present, our vivid present’. A ‘we-relation’ is established when people communicate in such a fashion that, by means of their communication, they feel as if they are experiencing an occurrence together. ‘Living in our mutual vivid present’, Schütz wrote, we are directed towards the thought to be realized in and by the communicating process. ‘We grow older together.’ We grow through the cultivation of our capacities as the poet did; we grow as we choose the projects by which we create our identities.3
To educate for the mode of associated living that is called community, teachers must think about what is involved in inventing the kinds of situations where individuals come together in such a way that each one feels a responsibility for naming the humane and the desirable and moving together to attain them. For the community is of great relevance for our thinking about schools of the near future and the formation of what Dewey (1954: 184) called ‘an articulate public’. El Puente is a school in Williamsburg, the largest Latino centre in New York City, concerned with building a movement focused on the development of the whole human being and the whole community (Rose 1995). Frances Lucerna and Luis Acosta, who founded the school under the aegis of the New Vision Schools in the city, are opposed to the kind of bureaucracy that places more value on standards and benchmarks ‘that are outside ourselves, outside of both our individual and collective experience’. Where subject learning is concerned, Frances Lucerna (Rose 1995: 211) says:

Look what’s happened to reading, writing, and arithmetic . . . these ‘basics’. We don’t see them any longer as life skills. They’re subjects to be taken, subjects outside our experience. They’re not seen as essential to our knowledge of the world, but that if young people know that if they can read, if they can write, if they can understand algebraic codes—if they see that they can use those skills, use them to bring about change in their own lives or in the lives of their families, or in their communities—well, then, there’s no stopping them.

Through the use of those skills, the students mapped their community, launched a newspaper, undertook one campaign on vaccination, and another on lead and lead poisoning. Bridges were built between the community and the school. Diverse young people and their parents came together, each from her or his location, to pursue something they all thought worth pursuing. They were not like the young Wordsworth hearing the blasts of wind below the mountain crag and feeling in touch with something larger that awakened a ‘visionary power’. But, feeling the changes in themselves and those around, they were able to extend the grasp of consciousness beyond Williamsburg to the city itself and, at length, develop a vision of what urban life might be if communities worked together and social suffering was, in some manner they were trying to imagine, healed.

Such people are beginning to grasp the Deweyan idea that democracy means a community-in-the-making. Through the building of a community the ground may be laid for an articulate public empowered and encouraged to speak for itself, perhaps in many voices, within classrooms (and corridors, and school yards) people look forward to seeing, across spaces where there can be dialogue and exchanges of all kinds in which persons can speak in their own idioms, avoiding the formulaic, the artificial and the ‘sound-bite’. For democracy, Dewey (1954: 184) argued, ‘is a name for a life of free and enriching communion. It had its seer in Walt Whitman’.
The voice of the artist in imagining the possible

Poets help us to penetrate the darkness and the silences and move on to visions of possibility. The 19th century US poet, Walt Whitman (1931:46) presented himself as the comrade of all sorts of people, as a learner, a teacher (of the ‘simplest ... of the thoughtfullest’), as a novice, a farmer, an artist, a gentleman, a rowdy, a fancy-man, a physician, resisting ‘anything better than my own diversity’. In Song of Myself (1931: 53), he called to the stage the forgotten, the disabled, and the oppressed, all of whom were to become cherished members of the community:

Through me many long dumb voices,
Voices of the interminable generations of prisoners and slaves,
Voices of the diseased and despairing and of thieves and dwarfs,
Voices of cycles of preparation and accretion,
And of the threads that connect the stars, and of sombs,
and of the fatherstuff,
And of the rights of them the others are down upon... Through me forbidden voices....

William Carlos Williams⁶ (Rosenthal 1956: 46–47) spoke oftentimes about the need to imagine, to ‘invent’, as in A Sort of a Song:

Let the snake wait under
his weed
and the writing
be of words, slow and quick, sharp
to strike, quiet to wait,
sleepless
—through metaphor to reconcile
the people and the stones.
Compose. (No ideas
but in things) Invent!
Saxifrage is my flower that splits
the rocks.

Silence often afflicts those wanting to write or to speak. Tillie Olsen (1978: 6) wrote of ‘the unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being, but cannot. In the old, the obvious parallels: when the seed strikes stone, the soil will not sustain; the spring is false; the time is drought or blight or infestation; the frost comes premature.’ Out of such recognition may come the envisaging of a better state of things, an imagining of the possible. Other voices demand attentiveness by school people. James Baldwin (1993: 285) described the profound impact of Martin Luther King’s tragic murder after all the acts of faith demanded by all the marches and petitions when Dr. King was alive.

One could scarcely be deluded by Americans anymore, one scarcely dared to expect anything from the great, vast, blank generality, and yet one is compelled to demand of Americans—and for their sakes, after all—a generality, a clarity, and a nobility which they did not dream of demanding of themselves.... Perhaps, however, the moral of the story (and the hope of the world) lies in what one demands, not of others, but of oneself.
There is a bitter futuring here, the other dark side of possibility. How, striving to create a vision of what the schools should be, do we cross the gulfs? How do we overcome the ‘blank generality’? The African American novelist Ralph Ellison (1952: 579) signals another possibility:

So why do I write, torturing myself to put it down? Because, in spite of myself, I’ve learned some things. Without the possibility of action, all knowledge comes to one labeled ‘file and forget’, and I can neither file nor forget. Nor will certain ideas forget me; they keep filing away at my lethargy, my complacency.

It is not that the artist offers solutions or gives directions. He nudges; he renders us uneasy; he makes us (if we are lucky) see what we would not have seen without him. He moves us to imagine, to look beyond. And at the end Ellison (1952: 581) speaks in a language school people like the founders of El Puente understand, along with enough others to give us models and a kind of hope:

In going underground, I whipped it all except the mind, the mind. And the mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived. That goes for societies as well as for individuals. Thus, having tried to give pattern to the chaos which lives within the pattern of your certainties, I must come out, I must emerge... Even hibernation can be overdone, come to think of it. Perhaps that’s my greatest social crime, I’ve overstayed my hibernation, since there’s a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play.

To be responsible in that fashion, we realize, the individual has to win recognition. In his prologue, before flashing back to his life story, the narrator explains that he is invisible ‘simply because people refuse to see me’. And then:

That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. (Ellison 1952: 3)

In any quest for educational purpose, for people to overcome invisibility, they must do something about their own and their colleagues’ ‘inner eyes’ so they can reconceive or reconstruct or reinterpret what they look upon as reality. It may be a matter of conceiving a plan of living once again, a project through which we can choose ourselves.

Encounters with the arts

‘Human association’ writes Bernard Barber (1992: 5), a US sociologist,

depends on imagination: the capacity to see in others beings like ourselves. It is thus through imagination that we render others sufficiently like ourselves for them to become subjects of tolerance and respect, sometimes even
affection. Democracy is not a natural form of association; it is as extra-
ordinary and rare contrivance of cultivated imagination. Democracy needs
the arts.

They are ‘civil society’s driving engine, the key to its creativity, its
diversity, its imagination, and hence its spontaneity and liberty’ (Barber
1998: 109). If the cultivation of imagination is important to the making of a
community that might become a democratic community, then the release of
imagination ought now to be one of the primary commitments of the public
school. One of the primary ways of activating the imaginative capacity is
through encounters with the performing arts, the visual arts and the art of
literature.

Art works being merely present in the school building are not sufficient
nor are some of the partnerships now in existence between US schools and
cultural institutions. If an aesthetic education is to be fully realized, chil-
dren need varied reflective encounters: Ibsen’s *The Doll’s House*, Miller’s
*Death of a Salesman*, with classical ballets like *Swan Lake* or *Giselle*, with
modern works like those choreographed by Mark Morris or Twyla Tharp,
with various jazz pieces, with novels like Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* or
Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, with the poetry of Adrienne Rich, Mark Strand,
Robert Pinsky and with musical works ranging from Bach’s to Philip
Glass’s and Steve Reich’s. Such encounters make possible an education
of feeling; an education in critical awareness, in noticing what there is to be
noticed. By making Monet’s paintings of *Rouen Cathedral* objects of her or
his experience a student will discover through looking at several versions
with their changing colours and transient light that the phenomena of the
visible world are themselves always fluid, always in process and signify-
differently. To realize that, in one rendering, the cathedral looks delicate,
lacy, in a certain fashion feminine, and that (through rendering at another
time of day) it looks grey, rocky, unforgiving, and still starkly beautiful, is
to see new possibilities in experience and to attend to the world around with
eyes wide open, refusing the fixed and unchangeable. 6 What could be more
important than a consideration of the unfinished in our classrooms? There
would always be something still to ask still to inquire into, still to know, still
to understand.

The arts hold no guarantee as to true knowledge or understanding, nor
should they replace other subject matters in middle school and high
schools. They should become central to the curricula and include exhibi-
tions and live performances, thus adding to the modalities by means of
which students make sense of their worlds. With aesthetic experiences a
possibility in school, education will be less likely merely to transmit
dominant (usually middle class and sometimes usually patriotic) traditions.
Experiences with the arts and the dialogues to which they give rise may give
the teachers and learners involved more opportunity for the authentic
conversations out of which questioning and critical thinking and, in time,
significant inquiries can arise. People’s conscious lives of opinion and
judgement ‘often proceed on a superficial and trivial plane,’ Dewey
suggested. Then:
But their lives reach a deeper level. The function of art has always been to break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness. Common things, a flower, a gleam of moonlight, the song of a bird, not things rare and remote, are means with which the deeper levels of life are touched so that they spring up as desire and thought. This process is art. Poetry, drama, the novel, are proofs that the problem of presentation is not insoluble. Artists have always been the real purveyors of the news, for it is not the outward happening in itself which is new, but the kindling by it of emotion, perception, and appreciation (Dewey 1954).

Exposure to works of art and the nurture of the capacity to engage with them are what make it possible for us to notice the flower, the moonlight, the songs of birds. Noticing requires more than merely taking note or recognizing. It demands responsiveness to colour and to texture and, oftentimes, to design. It requires a release of imagination, a moving beyond mere facts and the cultivation of a dialogical community, important though that is. It requires a space and a community where diverse views can find expression and diverse hopes take form, energized by shared art experiences. Shared objects of concern will there be discovered as the deeper levels of life are touched, as they find expression in desire and thought. To ponder about the future of the school can only be to explore such moments, to expand the spaces where deepening and expanding conversation can take place and more and more meanings emerge.

Conclusion

With reminders of incompleteness and possibility in mind, listen to Merce Cunningham, a great contemporary dancer-choreographer, now in his 80s. For him, too, the questions remain open and the future continues to reveal itself, in process of being made. He is speaking here about breaking through the boundaries of the ordinary and what it means to think of dance as a transformation of life.

Take nothing else but space, you see how many possibilities have been revealed. Suppose you now take the dimension of time. Our eight dancers can be doing different movements, they may even to them to the same rhythm which is all right – but there is also the possibility that they can be doing different movements in different rhythms, then that is where the real complexity comes in, adding this kind of material one on top of and with another. One may not like it, but it seems to me anyway that once one begins to think this way, the possibilities become enormous. One of the points that distinguishes my work from traditional choreographies, classical and modern, is certainly this enlargement of possibilities. (Lesschaeve 1991: 18).

He is suggesting what it might mean to refuse the conventional ways of dealing with what had been for so long taken for granted about time and space, and the body’s self-identification in relation to time and space. Doing so, he was opening new pathways for dancers as well as choreographers; he was provoking those willing to pay heed to resist ‘insularity’, to conceive things as if they might be otherwise.
Although Merce Cunningham (Lesschaeve 1991: 73–74) was not concerned about education in the usual sense, he had something to say about children. When asked if he had ever thought of working with children, he said he would have liked it but never thought it would be practical. Then:

I was looking out the window one morning and there were several children out there. They were skipping and running about playing, little kids, and I suddenly realized they were dancing, you could call it dancing, and yet it wasn’t dancing. I thought it was marvelous. There was no music. They were skipping or stopping the way children do, and falling down. I asked myself what it was. Then I realized it was the rhythm. Not the immediate rhythm, for each one was doing something different, but the rhythm of each was so clear because they were doing it completely, the way children do.

There are implications for those of us wondering about the future of US public schools. There is the metaphor of looking through the window. There were children expressing what might have been their desires and thoughts through their skipping and their stopping, their reaching out for their own language. There was their ‘doing it completely’, in the mood Dewey was describing when he wrote about imagining intellectual possibility. And there was Cunningham seeing something he had never thought of before. He thought it was ‘marvelous’. Out of the dread, out of the inequalities, out of the contradictions and the cruelties and the misunderstandings, there may be a vision of the ‘marvelous’. The dialogue, the wonder, the openings: we can only trust they will continue on.

Notes

1. We can see this with painful clarity in the US fiction of the early 20th century: Sherwood Anderson’s Winesburg, Ohio, Edith Wharton’s The House of Mirth, Theodore Dreiser’s Sister Carrie and Ernest Hemingway’s short stories. The rebellious one, the one Anderson called a ‘grotesque’ were not only in some manner destructive of themselves; by example, or through the disturbances they caused, they appeared to endanger the community.
2. Given the advances, particularly in the mathematical and natural sciences since 1931, it is doubtful that Dewey would make the same arguments with regard to all or most of the disciplines.
3. Dewey (1916: 404), always concerned about escaping from the ‘dominion of routine habits and blind impulse’ and about ‘the accentuation of consciousness’ that occurs when we are faced with an interruption in the ordinary flow of things, or when we confront novelty or something unexpected, had in mind what he thought education should become. He (1916: 408) emphasized the ‘conscious deliberating and desiring’ that identified the engaged practitioner. ‘The self is not something ready made but something in continuous formation through choice of action . . . ’ Indeed it is a matter of interest, he said, and interest signifies an active identification of the self with a certain object or project. Dewey’s vision obviously had to do with persons, old and young, moved into wide awakeness and the making of life choices. Action, not merely behaving, signifies a sense of agency, an ability to begin something new in the light of untapped possibility. Imagining, choosing, people develop a consciousness of an enlargement of experience, a making of more and more connections, a tapping into funded meanings as new possibilities present themselves.
4. At moments like these in classrooms, individual young people may come to a realization that their uniqueness, like their individual integrity, is a function of active participation.
in a community, a neighbourhood, an organization. Witness the examples of high idealism in this country: the Civil Rights movement, peace movements, actions to institute the fair treatment of immigrants, projects to insure research on AIDS and related illnesses, movements for equity on behalf of homosexuals and the disabled. A school that succeeds in making a social emergency (like the building of an unwanted incinerator, the dumping of dangerous garbage, the absence of clinics for the poor) a subject of serious study may be on the way to full and creative membership for all involved.

5. William Carlos Williams was a medical doctor who wrote stories, poems, and critical essays (see Williams 1956).

6. There is, as Herman Melville suggested in Moby Dick, a great power in what is incomplete, as there is a challenge to any all encompassing system (like the system called 'cetology' or the classification of whales). It cannot be completed, says the narrator (1981: 148), or perfected:

   You cannot but plainly see that I have kept my word. But now I leave my cetological System quite unfinished, even as the great Cathedral of Cologne was left, with the crane still standing upon the top of the still uncompleted tower. For small erections may be finished by their first architects; grand ones, true ones, ever leave the sopelstone to posterity. God keep me from ever completing anything. This whole book is but a draught of a draught. O Time, Strength, Cash, and Patience.

References


