Literacy in the Conceptual Age and the Future of the Agenda for Education in a Democracy

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Abstract

This paper considers the future of the mission of the Agenda for Education in a Democracy (AED) as our society moves into a conceptual age, a time when making meaning and connections will be most valued. Specifically, each of the four parts of the AED mission is examined in terms of literacy instruction and knowledge in the conceptual age, with connections to current research and classroom practice. Recommendations are offered on how to push forward with educational renewal efforts in this time of change.

Introduction

A sense of change in education has been building for some time. Four years ago, Linda Darling-Hammond observed, "These are especially critical times for democratic education. The pace of economic, technological, and social change is breathtaking" (2005, p. 1). Change has affected the process of educational renewal as well. Ten years ago, the National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER) hosted a conference entitled, "In Praise of Education." This conference celebrated a variety of education renewal initiatives focused on the four-part mission of the Agenda for Education in a Democracy (AED): Access to learning for all students, a nurturing

pedagogy, enculturation of youth in a democracy, and stewardship of the schools (Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley, & Goodlad, 2004).

Soon afterward the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (2002) was passed. This legislation has been described recently as "probably the most invasive and complex piece of federal legislation on education in our nation's history" (Nichols & Berliner, 2007, p. 8). With an emphasis on high-stakes testing as a mechanism for enacting change, NCLB significantly altered the landscape of renewal that appeared so permanent at the "In Praise of Education" conference just three years before. In the context of these changes comes a call for a new mission for education. This mission is:

> One that requires schools not merely to "deliver instruction" but to ensure that students learn—and to do so in more powerful ways than ever before. If schools are to meet this new challenge, they must dramatically increase the intellectual opportunities they offer while meeting the diverse needs of students who bring with them varying experiences, talents, and beliefs about what school means for them. (Darling-Hammond, 2005, p. 2)

Considering this mission today, it must be noted that students also bring with them diverse language, cultural, and life experiences that represent funds of knowledge (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994) that must be tapped in order for all students to access these intellectual opportunities. Further, the context for education has changed, as we are no longer in the technology or information age. We are entering what Daniel Pink (2006) calls the "conceptual age," a time when making meaning and connections will be most valued. He asserts that we are currently progressing from a society of knowledge workers to one of "creators and empathizers, of pattern recognizers and meaning makers" (p. 50). The focus of learning in the conceptual age will need to be on multiple possibilities rather than single solutions, and creative thinking will be the key to success (Beers, 2007). While change is certain, the ways in which NCLB or the goals of the

AED fit into a conceptual age mission of education are not clear.

The purpose of this paper is to consider the future of the mission of the AED in the conceptual age. These thoughts are drawn from my experiences as an attendee of the "In Praise of Education" conference, as a classroom teacher, as a member of the NNER-affiliated League of Democratic Schools, and as a literacy researcher. My goal is to articulate a call to action to begin the process of pushing the AED forward in a quickly evolving education landscape. Now is the time to assess the current state of our efforts and to increase collaborations across school and university settings to identify ways to move forward with an agenda of educational renewal that will meet the challenges of our time.

Refocus Our Efforts on the Child

Four points emerge as I consider this idea of the conceptual age, the mission of the AED, the consequences of NCLB, and the goals and purposes of literacy education. First, it is clear that we must refocus our efforts on the child. This need relates directly to the issue of students' *access to knowledge* and to the ever-widening gap between school reading and world literacy, a gap that is caused in part by our current system of accountability and our focus on student outcomes rather than the students themselves. Outcomes, achievement, and learning are not synonymous, and the assumption that the concepts behind these terms are aligned is dangerous.

In literacy research, the terms *digital natives* and *multiple literacies* are becoming increasingly common in describing the new and innovative ways students are melding literacy and technology—ways that often don't work at school and are seldom measured. Prensky (2006) coined the term *digital native* to refer to students who are "fluent in the digital language of computers, video games, and the Internet" (p. 9). Comparing digital natives to digital immigrants (those of us who are a bit older), Lori Norton-Meier (2005) observed, "Whereas we digital immigrants tend to process slowly, methodically, and step by step, digital natives are used to receiving information fast and can engage in multiple tasks at once. They are multimodal—they can integrate words, images, sound, actions,

values, decisions, and interactions quite naturally" (p. 430). These students are in our classrooms. Are we ready to teach them? Are we providing sufficient access to knowledge?

Kylene Beers (2007) wrote about a recent encounter with a digital native. Visiting a high school, she overheard in the library a student swearing to himself as he typed at a computer workstation. She asked him what was up, finding out that he was responding to posts on his blog about environmental awareness, a blog he had maintained, daily, for three years and that received a large number of hits. Later, when Kylene ran into this student's English teacher, she was told that he was failing class because he just didn't write much and didn't seem to care about assignments. The gap between school reading and world literacy is huge, as this story demonstrates, and this gap is widening. At the same time, students need effective instruction as much as ever. Research suggests that although digital natives may be comfortable and multimodal with technology, they need guidance applying critical thinking to these media and instruction in developing information literacies that support learning (Bennett, Maton, & Kevin, 2008). Clearly, access to knowledge must be provided to all students from diverse backgrounds in order to bridge this gap between school reading and world literacy.

Redefine "Highly Qualified Teacher"

Providing access to knowledge requires instructional skills as well as learning opportunities. This leads me to my second point, that to provide access to knowledge we must redefine what it means to be a "highly qualified teacher," as student achievement and teacher seniority, for example, are not sufficient defining characteristics. Sonia Nieto (2005) provides a different list of characteristics of highly qualified teachers. Such teachers:

- Place a high value on students' identities
- Connect learning to students' lives
- Have high expectations for all students, even for those others may have given up on

- Stay committed to students in spite of obstacles that get in the way
- View parents and other community members as partners in education
- Create a safe haven for learning
- Dare to challenge the bureaucracy of the school and district
- Are resilient in the face of difficult situations
- Use active learning strategies
- Are willing and eager to experiment
- View themselves as lifelong learners
- Care about, respect, and love their students (p. 31)

These characteristics are aligned closely to the idea of a nurturing pedagogy, where teacher skill and knowledge, and student motivation and interests, factor into what is taught and what is learned. In literacy this means going beyond the five elements of reading identified by the National Reading Panel (2000), which are: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. Focusing too much on the mechanics of fluency, for example, by boosting the words correct per minute rate scores for students, only makes kids read faster. It does not help them read better, or to comprehend more. Is reading faster the purpose of reading? Is this the best skill set for their adult lives in our society?

A nurturing pedagogy in literacy must include three additional elements beyond the five identified by the National Reading Panel: These are motivation, interest, and engagement. Motivation is an essential attribute of the skilled reader (Snow, 2002). Without the desire to read, even the most powerful reading strategies will not be put to use. As Alvermann and Eakle (2003) note, "If students are unmotivated to read because of contextual factors, have no meaningful reason to do so, or are not interested in the content, then reading skill or strategy instruction alone will not engage them" (p. 21). Teachers must work to provide engaging purposes and interesting contexts for reading as part of a nurturing pedagogy that reaches beyond isolated skills and into the conceptual age. Motivation, interest, and

engagement are key not only to literacy development, but also to civic engagement in our democracy.

Retire the Factory Model of Schooling

While a nurturing pedagogy is essential to education in a conceptual age, it is insufficient if the school itself is not functioning in a way that supports the nurturing. This brings me to my third point – one that John Goodlad (1979/2006) eloquently stated almost 30 years ago – that we must retire the factory model of schooling and replace it with an ecological model. The factory model of schooling is a major source of misalignment between school goals and actual school functions. The factory model, with an emphasis on outputs, diminished expectations, and narrow measures of accountability, is fundamentally incompatible with essential goals of providing access to knowledge and a nurturing pedagogy and supporting the process of lifelong learning in the conceptual age. Schools, unlike factories, do not have the means by which to be accountable for an end product.

The factory model, with its replication-oriented reforms and scientifically based notions, does not work for schooling. In fact, the current accountability system under NCLB is itself not scientifically based. Yet we are giving more tests than ever, and the factory model remains widely accepted. Goodlad (2005) argues that the alternative, an ecological model, is one that calls for "descriptions, analyses of relationships, and the use of normative standards or criteria of goodness" (p. 91). Such an approach keeps the focus on the child, the classroom, and the school context, rather than single high-stakes indicators that may lead to the dire realm of Campbell's Law. This law stipulates that "the more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it was intended to monitor" (Campbell, 1975, quoted in Nichols & Berliner, 2007, p. 26). The factory model of schooling is vulnerable to the negative effects of Campbell's Law due to its overreliance on high-stakes outcomes as indicators of progress.

These negative effects can spread school-wide very quickly. I have an example of this from my own experience.

Thirteen years ago I taught in a public elementary school that was governed by a program delivery council comprised of teachers, administrators, and parents. This council considered district learning goals and the needs of students, making curriculum recommendations based on these factors. Today that same school must comply with a district-wide curriculum web that mandates what is taught each day in every subject, despite vast demographic differences across classrooms and schools. Teachers in this district must submit a signed form each time they dare to deviate from the master plan, and such behavior is not encouraged. The operating assumption at the district level is that uniformity in program delivery will yield higher test scores across the district, even though individual schools have differing needs and levels of diversity. Test scores are the goal of these vast changes to curriculum and policy, not student learning. This approach not only "raises the bar," it hits kids with it.

An ecological model of education would shift the focus away from high-stakes measures of accountability and would lessen the threat of Campbell's law. The ecological model, Goodlad (2006) asserts, is concerned "with interactions, relationships, and interdependencies within a defined environment" (p. 90). With a new focus on how a school functions as an organism, rather than as a factory with production goals, the emphasis on accountability and sustainability shifts so that external expectations are examined in context and in relation to individual and group life in classrooms and schools. Student learning is emphasized, rather than testing outcomes. Further, an ecological model would foster strong, meaningful relationships, which research suggests are correlated with higher academic achievement among students (O'Conner & McCartney, 2007). Again, the focus must be on the child in context, not the test score in isolation.

An ecological model of schooling dovetails with the idea of *enculturating youth in a democracy* because a factory line cannot do this. I have a recent example from one of my M.Ed. advisees, Amy (a pseudonym), who is also a high school English teacher. Last

year Amy was assigned by her principal to teach a remedial reading class. Her sole purpose was to give the angry teenagers in her new class enough practice assessments so that they would pass the achievement tests they had recently failed. This assignment did not reflect a nurturing pedagogy; it reflected enculturation into failure.

The situation of these students reminds me of a point made by Randy Bomer (2007), who noted that too often, “students have experienced reading and writing as demonstrations of compliance with authoritarian norms, rather than as ways of acting in the world, tools for doing something real. Could it be that when they are uninterested in literate activity, it’s because of what they think literate activity is for?” (p. 310)

Amy tried to work with her disgruntled students on their practice tests, but after a few weeks, tossed out her plans and instead had everyone read an emotionally charged and highly engaging book, *The absolutely true diary of a part-time Indian* by Sherman Alexie (2007). Her students were interested. They were engaged. They read the book. Discussions were held in both large and small groups. Students and teacher alike laughed, argued, and cried. The class developed as a community. This was not just a set of practice assessments to prepare for mandated achievement tests. This was dialogue. This was discourse. This was life, establishing a connection between a work of literature and important societal issues of racism, poverty, and adolescence.

The effects of Amy’s efforts were considerable. The edgy nature of the text encouraged connections between teacher, reading specialist, principal, and parents, an example of the type of communication that may help address the widening gap between school reading and world literacy experienced by adolescents. Further, her facilitated discussions in class helped move students in the direction of critical literacy, empowering students to change the habitus of school reading by examining connections between events in the book and their own experiences (Bourdieu, 1994). In the end, many of Amy’s students passed the tests. As a master’s student, Amy was able to get support for this project from her coursework and from her advisor. But Amy is just one teacher.

Reinvigorate University-School Partnerships

Amy noted that her whole school needed the level of support she had received. This brings me to my fourth point: That we as educators from all levels must work to reinvigorate and strengthen university-school partnerships, because building them is one of the most powerful ways that we can all become supportive and involved *stewards of the schools*. While I know that a number of NNER members are involved in active and effective school-university partnerships, I also know that many schools are struggling in isolation. In my current work, my colleagues and I have managed to maintain a connection between our teacher education program and one elementary school in which we conduct our literacy methods courses. This partnership, although limited in scope, provides teacher candidates with opportunities to put class theories into practice, for students to work with teacher-candidate buddies, and for classroom teachers to participate in ongoing professional development exploring literacy practices. It also allows the instructors of the course to work as stewards of the school.

Truly, as John Goodlad, Cori Mantle-Bromley, and Stephen Goodlad suggest, "the partner school is perhaps an idea whose time has come…It is the primary vehicle for the renewal of both schools and educator preparation programs" (2004, p. 118). It is also a mechanism for the university to provide support as a steward of the school. From my work with an incredibly creative set of teachers and administrators in independent and alternative schools participating in the League of Democratic Schools, I know that there is a desperate need for support and stewardship. The survival of these schools depends on it.

Concluding Thoughts

To move the mission of the AED forward into the conceptual age, we must refocus our efforts on the child. We must redefine what it means to be a highly qualified teacher. We must retire the factory model of schooling and replace it with an ecological model. And we must work to reinvigorate university-school partnerships. In the conceptual age we must approach renewal with a sense of urgency.

We must operationalize the mission in ways that make a difference in the daily lives of students and their teachers.

The purpose of the school is to develop the full potential of the individual, for the sake of both the individual and our democracy (Goodlad, 2006). Our current system of education is not aligned to this purpose. We as educators and members of society must engage in dialogue to consider how to address this misalignment, as we are accountable for the condition of our schools. As Marc Prensky (2006) puts it, "If educators want to have relevance in this century, it is crucial that we find ways to engage students in school" (p. 11). It is time for us to participate in the reconstruction of our schools, to align them with the new mission for education in a conceptual age. Goodlad observes, "Our nation is marked by a characteristic that is both interesting and frightening: We are extraordinarily patient with human folly, sometimes not paying attention until it has brought us to the edge of a precipice. Then we look down and wake up" (p. 153). An article in a recent issue of *Education Week* suggests we have begun to wake up, stating:

> If "scientifically based evidence" was the rallying cry for education research over the past eight years, the watchwords for the field in the post-Bush era seem headed toward "development" and "innovation." A growing number of foundations, entrepreneurs, national education groups, and public officials have called in recent months for a stepped-up emphasis on generating findings, programs, and products that practitioners find useful and that will help revolutionize the way America does school. (Viadero, 2009, p. 1)

Now is the time to seize these emerging watchwords and to push forward with the Agenda for Education in a Democracy to improve our schools, educate our children, and sustain our democracy.

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